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"Narratives They May Not Seek Out On Their Own": Teacher Perspectives on Addressing Race and Ethnicity in Private, College Preparatory High School English Classrooms

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Abstract

In this paper, I discuss how high school English teachers at private, college preparatory schools approach conversations about race and ethnicity in their classrooms. Using twelve interviews with high school English teachers across six schools in the Chicagoland area, I find that their engagement with themes of race and ethnicity is predominantly shaped by school context. Specifically, schools that were more committed to racial justice and teaching students about race led to student bodies who were more receptive to talking about race, and teachers therefore felt more empowered to facilitate these conversations. These findings demonstrate that administrative-level support and interventions help cultivate environments to talk about race in honest, productive ways. For the most part, schools that included standardized college prep curricula, such as Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) classes, did not prevent teachers from building diverse syllabi. While many of the teachers spoke of positive experiences regarding teaching about race, respondents highlighted ongoing challenges, such as choosing which narratives to showcase, creating safe spaces for all students, and difficulty getting students to critically think about race. The findings presented here give insight into how race is being taught in private school settings where the student body is predominantly white and affluent, helping policymakers better understand when approaches to teaching about race and ethnicity are likely to be successful for this demographic.

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Introduction

High school English classes frequently deal with topics of race and ethnicity. Even if race is not explicitly discussed in the classroom, common texts often depict racialized experiences. For example, books such as Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* or Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* use concepts of literary "Blackness" to define literary "whiteness", a phenomenon seen in real-world racialization (Morrison, 1992; Omi & Winant, 2015). Even texts with predominantly white characters and narratives deal with race, as whiteness is not race-neutral. Because the literature students read in their English classes deals with race, teachers have the opportunity to address racialized topics in ways that foster productive conversations that increase teacher and student understandings of race and ethnicity. Despite its relevance, there is less research focused on pedagogy at predominantly white schools when compared to predominantly Black schools (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). Furthermore, much of the research at private, academically rigorous schools focuses on parent choice and student perceptions of race rather than curriculum building (Hagerman, 2018). So, I wanted to bridge the gaps between pedagogy, school demographics, and academic focus through this research. Additionally, because college prep schools often use prescribed Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) curriculums, they may face unique challenges in addressing race and ethnicity given their focus on boosting test scores via adherence to standardized curriculums (Glass, 1997). Thus, this paper investigates whether and how race is being taught within these institutions' English classes.

This paper answers the question "How do English teachers at private, college preparatory high schools approach conversations about race and ethnicity in their classrooms?" To answer this question, I interviewed twelve high school English teachers across six private, college preparatory schools in the Chicagoland area. By investigating how the syllabi are created, the activities and

discussions associated with different pieces of literature, and attitudes toward how classes currently discuss race and ethnicity, I gained insights into the realities of these classrooms and unique teacher perspectives. From my interviews, I found that the school's level of buy-in or support for teaching about race and ethnicity was a significant factor in how teachers approached race in their classrooms and how receptive their students were. All the teachers talked about the importance of exposing their students to narratives they were unfamiliar with. However, some teachers focused on empathy and understanding while others expressed a desire for students to dismantle racial inequalities in the future. However, since students seemed to be starting with a limited understanding of race and ethnicity, much of the instruction was focused on basic knowledge and getting comfortable talking about race. Learning about race and ethnicity is an ongoing process, and the teachers emphasized that they want to give their students the tools to continue learning about these topics as they continue their education and life. I also found that teacher autonomy was important for the interviewees, so they could adapt their curriculums to best resonate with students. While the majority of the teachers had positive experiences with teaching about race and ethnicity in their classrooms, one teacher depicted a hostile environment in the school with teachers and students resisting talking about race and ethnicity. By talking directly to teachers, I saw beyond the reports and mission statements the schools published and learned the realities of English instruction at these institutions.

My research finds that teachers used diverse narratives and class wide discussions as the primary entry points for talking about race and ethnicity. Because the students at these schools often had little exposure to diverse, non-white narratives and limited understanding of historical and contemporary racial struggles, the teachers seemed to be setting a foundation of understanding to prepare students for more justice-centered learning in the future. My research broadens existing

research by confirming that certain pedagogical practices, such as culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP), help get students to learn about race and ethnicity (Martin, 2014) and that private schools are sites of significant privilege that can shield students from the realities of the world (Hagerman, 2018). Because private school students are often privileged and attend schools that are frequently non-diverse, having explicit conversations about race and ethnicity in classrooms is a valuable site for learning. Like public school students, private school students will eventually leave the protective boundaries of their schools and fully enter society. Thus, it is important for racial equity projects that these students have a foundational understanding of race and ethnicity so that they can contribute to a more equitable society. This paper affirms the importance of critical engagement with race and ethnicity in these predominantly white, affluent spaces.

Literature Review

Schools & Racialization

Central to this paper is the idea of racialization and the ways people learn about and interpret race. Omi and Winant define racialization as, "the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice, or group" (Omi & Winant, 2015, p. 111). While race is a dynamic social construct, it still has real-life implications (Omi & Winant, 2015). Children are frequently aware of the concept of race and often develop racial biases by the time they are in elementary school (Hughes, Cox, & Das, 2023). An infamous example is seen with the 1939 Clark and Clark doll experiment where researchers found that young Black children had preferences for white dolls and associated the white dolls with positive characteristics and Black dolls with negative ones (Clark & Clark, 1939). By the time children are in school, they are already conscious of race and are beginning to assign meanings to different racial groups. Because schools seek to prepare students to be adults and give them the tools necessary to properly function

in society (Bidwell, 1965), it is important to teach students about race. This knowledge will help students successfully navigate racialized situations (Lawrence, 1997). Furthermore, if society wants to achieve racial equity, school is a good place to develop students' understanding of historical and contemporary racial histories and struggles, so that students can contribute to equity projects. Thus, schools should develop students' racial literacy, a "skill and practice in which individuals are able to discuss the social construction of race, probe the existence of racism and examine the harmful effects of racial stereotyping" (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2022, p.3). Reading literature that confronts historical and contemporary race relations helps students develop racial literacy (Thomas, 2015).

Moreover, schools are already sites for racialization and racial understanding (Hughes, Cox, & Das, 2023) so directly addressing race in their curricula can help students make sense of the patterns of racialization they observe and experience. Drawing on Ray's theory of racialized institutions, Pascoe notes that schools are sites where "rules, traditions, buildings, and people shape and are shaped by racialized practices" (2023, p.100). The significance of schools as racializing places has received considerable scholarly attention in recent years. For example, Hagerman's qualitative study about white children and their experiences with privilege finds that "private schools not only benefit children materially but also have a significant ideological impact. Like neighborhoods and public schools, private schools are also part of a white, affluent child's racial context of childhood" (Hagerman, 2018, p.78). Here, Hagerman gestures towards the stakes of engaging with race and ethnicity in the classroom. Because students at private schools presumably come from privileged backgrounds, school can be an effective place to expose students to more nuanced narratives surrounding race and ethnicity.

However, certain kinds of instruction can fail to properly educate students, so the methodology behind teaching about race and ethnicity is incredibly important. One ineffective approach is "benign diversity", which frames racism "as an individual problem of offense or hate rather than a form of systemic exclusion and domination" and "emphasizes kindness and acceptance as solutions to racial inequality rather than justice or equality" (Pascoe, 2023, p. 70). By glossing over structural inequality, this superficial approach to diversity "protects whites and white organizations from discussions of racial inequality" (Pascoe, 2023, p. 71). Through "sugar coating" or failing to discuss the realities of racial inequality, students are left with "few tools to make sense of race in general, much less the inequality they continue to see and experience" (Pascoe, 2023, p. 73). Benign diversity centers whiteness and devalues marginalized peoples' experiences and protects racist institutions. While benign diversity leads to less "uncomfortable" conversations, it ultimately fails to adequately address race and ethnicity.

In addition to benign diversity, individuals and institutions can employ other "tools of whiteness" to maintain "dominant ideologies of race" (Picower, 2009, p. 204-205). These strategies:

> Include linguistic strategies such as framing racism as "out of my control," proposing personal remedies to systemic problems of inequity by emphasizing "being nice" (Picower, 2009), choosing silence in the face of racial discomfort, avoiding racial conflict and dilemmas or withdrawing from situations where they feel subjected to racially motivated "attacks" (DiAngelo, 2011). These race talk practices actively maintain white privilege and supremacy (Irby and Clark, 2018, p. 5).

The preservation of these dominant ideologies leads to "white institutional dominance" (Irby and Clark, 2018, p. 5). Like benign diversity, these strategies fall short of meaningfully teaching

students about race and building their racial literacy. Martell also points out the opposing frameworks of "tolerance-oriented" and "equity-oriented" approaches to talking about race (2017, p.80-82). Tolerance-oriented approaches posit racism as a phenomenon of the past and, like benign diversity, focus on individual prejudices whereas equity-oriented approaches tie in modern-day instances of racial inequality and focus on system racism (Martell, 2017). Thus, attention to individual, superficial approaches to talking about race vs. action-oriented, equity approaches is something I took up in my analysis by paying close attention to teacher language and reasonings for talking about race.

Anti-Racist & Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

To combat white institutional dominance in schools and provide an education that directly addresses race, teachers can implement frameworks such as anti-racist literature instruction. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides explain that anti-racist literature instruction makes race a central part of instruction, builds students' vocabulary around race, and helps them analyze how race operates in literature in a complex way (2019). They argue that since American literature has constructed whiteness by defining it as not being Black, there is no way to teach English in a race-neutral way (2019). When teachers refuse to acknowledge race and racism in their classrooms, they affirm whiteness as the default and dominant culture. After introducing their framework, the authors give examples of how to incorporate anti-racist literature instruction into curriculums (Borsheim-Black & Sarigianides, 2019). For instance, they talk about listing "specific racial literacy objectives that frame "racism as a concept to be learned rather than an opinion to change" (24). By having clear objectives and assessments, teachers can more explicitly talk about and teach about race and ground racial literacy in their curriculums. Borsheim-Black and Sarigianides

highlight the importance of integrating race across the curriculum rather than isolating conversations around race into one text or unit.

Additionally, frameworks such as critical race theory (CRT) and culturally responsive/relevant pedagogy (CRP) have proved helpful in the classroom. Drawing from Lynn, Martin defines CRT as:

> The recognition of race and racism in society, a critique of the traditional Western values of objectivity and neutrality, a reliance on the knowledge and experience of people of color in the definition of its tenants, an interdisciplinary focus, the goal of the elimination of all form of oppression (Lynn 1999; Martin, 2014, p. 246).

CRP relates to CRT as it requires teachers to use CRT to shape their teaching practices and curriculum. With CRP, teachers are not the main authority on a topic, and there is a collaborative relationship between teachers and students to not only learn about race but also work to dismantle oppressive systems (Martin, 2014). Additionally, Ladson-Billings writes that "culturally relevant teachers encourage a community of learners rather than competitive, individual achievement" (1995, p.480). This approach to teaching disrupts instruction based on high test scores by establishing community-centered classroom goals pertaining to racial literacy. In Martin's study, this community-centered approach to learning that values personal and class development over academic achievement helped teach about race in a predominantly Black, low-income public school, as it allowed students to share their own forms of knowledge and learn from one another (Martin, 2014). The teacher used these practices when teaching *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, emphasizing the value of teaching canonical texts with a CRT-informed approach.

An example of CRP in practice is the Storytelling Project (STP) in NYC. Roberts et al., explain that the STP curriculum is centered around "building a community in which stories about

race and racism can be openly shared, respectfully heard, and critically discussed and analyzed" (2008, p. 338). The curriculum uses four types of stories to help shape conversations. Stock stories share narratives from the "dominate white racial group" and are the foundation for critical analysis (Roberts et al., 2008, p.338), concealed stories are from the perspective of marginalized people and explore the "contradictions" in stock stories, resistance stories "relate how people have resisted racism and fought for more equal and inclusive social arrangement" (Roberts et al., 2008, p.338), and counterstories are "new stories, deliberately constructed to challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify concealed and resistance stories, and offer ways to interrupt the status quo" (Roberts et al., 2008, p.338). Through these kinds of stories, students were able to go back and forth between their own experiences and the knowledge produced from the curriculum to deepen their understanding of their world and understand how to dismantle oppressive systems (Roberts et al., 2008). This program reflects CRP as it validates student experiences and knowledge, is concerned with dismantling oppressive systems, and explicitly talks about historical and contemporary racial struggles. STP demonstrates the value of a focused curriculum that foregrounds diversity and racial equity.

Another component of inclusive instruction is intersectionality. Crenshaw explains that intersectionality addresses the harm of conflating "intragroup differences" by examining how multiple identities interact and offer distinct experiences (1991, p.1242). She discusses two forms of intersectionality - structural and political, with a focus on women of color. With structural intersectionality, Crenshaw highlights that "women of color are differently situated in the economic, social, and political worlds" and because of these placements, reforms directed towards women typically meet the needs of racially privileged women more than women of color (1991, p.1250). With political intersectionality, she discusses that "women of color are situated within at

least two subordinated groups that frequently pursue conflicting political agendas" (Crenshaw, 1991, p.1251-1252). Understanding the nuances in identities and experiences is part of a complete understanding of structural inequality and how race affects people differently. Thus, teachers must have an intersectional approach to their instruction and be aware of how intersectional identities affect the characters in their books, the students in their class, and the issues they talk about.

Another important component of anti-racist literature instruction is critical readings of canonical literature. In this paper, the canon refers to the Western literary canon. The canon refers to a set of literature that has been deemed culturally essential and often reflects dominant cultures and illustrates moments of imperialism and inequality (Marx, 2004). These are texts that are commonly imagined when people think of "the classics" such as William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet,* F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, and Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. In *Playing in the Dark*, Morrison presents a case of the continual study of American classical texts to explore how these texts construct race and produce racial binaries. Morrison introduces the concept of "American Africanism" which is the "investigation into the ways in which a nonwhite, Africanlike (or Africanist) presence or persona was constructed in the United States, and the imaginative uses of this fabricated presence served" (1992, p.6). One of the roles of literary "blackness" was to construct literary "whiteness". She writes about how Black characters often serve a "surrogate and enabler" role in American literature (1992, p.51). An example is seen in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* where Morrison explains that the unfree Africanist character Jim gives meaning to Huck's freedom (1992). She argues that classic American novels, such as *Huckleberry Finn*, are valuable to examine through critiques and problematizing the texts (1992). When students read texts like these through a critical lens, they gain a historical understanding of race in America and build their conceptual vocabulary surrounding race.

To effectively introduce racial concepts and encourage learning in the classroom, teacher professional development can be helpful. Irby and Clark identify the ability to talk "about race with precision and specificity [as] a critical skill" (2018, p.4). They explain that race talk and race-specific language refer to "phenomena, which encompasses concepts such as wrestling with race (Buehler, 2013), courageous conversations (Singleton, 2014), as well as the range of linguistic deployments of color-blind racism (Picower, 2009)" (Irby & Clark, 2018, p.3). When professional development includes these topics, teachers are better equipped to facilitate conversations about race in their classrooms (Irby & Clark, 2018). Furthermore, teacher development is an ongoing princess. Vetter et al. found that teachers must constantly increase their knowledge about the "historical and contemporary nuance of social constructs" to effectively facilitate conversations in their classrooms (Vetter et al., 2021, p.20). While the authors explain this learning can happen on an individual or institutional level (Vetter et al., 2021), having institutional resources establishes a degree of standardized learning. While the benefit of institutional support is presented in the literature, there are limitations and concerns. In researching white teachers' beliefs after a semester-long training program, Pezzetti found that teachers still expressed anxieties about teaching at a racially diverse school (2017). The author writes "it clearly takes more than a semester to unlearn a lifetime of colour-blind racial messaging" (Pezzetti, 2017, p.144). These insights generate questions about how institutional training should be delivered and the extent of this training. Despite these concerns, the literature concludes that institutional support helps prepare teachers to talk about race in their classrooms. A takeaway from this literature is that attention to race, and more specifically racial equity, on the institutional level affects the level of engagement with race on the classroom level. Analyzing both the teacher and their school was a lens I took in my analysis as well.

While the top-down approach of having teachers develop their ability to talk about race amongst themselves is helpful for classroom learning, the value of student contributions cannot be overlooked. Sosa (2020) speaks to student resistance and affirms the value of collaborative learning that is emphasized in CRP. Sosa focused on situations where race was brought up superficially in ways that did not "focus on unequal social and structural distribution of power" or where topics were addressed "within carefully controlled boundaries of scope and sequence" (2020, p.1040). Because classrooms rarely critically analyze how race and racism manifest in texts (Brown et al., 2017), Sosa identified the ways students resisted this silencing, providing student perspectives (2020). A strategy that students used was having direct conversations about race and being intentional about their language during class discussions (Sosa, 2020). Through naming, all individuals in the classroom, teachers included, were able to learn and broaden their vocabulary and underdogs about race. This piece highlights the collaborative nature of CRP and that learning about race is an exchange between students and teachers rather than something formulated by teachers and delivered to students. Another strategy students use to talk about race is the "strategy of implicature" (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013, p.165). When studying classroom conversations in a multi-racial high school classroom, the authors found that Black students used the "strategy of implicature", which calls attention to how Black and white Americans' histories and experiences are interconnected across time, to counter white student's attempts to trivialize instances of racism (2013, p.175). By using historical knowledge to discuss modern racial issues, students recentered race in conversations that tried to overlook it. Both student driven strategies demonstrate the positive impact of student voice in the classroom.

While the literature shows that white teachers have mixed experiences with how they facilitate talking about race and their own challenges, teachers of color often have different

experiences. In a qualitative study with K-12 women of color teachers, it was revealed how culturally white dominate schools affect teachers of color. (Kohli, 2009). The study found that many of the teachers had a heightened awareness of the "cultural invisibility" in their curricula (Kohli, 2009, p. 241). Respondents were able to identify the consequences of non-diverse curriculums from personal experiences and understand the negative impact this erasure had on their students (Kohli, 2009). While the teachers reflected on past instances of marginalization that happened when they were in K-12 schooling, the teachers spoke about current examples of marginalization from their educator peers, whether that be stereotypes they witnessed faculty place on non-white students or microaggressions directed at them (Kohli, 2009). One teacher gave an example where her administrators brought her a Korean student and assumed she, a Chinese woman, could speak to the child in Korean (Kohli, 2009). This minimization of the teacher and student's identities reflects an environment that is exclusive and harmful. The teachers' experiences demonstrated that "racism is a cycle" and the same racism they experienced when they were young repeatedly played out in their schools (Kohli, 2009, p. 249). This paper shows the unique perspectives of teachers of color and the personal impact culturally white dominant schools have on them. Drawing upon this research, when I interviewed teachers of color, I gave them space to reflect on how their identity informed their teaching practices and how the school's culture impacted them.

Standardized Curriculums

An important factor in curriculum building is the relationship between teacher autonomy and adhering to standardized curriculums. Bidwell argues that schools give teachers considerable discretion to enable them to accommodate their students' individual needs while also providing a largely standardized education (1965). The balance demanded in this model, between

standardization and flexibility, is constantly in flux, and can be difficult to strike. Understanding how teachers exercise their autonomy in these spaces is important, as it demonstrates how teachers tailor their curriculums to best fit their classrooms. Moreover, private schools are interesting sites of autonomy because they are not beholden to state standards (Glass, 1997). Theoretically, private school teachers should have more autonomy than public school teachers, but Glass challenges this view (1997). Glass finds that private school teachers face college admissions pressures, parental demands, and AP requirements that significantly reduce their discretionary power (1997). While Glass is not arguing that private school teachers have less autonomy than public school teachers or that these pressures affect them differently, she does highlight that these factors reduce teacher autonomy. Many of the schools in my research use IB or AP curriculums. Both curricula offer college-level courses and feature unique assessments that students can use for college credit ("Assessments and Exams", 2023; "DP Curriculum", 2023; "What is AP?", 2023). There is a tension between the community-centered learning goals of CRP and the individual performance-based ones of the IB and AP curriculums. Drawing from Glass' attention to the relationship between standardized college prep curriculums and teacher autonomy, in my research, I seek to identify how these curriculums and external pressure affect how teachers approach conversations about race and ethnicity in their classrooms.

Data & Methods

My data comes from twelve semi-structured interviews with high school English teachers from six private, college preparatory schools in the Chicagoland area (see Tables 1-3, information obtained from school websites and calls with admissions offices). Nine of the interviews were conducted over Zoom and three over the phone. All interviews were recorded and transcribed to enable coding, as described below. To determine whether a school was

“college prep”, I looked to see if college readiness was part of the school’s mission and if there was a selective application process. I also leveraged publicly available school ranking lists to see what schools were considered academically rigorous.

The first step of my recruitment process was gaining administrative permission to interview teachers at each school. Starting in October 2023, I cold emailed and called twenty-one schools, often sending multiple follow-ups and contacting multiple people at each school. In the end, I received permission to interview teachers at seven schools. Next, I began recruiting teachers. In some cases, administrators emailed all eligible teachers to tell them about my research, and in others, I was given the list of eligible teachers to contact myself. Everyone who expressed interest in participating in this study was interviewed. Interviews were conducted between November 2023 and February 2024. The interviews were 30-45 minutes and recorded with the interviewee's consent. During the interviews, I used the same interview guide for all participants; however, a semi-structured approach allowed for tailored probes when appropriate. After the interviews, participants received a $50 Visa digital gift card as a thank-you for their time. After the interviews, I uploaded the recordings to a secure UChicago Box folder and used Otter.AI to generate transcripts. After checking the transcripts for accuracy, I hand-coded the interviews thematically and anonymized participants' names and schools. After coding, the annotated transcripts were added to the UChicago Box folder.

Interviews are an excellent way to gain insights into the realities of the classroom and identify what triumphs and challenges teachers are facing. They reveal what happens in the day-to-day, teachers’ specific thought processes, and teacher opinions. These qualitative elements are essential for answering the research question. Despite race and ethnicity sometimes being uncomfortable topics to discuss, the teachers were excited to talk to me about their experiences

and perspectives. Interestingly, the teachers often used phrases such as “you know” and “right” when talking about their methods of teaching about race and ethnicity. While I have no formal experience teaching, I believe this was their way of relating to me, and it did feel like they were talking to me as their equal rather than their student. The teachers expressed vulnerability by identifying their weaknesses and blind spots when approaching these conversations about race and ethnicity, and it did not seem like they were trying to convince me that they were invested in racial literacy instruction.

While I did gain valuable insights through the interviews, there were some limitations. One was that the teachers who opted in to be interviewed were already invested in teaching about race and ethnicity. While the interviews paint an optimistic light on how conversations are going at these private schools, they are not reflective of private schools as a whole. Additionally, the teacher-focused perspective does not completely reveal how the instruction is resonating with students. It is unclear the overall effects of the instruction and if it is developing students’ understandings of race and ethnicity on a personal level. Finally, the balance between protecting students of color while also opening spaces for white students to learn through open discussion is something I did not fully gain insight into. Some of the teachers talked about strategies they used to mitigate this tension, but without student input, I am unsure if this balance was being met. The teacher's perspectives provide an important piece of the overall understanding of race and ethnicity in private, college prep schools, but they fail to give a sweeping account.

My interest in this topic comes from my own experiences as a Black student who participated in a college prep high school program. While I attended a magnet program rather than a private school, there was still a rigorous, performance-based culture and a historically white student body. In terms of environment, it felt tense as teachers were uncomfortable with

talking about race and addressing microaggressions in the classroom. Also, the program prioritized the traditional literary canon and treated works by people of color in a way that felt less academic and valuable. Overall, I, along with my other peers of color, felt marginalized in our classrooms. I felt like my opinions and experiences did not matter, and others made me feel like I was "overreacting" to insensitive comments. On a larger scale, the lack of diversity in the syllabus made me feel unseen as I did not see myself reflected in many of the works, and because of the prioritization of the traditional literary canon, the implicit message was that stories by people of color were less important. This experience left me curious about how white students are learning about race and ethnicity in their classrooms, and how these topics are being managed alongside academic achievement-based goals, such as college administration and standardized exams.

Overall, the qualitative approach used in my research revealed the realities of these English classes and the approaches teachers were using to talk about race and ethnicity. One helpful strategy the interviews allowed me to use was probing which allowed me to get teachers to fully unpack and expand upon their statements. For example, for teachers that had diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) officers or programming, I was able to get teachers to talk about what was specifically helpful with these resources and how they could be improved. Most of the time, the teachers mentioned the DEI resources in a brief, positive light, but it was valuable to have them identify what could be changed to better support their classrooms. From the interviews, I was able to get specific insights about what teachers found helpful in talking about race and ethnicity and current challenges. Strategies such as this enabled me to explore the challenging topic of teaching about race in a way that captured the nuances and complexities of teachers' approaches.

Table 1 School Snapshots (6 Schools)

4 Serve K-12 and 2 Serve 9-12
Average Class Size: 12 Students
Models Include: International, Christian, IB, AP, Montessori, Boarding, and Differentiated Learning
Average % Students of Color (3 reported): 39%[1]
Average % Students Receiving Financial Aid (4 reported): 26%

[1] For non-reported schools, they did not disclose that information.

Table 2 Detailed School Snapshots

School	**Dogwood Academy**	**Maple Academy**	**Redwood Academy**
Grades Served	9-12	9-12	Pre-K-12
Student Population	160	445	60 in High School[2]
Tuition	$33,495	$53,200 (Day) & $73,400 (Boarders)	$35,632
Focus/Model	Montessori, IB	Boarding & Day School, AP	Specialized Learning
% Students of Color	31%	37% Domestic[3]	
% Students Receiving Financial Aid	32%	30%	

School	**Pine Academy**	**Oak Academy**	**Willow Academy**
Grades Served	Pre-K-12	Prek-12	Pre-K-12
Tuition	Up to $15,500	$26,500	$39,950 (9th-10th grade) & $41,950 (11th-12th)
Student Population	429 Total and 90 in High School	760 Total and 205 in High School	222 in High School
Focus/Model	Christian AP and Dual Credit	Multilingual, IB	International, IB
% Students of Color	49%		
% Students Receiving Financial Aid	20.7%		20%

[2] Reported by a teacher
[3] It's unclear what the overlap between international (27%) and domestic students of color is.

Table 3 Teacher Snapshots

Teacher	**School**	**Classes**[4]
Eric	Dogwood Academy	11th and 12th Grade IB and "Film and Literature"
Michelle	Dogwood Academy	11th and 12th Grade English in an Interdisciplinary Program
Lena	Dogwood Academy	9th Grade "Critical Literacy"
David	Maple Academy	10 Grade English, Creative Writing, and AP Literature
Leslie	Maple Academy	9th and 10th Grade
Anthony	Redwood Academy	10th Grade "Novels and Nonfiction"
Miranda	Redwood Academy	9th Grade "World Studies" (Interdisciplinary), 11th and 12th Grade "American Literature", and 11th and 12th Grade "College Level Composition"
Alex	Pine Academy	9th Grade Regular and Advanced English
Avery	Oak Academy	11th and 12th Grade IB
Brittany	Oak Academy	9th and 10th Grade
Luke	Oak Academy	11th and 12th Grade IB and English Literature in Non-American International Curriculum
Natasha	Willow Academy	11th and 12th Grade IB and 9th and 10th English Literature in Non-American International Curriculum

[4] Course names used when provided

Findings & Analysis

Overall Themes

Throughout the interviews, teachers expressed their investment in diversifying their syllabi and broadening their students' understandings of race and ethnicity. The teachers were excited to talk about their classroom experiences and the strategies they have developed. When talking about setbacks or frustrations, the interviews gave teachers time to reflect and some generated new ideas for better addressing race and ethnicity in the future. A common classroom goal was getting their students to understand and empathize with different people and experiences, but some teachers vocalized going a step further and talked about wanting this empathy to translate into action in the students' futures. According to the interviewees, empathy referred to a baseline understanding of different racial and ethnic groups and their historical and contemporary marginalization. When teachers talked about action, it often referred to wanting their students to positively create change in the future, but they did not specify exactly what they envisioned these racial equity projects to look like. There was a broad gesture to wanting their students to "create change", and they saw themselves as setting the foundation for their students' action. Additionally, the teachers talked about different challenges, and a common thread throughout these challenges was the idea of balance. When building their curriculum, the teachers expressed the need to consider many factors, and there was an ongoing sense of revision and evaluation as they curated their syllabi. Overall, I found school support and resources to be the most significant factors affecting teachers' ability to facilitate learning about race and ethnicity. Thus, I have organized the findings and analysis into four parts, dividing up schools by the level of institutional support regarding integrating race and ethnicity into the curriculum, moving from most to least regarding school support and structure.

Dogwood Academy: Strong School Buy-In and Ample Resources

From the interviews, Dogwood Academy had the strongest school-wide commitment to diverse, inclusive English curriculums and the most robust diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) resources. Dogwood Academy is a Montessori themed school that serves 9th-12th grade students and has a student body of approximately 160. The school's website reports that 31% of its student body identifies as students of color and 32% receive financial aid (tuition is $33,495 per year). Regarding standardized college prep curriculums, they offer IB classes. At this school, I interviewed three English teachers - Lena, Michelle, and Eric. Lena teaches 9th grade "Critical Literacy", Michelle teaches part of an 11th and 12th grade interdisciplinary history-English program, and Eric teaches 11th and 12th grade IB English and a film and literature class. When talking about the importance of diverse syllabi, the teachers emphasized the need to expose students to narratives they were unfamiliar with in order to make them "better" people. There was consistency across the teachers regarding class climate, suggesting the school's overall culture helps facilitate constructive conversations about race and ethnicity in individual classrooms.

Building the Syllabi

When building their syllabi, Dogwood Academy teachers discussed explicitly integrating topics of race and ethnicity into their curriculums. When asked how race and ethnicity fit into his syllabus, Eric explained:

> I think it's a necessary component of a syllabus, especially in a literature class. [While Dogwood's] student body is relatively diverse compared to some other private schools, our student body is largely white, cisgender, and very well off. So, I think exposing them to narratives from racial and ethnic minorities is incredibly important because these are narratives that they may not otherwise seek out, listen to, or hear on their own.

This reflection underscores Hagerman's arguments that private schools, which often have more privileged student bodies, serve as an important place where students learn about racial histories, dynamics, and issues (Hagerman, 2018). This role is seen at Dogwood as the school introduces students to diverse narratives. Eric emphasizes the stakes of talking about race and ethnicity by expressing that without this explicit engagement in the classroom, students could avoid critically thinking about these topics.

Similarly, Lena talked about the importance of diverse narratives. She explained that these conversations help students "talk about how to be better people and move forward in the world with more understanding". This comment connects to Lawrence's point about needing to address these topics to prepare students for participating in society (Lawrence, 1997). Lena's response shows an investment in preparing students to grow, however, there is not an explicit call for racial equity. Lena's points about wanting students to be "better people" and have "more understanding" are important for racial justice, but the lack of identifying what "being better" entails or the result of "more understanding" leaves the class goal ambiguous. With Eric and Lena's comments, there is an assumption that exposure leads to empathy. However, Eric and Lena's reflections do not reflect a tolerance-oriented approach to talking about race and ethnicity or benign diversity (Martell, 2018; Pascoe, 2023). In their interviews, Eric and Lena did talk about tying in contemporary instances of racism, Eric spoke about getting his students to "embrace discomfort" when talking about race, and both teachers did not frame racism as solely an individual problem. Even though it was a bit vague what racial equity projects the teachers wanted their students to take up, they did lean towards an equity-centered approach to engaging with race and ethnicity.

Michelle gave a helpful example of how her curriculum exposes students to racial issues they were previously unaware of, and her experience demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary

learning. One example unit Michelle discussed was on the Harlem Renaissance where she taught Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Brit Bennett's *The Vanishing Half*. She explained that the books "work[ed] really well to show what the long impact [of colorism] has on individuals." When talking about colorism and passing, she explained that these were new concepts to her students, so she was very "deliberate" with her conversations. Overall, she felt that students responded well to the class discussions, and they enjoyed the novels. By interweaving discussion and analysis of colorism across centuries, Michelle emphasized the legacies of racism. Here, Michelle engages in historical and contemporary talks about race, which the literature finds essential for building racial literacy (Thomas, 2015). Additionally, the interdisciplinary history component of the program helped provide extra support and context regarding these concepts. In her interview, Michelle highlighted the benefit of having students learn about race in their history and English classes, and that the connections across classes provided students with ample context and a fuller understanding of the topics. The combined instruction with history and English, as well as involving contemporary works, engaged students and helped instruct about passing and colorism in the context of the Harlem Renaissance and its legacies today.

When talking about the canon, Michelle and Lena spoke about critical readings of this literature. Both teachers mentioned the phrase "reading the canon to break the canon" when explaining their incorporation of these texts. Both teachers affirmed the importance of critiquing traditional literature, supporting Morrison's arguments (Morrison, 1992). Lena provided an example of how she uses the canon in her 9th grade "Critical Literacy class" during the bildungsroman unit, saying:

> I started with *The Catcher in the Rye* and *The Bell Jar*. So, I taught the canon of more traditional novels about coming of age stories in America. And then we're currently reading

> *Like Water for Chocolate*, so coming of age in other countries, because it takes place in Mexico during the Mexican Revolution. And then we're going to be doing *The Namesake* by Jhumpa Lahiri, which is a story of an Indian family that migrates to the US.

Lena foregrounds her unit in traditional, or white, American literature and then expands outwards to other US-based and global perspectives. With this roadmap, the chronology is set up so students read and critique "the norm" first, and then learn about other experiences. This approach is similar to the STP curriculum's stock and concealed stories (Roberts et al., 2008). The instruction depends on a comparative framework, however, since it appears that students have not been exposed to a lot of diverse narratives, especially since this is a 9th grade class, starting with texts that may be more familiar can be a helpful starting point. The comparative framework also asks students to grapple with why certain narratives have been privileged over others, touching on systemic racism and going beyond individual understandings of different racialized experiences

School Culture & Class Climate

Compared to the other schools in this study, Dogwood Academy had the most robust DEI programming. The teachers talked about a DEI officer, required teacher trainings, and a book club. All three of the teachers expressed engagement with the DEI programming, demonstrating that amongst English teachers, this is a utilized and helpful resource. Michelle talked positively about the book club and how their recent conversations surrounding *Unconscious Bias in Schools* by Sarah Fiarman and Tracey Benson were helpful. While Lena agreed that the book club is doing positive work, she talked about ways it could improve. She discussed how the book club could get more specific by applying the frameworks outlined in the book to real scenarios at their school. This feedback demonstrates that the book club is attended and appreciated by the teachers, and the teachers want to go further with their engagement. Eric spoke about using the DEI officer as a

resource to ensure thoughtful, respectful classroom activities. One example he gave was how he worked together with the DEI officer on an activity relating to Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* and the Great Migration. Eric wanted students to create a musical playlist that drew upon different genres and the experiences of the play's characters. However, he was concerned with minimizing the trauma these families went through and "reducing [Black communities] to music" Eric worked with the DEI officer to make sure the activity acknowledged the "real lived experiences" of the Black community and the "pain and trauma" they experienced. Eric's classroom example shows the value of creative activities and their ability to generate conversations and reflections about race while also emphasizing the attention required to make sure the activity is thoughtful. Overall, the teachers found the DEI resources supportive and helped empower them to directly engage with race and ethnicity in their classrooms. The extent of the DEI resources also demonstrates a school culture that welcomes engagement with race and ethnicity.

The teachers at Dogwood Academy described positive class climates concerning discourse about race and ethnicity. Michelle characterized her 11th and 12th-grade students as "open-minded", "curious", and "self-aware of their own privileges". She explained that students were "eager" to participate in class conversations and learn about unfamiliar concepts. She identified open conversation as an important for developing racial literacy and that the school welcomes open conversations about race and ethnicity. Michelle said, "[Dogwood's] students chose the school for that reason. It's really a place where you're able to be vulnerable and acknowledge racial biases". This comment explicitly links the school culture to classroom culture, showing the institutional impact on conversations about race and ethnicity.

Lena extended Michelle's point by talking about her younger students' fears about "getting it wrong" when talking about race. Lena talked about the school culture being daunting for

students at times by saying “our school is odd in a way that we are a liberal-leaning school. So, there is not a lot of room for mistakes”. Here, Lena identifies a challenge in the school’s culture where students fear saying the wrong thing, and that fear prevents engagement with the topic. Lena then talked about the burden this climate places on students of color where they “feel like they need to teach everyone, which is also not their responsibility to do”. This hesitation to talk about unfamiliar or uncomfortable topics is not uncommon in these predominantly white spaces (Anthony-Stevens et al., 2022), but Lena also highlights the dangers of further marginalizing students of color by placing the responsibility to talk about race on them. To address this tension, Lena talked about creating a class culture where it is “okay to make mistakes” but these mistakes are promptly addressed and corrected. This culture helps students feel comfortable talking about race while also being constructive.

Ongoing Challenges

In addition to the ongoing work the teachers were doing to create inclusive classroom environments and diverse syllabi, the teachers identified ongoing challenges to talking about race and ethnicity. One example Lena gave was getting her students to think more critically about race. She said her students would say things like “the characters are suffering because they're slaves, and slavery is bad,” but the analysis would stop there. She attributed some of the lack of depth to their age, saying “they’re just learning how to be in school” and have trouble articulating their thoughts related to race. Here, Lena expresses a correlation between age, critical thinking skills, and exposure to racial issues. When comparing Lena’s students to Michelle’s older students who seemed more prepared to talk about race, the younger students seem to engage with race less critically but this changes throughout their time at Dogwood.

Another challenge Lena talked about was moving outside the white-nonwhite binary that exists in the U.S and studying works not about racial trauma. She framed the challenge as finding "texts about people of color where they're not constantly comparing themselves to white people". She explained her inclusion of Laura Esquivel's *Like Water for Chocolate*, as a way to "circumvent that problem, because anything that takes place in the US inherently has that binary, of posing people of color in relation to white counterparts, because that is the standard in which we've set up our systems in this country." This point highlights how racial formations and projects have manifested in the U.S., supporting Morrison's arguments about classic American literature inherently deals with race (Morrison, 1992). She also talked about the challenge of finding works that engage with race and ethnicity that are not rooted in racial trauma. She linked this challenge to a broader characterization of literature saying "you very rarely read books in English classes that are full of joy for anyone. Because… unfortunately, happiness isn't always as complex." She went on to say that:

> Taking [the stories] out of the U.S. does help a little bit [with alleviating racial trauma] but even in *Like Water for Chocolate*, the whole story is about how she can't be with the person she wants to be with like the entire time…but it doesn't feel like racial trauma because it's about Mexican people set in Mexico.

Here, there is an interesting distinction between trauma inflicted upon people of color and trauma rooted in systemic racism. Lena voices a concern about not wanting her students to only engage with non-white narratives that hinge upon racism. However, there is still the concern with having most POC narratives rooted in trauma. With some narratives, the lines between racial trauma and other forms of trauma can be blurred since systemic racism affects individuals in different ways and can "indirectly" or less obviously cause trauma. Whether or not the trauma in a story is

explicitly race based or not, it still takes an emotional toll on students, especially students of color. Lena's concern points to a broader challenge of balancing the syllabus to accurately depict racism while not overwhelming students with stories about trauma.

Eric spoke to challenges about teaching intersectional texts. When reflecting on this topic he explained:

> Students are willing to address issues of race and ethnicity in the classroom to different degrees of comfort. But I think when you combine race and ethnicity with gender, or with sexuality, or with gender expression, that discomfort compounds itself, and students find it even more difficult to engage. So, trying to get them to embrace the complexity of these narratives has been a challenge. I want to try to show the breadth and depth of these communities. And that gets tough when students feel like they're walking on eggshells between, 'Oh, I'm already a little iffy on talking about race and ethnicity. But now I've got to be careful about what I say about trans characters or non-binary characters as well'.

It is necessary for students to talk about intersecting identities to break up monolithic understandings of a group. However, Eric expresses that having these conversations is hard because students feel overwhelmed. This comment highlights that talks about race and ethnicity but must also talk about gender, sexuality, religion, class, and other impactful social characteristics. Eric's comment encapsulates a sentiment that there is always more that can be done to better develop student's racial literacy. Throughout his interview, he was very invested in getting his students to work through challenging texts and conversations.

Overall, the teachers at Dogwood Academy felt supported by their school when it came to talking about race and ethnicity in the classroom. Lena, Michelle, and Eric's responses suggest that school wide support of inclusive curriculums and diverse syllabi greatly helps instruction and

student engagement. The teachers saw talking about race as a way to expose their students to different perspectives, build empathy, and encourage them to take positive action in the future. While they shared positive experiences, they also identifying places to improve their instruction and challenges they are actively working through.

Maple and Redwood Academies: School Support & Teacher Driven Projects

At Maple and Redwood Academies, the teachers felt supported by their schools, but their engagement with race and ethnicity was more individually rather than institutionally driven. Maple Academy serves 9-12th graders and is a boarding and day school that offers AP classes. According to the school website, they have a student population of 445 and report that 37% of their students are domestic students of color and 30% of their students receive financial aid (tuition for day students is $53,200 and $73,400 for boarders). I interviewed two teachers at Maple Academy - Leslie and David. Leslie teaches 9th and 10th grade English, and David teaches 10th grade English, Creative Writing, and AP Literature. Next, Redwood Academy serves PreK-12th graders and according to one of the interviewees, has approximately 60 high school students. The school operates under a specialized learning model and as one interview explained is “a magnet for kids who weren't able to be successful in other school environments.” The school would not disclose the percent of students of color or percent of students receiving financial aid (high school tuition is $35,632). Here, I was able to interview two English teachers - Anthony and Miranda. Anthony teaches the 10th-grade “Novels and Nonfiction” class and Miranda teaches 9th Grade “World Studies” (interdisciplinary history and English), 11th and 12th Grade “American Literature”, and 11th and 12th Grade “College Level Composition”. Notably, there are only two English teachers at Redwood, so I was able to get a complete picture of Redwood’s high school English instructional team

Building the Syllabi

When talking about how they build their syllabi, Leslie and Miranda centered diversity in form and perspectives. Leslie talked about prioritizing a "variety of voices, genres, and style" to provide students with a "dynamic representation of individuals who come from a variety of society types." Here, Leslie identifies variety in form as a way to access diverse narratives, and she uses this as a guiding principle to build her syllabus. Miranda also talked about having "texture" in her classes and diversity "not just in terms of the racial identity of authors, characters, or content" but also in the "era of publication, regional identity". Importantly these teachers did not use diversity in form as a substitution for racial diversity, but as a way to better represent diverse racial experiences. The teachers explained that these methods helped break up monolithic understandings of racial groups and contributed to student learning.

Leslie expanded on her syllabus-building practices by pointing to the importance of curriculum design, explaining:

> I actually think that you can have the most diverse texts, but your curriculum and your teaching is what will make it relevant to the students. So, it's not so much like, 'Oh, I'm going to pick these books', but it's the way that instruction is designed. So, I'm prioritizing, yes, diversity in what visually someone would see if they looked at my current curriculum, but more so, the equitable and inclusive practices that are being done in the class. So, for example, I have systems, routines, and assignments that prioritize the students centering themselves within whatever the text might be. So even if we are reading, for example, *The Odyssey*, … they can think about it in relation to their own cultural niches.

She then referenced CRP and explained that in order for the instruction to truly resonate, students needed to think about themselves in relation to the "diverse text or content." This approach helps

Leslie avoid teaching a "diversity ideology" that "creates space for minor acknowledgment of structural inequality in the abstract but psychologically and materially protects whites and white organizations from discussions of racial inequality" (Pascoe, 2023, p.71). By forcing students to locate themselves within different narratives and structures, students must directly confront racial and ethnic struggles and understand how they relate to them. Leslie highlights that building an inclusive classroom environment requires more than a diverse syllabus and that classroom practices are an important part of building an inclusive classroom.

When asked about the canon and how it informs his syllabus curation, David critiqued a static definition of the canon and advocated for a focus on picking books that are relevant to students rather than concerning oneself with the idea of the canon. He defined the canon as a dynamic set of texts that is determined internally whether that be on a school, department, or individual level. This view privileges the individual as they determine what belongs in the canon rather than dominant society. He also subverts the concept of the canon by explaining what makes a text valuable is how it helps each student learn, rather than a societal level determination of whether a text is important. In a way, David's points align with Dogwood's "teach the canon to break the canon" rhetoric as both ideologies seek to move beyond a static idea of the canon. Another point David stresses is the relevance a text has to students. Similar to other teachers, David prioritizes student engagement and resonance with a text over whether a text is traditionally canonical. From this framework, David builds a syllabus that exposes students to new ideas and narratives.

David expressed there was no difference regarding his autonomy between his AP and non-AP classes, offering a different perspective from the literature arguing AP classes restrict teacher autonomy. He even said that the framework of the AP supported a diverse syllabus, saying "the

best way to prepare them for that exam is to distribute a wide variety of authors and texts". For David, the structure of the exam did not impose restrictions, and he saw diverse texts as important for preparing students for the exam. This insight challenges previous literature that finds AP courses limiting (Glass, 1997). While the curriculum does not explicitly encourage a diverse curriculum, it does not prevent one. In this case, David was able to adapt the AP curriculum to fit what he wanted to teach students.

Miranda identified interdisciplinary English-history collaborations as helpful for teaching about race and ethnicity. When asked about the helpfulness of providing historical context along with texts where students may be unfamiliar with the timeframe, Miranda affirmed its usefulness, saying "the integrated curriculum with English and social studies has been hugely helpful in getting at the material underpinnings of some of the ideas and identities explored and expressed in the text." She gave an example of how she collaborated with her co-teacher to do a unit on the Civil Rights Movement, reading selections from King, Malcolm X, Baldwin, and Shirley Chisholm. Miranda points to the interdisciplinary approaches as helpful for allowing more depth and complexity regarding instruction, allowing the course to go farther than it would in a standalone English class. With the Civil Rights example, Miranda and her co-teacher were able to engage a group of students who previously were disengaged and disinterested in learning about the topic, speaking to the value of this approach.

School Culture & Class Climates

When talking about why she chose Maple, Leslie pointed to school demographics. She explained:

> I was interested in [Maple], in particular, because it's a community where there's a lot of students that come from wealthy backgrounds. And just by nature of the college prep

> school, and the assumption that they're going to be going to strong colleges, I know that they'll be leaders in their fields eventually. So, I want to design curricula that inspire them to be leaders of good character, especially in our world today. So that they can change the world.

Leslie extends Bidwell's point that the goal of schools is to adequately prepare students to function in society (Bidwell, 1965) and affirms Lawrence's arguments by stating that her goal is to help improve character and that racial literacy is a critical skill (Lawrence, 1997). Her point also highlights the stakes of teaching about race and ethnicity to privileged students. If these students are likely to come into positions of power, assisted by their ample resources, they must understand and want to solve social issues. Like the teachers at Dogwood, Leslie does not explicitly go into what the exact features of "good character" are or what students will change, but implicitly, she is suggesting they will advance racial equity projects. Then, Leslie raised a concern about consistency across teachers. She explained, "I don't know if everyone is philosophically on the same page when it comes to equity and inclusion, [especially with their] practices and routines in their classroom." This point highlights the benefits of autonomy when teachers are committed to certain skills, like increasing racial literacy, but the lack of transparency and high levels of freedom also means that teachers can choose to omit teaching about race and ethnicity. Leslie's responses show that the school's culture encourages Leslie to talk about race in her classes, not because Maple itself is pushing for racial literacy, but because of the student body, and it is unclear how consistent this investment in racial literacy is across teachers.

However, David had a different perspective on Maple's culture. David talked about how Maple Academy's culture helped and encouraged him to teach about race and ethnicity. David explained that Maple values and promotes diversity and inclusion. He linked the ease of talking

about race in the classroom to the institution, saying, "it's an institutional norm to talk about and to think about issues of race, ethnicity, and socio-economic background." This norm then creates "a baseline buy-in" from students, creating more engagement in the classroom. Similar to Dogwood Academy, the overarching school culture trickles down into the classroom, making it easier to have these conversations. David also spoke highly of the school's "vibrant" affinity networks and how they were "safe spaces" for students and faculty self-expression. The school's support of these student-run affinity groups demonstrates a school culture that promotes conversations about race and ethnicity and has goals of inclusion and belonging.

Overall, David and Leslie expressed that they felt supported at Maple. David explained "[Maple has] a whole interconnected network of safety nets that provide feedback guidance." He explained that he can consult other faculty or administrators when navigating conversations about race and ethnicity and how he is constantly receiving feedback and guidance on how to best foster this kind of learning in the classroom. His insights point to the school providing support, but that individual must seek it out. When asked about school support, Leslie talked about the school's multi-pluralism director. She explained this role was similar to a DEI officer, but there was a bigger emphasis on belonging. Leslie said the director was a "good resource" and gave an example of how the director helped her develop a critical lens document for approaching texts about race and ethnicity. From the discussion about Maple's DEI resources and the assistance from other teachers, it appeared that teachers at Maple received support when it came to approaching conversations about race and ethnicity in the classroom, but there was less direct DEI programming like at Dogwood Academy.

When addressing class climate at Redwood, Anthony spoke directly to the socio-economic backgrounds of Redwood's students. He said the "class similarities" between his students "often

allow them to mask racial components of what's going on" and that he believes there will always be a "socio-economic component" to dealing with race at such an expensive school. Anthony was the only teacher who spoke directly about his students' general affluence and the impact of class on racial understandings. From Anthony's perspective, his students bond over a shared socio-economic background that obscures racial differences they may have. I appreciated this comment as it clarified how race and class intersect in Anthony's classroom. Within the interviews, many teachers were focused on the racial backgrounds of their students and how race affected classroom conversations, but the idea of class, such as differences between students receiving financial aid and students not receiving aid was not talked about. For Anthony, class was a major component of the school's culture that affected classroom conversations about race.

At Redwood Academy, Miranda and Anthony did not talk about DEI resources or programming. While their school was receptive to their integration of topics of race and ethnicity in their classrooms, their efforts were self-driven. When talking about Redwood's school culture, Miranda characterized the student body as being more open to talking about race and ethnicity than other schools she had taught. When comparing the students at Redwood to those at a previous school she taught at, she said the Redwood students "are much more receptive to talking about these topics [of race and ethnicity]." When offering explanations for why they may be more receptive, she pointed to social media and the students living in the Chicagoland area. Here, proximity to diverse experiences, through classmates, social media, and geography, seems to positively impact student's willingness to learn about race and ethnicity.

Ongoing Challenges

When talking about challenges, David talked about facilitating conversations that did not force students of color to constantly speak about their own experiences to educate their classmates.

He explained that he did not want to build "in any expectation" that students must share their own experiences, but he wanted to "leave the door open" for students to "speak from their own lived experience". The way David values his students of color's knowledge and unique perspectives reflects CRP (Martin, 2014). Moreover, his comment relates to Eric's conversations about balancing class conversations to promote white students talking about race and deeply engaging with the topic while also protecting students of color. As a solution, David offered literature as a mediator that gave students of color more control over how they share information. Implicit in David's response is that the literature students read is directly connected to contemporary issues. David's encouragement of students sharing personal experiences shows a classroom that analysis contemporary racial dynamics alongside historical ones. While personal anecdotes and modern day perspectives are important for building racial literacy, David acknowledges the emotional toll it can take on students of color and cultivating a safe, healthy classroom environment is something he is working to achieve.

When asked about challenges, Miranda talked about her positionality as a white person facilitating conversations about non-white communities. She reflected on this by saying she never wants to "be reductive" and that she is concerned with her "blind spots, as a white person" and as "someone who has come up through very white institutions". Despite these concerns, she affirmed that teaching these texts is better than the alternative of only using texts that reflect her experiences. Miranda's commitment to providing her students non-white narratives reflects a disruption of white institutional dominance. Since white institutional dominance is maintained by avoiding uncomfortable situations related to race and framing racism as out of individual's control (Irby & Clark, 2018), Miranda counters by directly engaging with topics that are unfamiliar and may challenge her. Also, she notes that she sees herself as a "guide" for her students rather than an all-

knowing authority figure. In this way, Miranda's practices align with CRP (Martin, 2014). I found this reflection impactful as Miranda was honest about how she wants to expose her students to diverse narratives but is scared about getting it wrong, however, this challenge is something she must work through.

Another challenge Miranda talked about was student resistance to talking about race. When discussing this challenge, Miranda referenced a class she taught at a different private, college prep school.[5] She explained that when she first started teaching in 2020, she wanted to focus on Black American experiences as the nation witnessed increased protests and action regarding ongoing police violence and systemic racism. So, for her AP Literature class, she taught James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and Claudia Rankine. She characterized the results as a "mixed bag", with some students being incredibly hostile saying things like, "We're not learning about capital L literature if all we're doing is talking about representations of a Black experience," "I wanted to learn about human nature," and "I just want to pass the AP exam, and I don't think I'm being prepared for the AP exam so much as I'm being prepared to think about 20th-century racism." She described feeling disheartened and surprised that her students were so against talking about Black experiences. The students expressed wanting to get different things out of their class, whether that be passing the AP exam or learning about human nature as it relates to whiteness, and this clashed with Miranda's goals of getting the students to learn about Black experiences through literature. The students' responses reflect Glass' arguments that the AP exam impacts instruction because of the performance based component of the class (Glass, 1997). Furthermore, Miranda's experience shows the stakes of not teaching racial literacy throughout high school. These students were in AP Literature, meaning they were likely in 12th grade, about to graduate and enter the world with an

[5] I included this anecdote because she explained this situation informed her approach to teaching at Redwood and was quite impactful.

incredibly ignorant view of race. Despite this negative experience, Miranda continued her commitment to integrating explicit conversations and lessons about race and ethnicity into her syllabus. She spoke about how she has changed things over the years, but the goal remains consistent. However, this experience does highlight the difficulty of going against the "average English class" where race is not explicitly talked about and the literature features more white, seemingly race neutral experiences. Also, it gives a glimpse into private, college prep school cultures where diversity and inclusion are not a priority. Overall, the teachers at Maple and Redwood Academies felt their schools agreed that racial literacy was important and did not restrict their teaching, but the instruction was largely teacher-driven.

Pine and Oak Academies: Institutional Support & Limitations

The teachers at Pine and Oak Academies still had school support but did run into some limitations regarding the school's attention to race and ethnicity. While the teachers characterized their schools as open to diversity and inclusion, there were some institutional policies and norms that limited the teachers' ability to facilitate conversations about race and ethnicity. In some cases, the school's inclusion of both middle and high school influenced the high school curriculum in ways that did not appear at other schools. However, the schools were overall supportive of the teachers' efforts to diversify their syllabi. Pine Academy serves PreK-12th grade students and is a Christian school that offers AP and Dual credit courses. According to the school's website and a phone call I had with the admissions office, the school has 429 students, with 90 in high school; 49% of all students are students of color, and 20.7% of all students receive financial aid (high school tuition is up to $15,500). At Pine Academy, I was able to interview one teacher Alex - who teaches 9th grade regular and advanced English. Oak Academy serves PreK-12th grade students and is an international school that offers IB courses. According to the school's website, there are

760 students with 205 in high school. I was unable to learn the percent of students of color and percent on financial aid (tuition is $26,500). Here, I was able to interview three teachers - Avery, Brittany, and Luke. Avery teaches 11th and 12th grade IB, Brittany teaches 9th and 10th grade English, and Luke teaches 11th and 12th grade IB as well as another national IB curriculum.

Building the Syllabi

Alex explained that teacher autonomy helped him diversify his syllabus, but that recently, administrative changes have hindered his endeavors. He discussed his old principal's support for diversifying his syllabus and making changes to his courses. Despite this moment of enhanced autonomy, Alex spoke to current administration changes and new school goals that limit his autonomy and restrict his syllabus diversification. Alex described being able to swap books out without question, but now, he cannot make those changes as easily. An example he gave was wanting to replace Homer's *The Odyssey* with something that resonated better with students but being "adamantly" told no by administrators because they wanted students to read this play sometime during their high school career. He attributed this restriction to the new administration's goal of reviewing the entire high school curriculum and determining from that level what needs to be taught. So rather than having each teacher have their own curriculum, there is a more holistic school-wide curriculum. Alex spoke about the time this curriculum review was taking and wished he could teach diverse and more engaging texts to his current students. Interestingly, Alex explained that he was not part of the administrative conversations about the overarching high school curriculum. His exclusion highlights a lack of his voice being heard at these meetings, likely resulting in fewer texts that he wants to teach being integrated into the new curriculum.

Avery and Luke described the IB requirements as a helpful framework that guided their diverse syllabus curation. Avery felt that the course requirements were "the IB''s way of forcing

people into more diverse text selection" due to the "requirement that [classes] have to read a certain number of texts in translation and from a certain number of continents". From these guidelines "[classes] automatically get more diversity [through literature]." Avery points to the ways the IB requirements suggest more diverse texts without explicitly giving racial or ethnic requirements. She also reflected on how the requirements forced her to branch out and do some research to find texts that resonated with students and satisfied the IB's requirements. When talking about the IB requirements, Luke characterized them as "restrictions that they have are barely restrictions." In his interview, he did not talk much about the IB requirements and instead talked about his perspectives and strategies for developing his syllabus. For the IB teachers at Oak, the IB requirements did not inhibit them from curating curriculum that addresses race and ethnicity.

When talking about his methodology, Luke highlighted the importance of including texts students would enjoy, that exposed students to different perspectives, and provided representation. Luke expanded on his point about representation by explaining that Oak is not extremely diverse, and since, for example, Black students are a minority at the school, he wanted them to feel "acknowledged and represented in the things that they're reading." This emphasis on inclusion was significant because some teachers talked more about exposure rather than representation for students of color. His point emphasizes the importance of not further marginalizing students through a non-inclusive curriculum and the value of validating student experiences.

Although Avery does not teach middle school, she spoke about an "overcorrecting" issue when it came to integrating more Black perspectives into the middle school curriculum. Avery cited a parent's comment about the lack of diversity in the syllabus as prompting "a major overhaul" of Oak's middle school curriculum. After the changes were made, Avery explained there was a Black student who asked, "Why are we always reading about violence against Blacks

in America?". The student raised an important point that it is incredibly draining to only see oneself depicted in traumatic narratives. This feedback prompted the department to constantly try to balance diverse narratives and books about trauma. While Oak is continuously working on their middle school curriculum, it is encouraging to see the school acted upon parent feedback. Avery also pointed out that because the middle school curriculum does not have guidelines like the IB courses, it requires more active teacher evaluation of the curriculum. Her point also highlights the balance between providing accurate representations of a people group without sugar coating issues, while not overburdening children with stories about racial trauma. This concern relates to Lena's earlier comment about trying to give students non-white texts not focused on racial trauma. Describing the issue as an "overcorrecting" one suggests that Oak included too many Black texts as a solution to their predominantly white, male syllabi. However, as Avery explained the issue, it appeared to be more a lack of nuance issue, where there were not enough different Black experiences showcased, and potentially not enough texts from other marginalized communities. Providing a more dynamic set of texts, that showcase pain but also joy, would still teach children about different groups and experiences while balancing the subject matter.

School Culture & Class Climate

Alex found that including supplementary materials and sharing personal experiences helped his students better understand racial histories and struggles. He explained that his students often had "more of an abstract understanding" of the racism in their texts because they likely had not experienced it themselves. To help deepen their understanding, he would share instances of racism he experienced as a Hispanic man. He felt that sharing personal anecdotes helped students see contemporary instances of racism and make the concepts less abstract. Alex continued:

> A few years ago, when some of our Asian students might have felt a bit of animosity towards Asians in terms of the COVID outbreak… I think Asian students who have experienced [racist comments] would understand [the racial topics discussed in class] so much clearer.

Around 2020 there was an increase in hate crimes and racial violence against Asian Americans associated with the COVID-19 pandemic (Yam, 2021), and Alex points to individual experience as helpful for building empathy and understanding. For Alex, personalizing the approach to teaching about race and ethnicity was helpful for facilitating learning.

When talking about class goals, Alex discussed empathy turning into action and referenced the school's Christian focus. Alex explained:

> The goal is for the students, not only to think clearly, to write logically, things like that, but also to exercise that empathetic muscle that I know we all have…so that when they see an injustice, or when they see something that's not right, that they could not just think, 'Oh, that's bad' but actually do something to help…because we do teach at a Christian school [and] it's very clear that we need to love each other above all.

Here, Alex talks about the importance of exposure but also emphasizes his desire for students to take action and work against social injustices. His point goes beyond some of the other teachers who focused solely on the exposure point. Also, he points to the school's values as promoting empathy. Of course, care is not an exclusively Christian value, but this point does connect institutional values with the need for a diversified syllabus. Because there is a call to action part of Alex's point, he goes beyond a tolerance-oriented approach of talking about race and uses an equity-oriented one (Martell, 2017). Alex emphasizes justice in addition to acceptance and

kindness, and he believes exposure is the first step towards teaching students to be active members of society working towards equality.

When talking about school culture, Luke talked about Oak Academy's lack of structural diversity and inclusion efforts. Luke started this comment by saying most of what he teaches in his classes regarding race and ethnicity is based on his own research and experiences rather than school resources or influence. Luke explained that Oak Academy is "slowly waking up to a need to do things" regarding support. He gave an anecdote where a Black student around five or six years ago "heard other students using the n-word in an offhand way" and was moved to join the school's newly formed diversity committee to voice her concerts. Luke explained that after this student's efforts, there were cultural changes at the school. This point is interesting because it highlights the impact individual students have on school culture and that pushes for diversity and inclusion seems to be on the teacher and student level rather than a top-down school approach.

Luke also talked about the school's academic rigor as something that supported his inclusion of diverse texts. He named this attribute as a reason he wanted to teach at the school, saying:

> It's really great to be able to push students to their limits, knowing that there's typically parent support for that kind of thing…Because most parents at the school have been to university as well and understand what is required for that kind of study.

With this statement, Luke connects parental education to the level of support needed to help students succeed at Oak Academy. This point highlights the "extras" needed for students to succeed at Oak Academy. Also, the comment shows that a diverse syllabus that goes beyond the canon is still academically rigorous and important for success in college. When asked about parental input on his syllabus choices, Luke explained:

> I've had parents just generally comment on the books in a positive way. And, again, because most parents at this school are university-educated. Many of them have read some of the books that we are reading. So, they will say something like, 'Oh, I loved that book, when I read it back in whatever, and I can't wait to talk about it with my child'. But also, parents of African American students have expressed, I don't know if I call it gratitude, but approval for sure of some of the texts that we read in class.

Luke's observations highlight that parental feedback has been positive. Expanding upon his earlier comments about parent education helping students, he identifies how parents can encourage analysis of the texts at home based on their familiarity with the text. Moreover, he points out that Black parents have "approved" of the texts selected. Importantly, he clarified it was not "gratitude" which implies that Black parents have an expectation for the school to provide diverse texts. This framing presents a diverse syllabus as the expectation, and that Luke is meeting what is expected from parents rather than Luke doing something extra or subversive.

A strategy Luke discussed for encouraging productive class conversations was setting clear boundaries. Luke talked about how once he sets boundaries about what type of language is and is not tolerated in class, students are more open to discussion. He explained that at first students can be hesitant about what is allowed to be said, so being clear upfront about conversation guidelines helps students with starting conversations. Luke also talked about giving explanations about the logic behind the boundaries. With the example of the n-word in Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, Luke explained to students that the use of the word is "a reflection of the kind of language that was used during the time period in which the book takes place" and not giving permission for readers to throw the word around casually. Giving students an explanation of the boundaries seemed to be beneficial as it helped his students understand the context of language rather than just flat-out

banning the word and making it into something students wanted to say as a way to "break the rules". Luke's reflection gives a bit more insight into factors that make a class more willing to talk about race and ethnicity.

Avery talked about factors that make students and teachers hesitate to have conversations about race and ethnicity. When talking about student hesitation, Avery explained that students seemed more open to talking about contemporary issues about race outside of "teacher curated discussions". Avery's observations highlight that perhaps students are more capable of having these conversations than their teachers think, but in the realm of the classroom, the academic setting alters student's engagement with the topic. Also, Avery pointed to the school discouraging talking about "hot topics in the news" with students, giving an example of the school sending an email to teachers discouraging talking about the Russia-Ukraine war due to having students from both countries. Avery continued by saying:

> I feel sometimes as a teacher, I have to be really careful about what I'm saying because, even unintentionally, if you say something that's misinterpreted or unintentionally sort of ignorant, that in the age of social media, I feel you could you could go viral…So I think that there is, amongst some teachers, more of an err of caution around talking, [not] just about race and ethnicity, but...[also issues like] the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or the Israeli attack on Gaza.

Here, Avery highlights the anxieties around being "canceled" and that it forces teachers to have a degree of caution with what they are saying. While increased accountability can be a good thing, especially when institutions do not properly correct harmful things happening in the classroom, the fear of "not getting it wrong" does prevent conversation and learning. At some point, individuals must decide when and how they will educate themselves to speak on a topic or else it

will never get discussed. Moreover, the school discouraging teachers from talking about current events hinders student learning by preventing them from making sense of contemporary issues. Avery's comments show that some of the same anxieties that prevent students from engaging are also seen on the teacher level.

When Brittany talked about class goals, she emphasized skills and then picked texts that connected to these skills. She brought up 11th and 12th-grade testing, saying, "I look towards tests that they have to take in junior and senior year, and make sure that I'm providing them with the skills that they can be successful." She indicates a clear attention to standardized testing and making sure students are given foundational skills in their earlier high school years. Then, Brittany brought up diversity amongst the texts, saying students have "African American lit pretty much through most of the years in middle school and high school", so she tries to include different narratives in her classes. It was interesting that African American literature specifically seemed to be present throughout Oak's curriculum, and this seemed to be the marginalized group with the most attention from Oak's teachers. She explained the purpose of reading diverse literature was to get students to "understand and put themselves into other people's shoes." Brittany emphasized the exposure and empathy points of having students read diverse texts. From Brittany's responses, she appeared to have a more tolerance-oriented approach to diversity (Martell, 2017). When she discussed successful skills, these were more oriented to test performance not racial literacy and equity projects. While she did emphasize understanding and empathy, she did not talk about action. This assessment is not to say the work she is doing is not valuable, that it is preventing students from fully developing racial literacy or hindering student participation in racial equity projects. However, her instruction could be more impactful if there was more of an action-oriented piece and focus on systemic racism.

Ongoing Challenges

Alex expressed having trouble getting his students to extend topics about race and ethnicity in their texts to contemporary issues. Alex gave the example of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, saying:

> When we talk about a film or talking about what happens in novels like *To Kill a Mockingbird* [and] Jim being convicted… [the students] are very clear on that stuff being wrong, [saying things like] 'How can a jury do that?' But I don't know if, like with George Floyd and the riots and protests that happened not too long ago, I don't know if they would make that connection. You know, it's easy to look back and say, 'Yeah, that's horrible. That's terrible.' I don't know if they look at [society] today and say, 'Oh, that's the same thing. That's also bad. That's also not healthy'... It's so easy to abstract it like 'Well, that's yesterday. That's not today.'

Here, there is a distinction in the student's minds about literature and the real world and getting them to make these connections and extend their understanding is a challenge. This disconnect suggests that Alex's students embody aspects of a tolerance-oriented mindset as they view racism as more a thing of the past (Martell, 2017), but Alex is actively trying to get them to develop an equity-oriented mindset.

When Brittany talked about challenges, she talked about her position as a white teacher. She explained that sometimes she has "some levels of discomfort when it comes to talking about race and ethnicity" because she lacks a "full understanding". Resultingly, she said its sometimes difficult to facilitate conversations about race and ethnicity. This comment points to something Miranda talked about when talking about the limitations of teaching about race and ethnicity while being white. However, it is impossible to be all-knowing about this very complicated and ever-changing topic, so Brittany's comment highlights how teachers must embrace levels of discomfort

and still try to facilitate these conversations since the alternative would be to omit this kind of teaching altogether. While teachers should educate themselves on topics to remain respectful and not spread false, damaging information, they also should not shy away from these topics. Brittany's comment does suggest that some more institutional support could help empower teachers to talk about these topics and provide them with helpful information that would enhance their understanding. Overall, while the teachers at Pine and Oak Academies had institutional support when it came to talking about race and ethnicity, they also faced limitations. The teachers could have benefited from more institutional support, whether that be integrating diverse texts into overarching curriculum reviews or access to education resources.

Willow Academy: School Resistance & Antagonism

Finally, Willow Academy was the only school where the teacher described a hostile environment regarding learning about race and ethnicity. Willow Academy serves Pre-K-12th grade students and is an international school that offers IB classes. According to their website, they have 222 high school students, and 20% of their total student body receives financial aid (tuition is $39,950 for 9th and 10th grade and $41,950 for 11th and 12th). I was unable to learn how many total students they have and the percent of students of color. At this school, I interviewed one teacher - Natasha. Natasha teaches lower-level English as part of a non-American national curriculum, as well as 11th and 12th grade IB.

Building the Syllabi

Natasha characterized the international curriculum and the IB as more limiting, in contrast to how other teachers described the IB. She described both curriculums as “prescriptive” but described the non-American curriculum to be more restrictive. When talking about the IB class(es), she highlighted that the assessments limited her autonomy and significantly shaped the courses.

At Willow, the testing aspect of the IB seemed to be more prominent than at other schools that focused more on texts and content matter; in fact, none of the other IB teachers brought up the exam. She concluded by saying there was "not much scope" for these programs. These insights demonstrate that standardized curriculum, like the IB or AP program, can be limiting and non-limiting depending on the school and teacher focus and how they value the exam.

When talking about class goals, Natasha talked about representation, and her own experiences as a woman of color. This conversation was significant as she was the only woman of color I interviewed, so the personal stake of representation was emphasized. She reflected on her own experiences growing up not reading diverse texts and explaining other forms of literature would have been more helpful. She talked about trying "as much as [she could]" to include diverse voices and that she received positive response from students of color who finally saw themselves in texts. Here, a personal investment is a driving force behind Natasha's class goals. While the white teachers did not speak about their education negatively affecting them, Natasha still felt the hurt of being erased in her school's curriculum. Her responses mirror those of the women of color interviewed in Kohli's research (2009). The difference in Natasha's comments about positionality and the white teachers emphasize the long-term impacts of non-diverse curriculums and the personal investment in diverse syllabi.

School Culture & Class Climate

Natasha identified teachers as a driving force behind school culture. Natasha explained that the teachers at Willow did not have much training on how to thoughtfully engage with race and ethnicity. She described relying on her "personal experience" as a woman of color to navigate conversations about race, but she wished she had more formal training. When comparing herself to other teachers, Natasha explained "the only reason I think I might be a little bit more equipped

is because of my personal experience and just a general thoughtfulness of what it means to come from a minority group." Here, Natasha points to her own identity informing her teaching practices but emphasizes that is not enough. These comments emphasize that people of color are not automatically experts on race, and they should not be expected to know everything. Then, Natasha described a negative situation where a teacher read the n-word out loud. She explained it caused a lot of harm, but there was no substantive follow-up and correction. She used this example to describe the overall lack of awareness of the teachers. Natasha explained that students of color are not always in "safe spaces" because of the lack of teacher awareness and care, saying that ignorant comments are not always "addressed in the most thoughtful way." Furthermore, Natasha spoke about the negative effects Willow's culture had on students. She explained how "students are afraid to come forward" about instances of harm or discrimination due to fears around escalation. She identified the "complete lack of education" and "privilege" of students at the school. She also felt that "if you even asked a student of color [about the harmful behavior], they probably wouldn't be able to express that to you. They would say 'it's not a big deal'.... They will just brush it off." This comment highlights the impact of school culture on students and how it works to minimize the impacts of student experiences. Natasha's reflections highlight the ways teachers influence shape school culture.

Additionally, Natasha spoke about the school's culture having a negative impact on herself. She reflected on balancing bringing in her own beliefs and correcting behavior while avoiding seeming "unprofessional". This comment reflects the kind of minimizing the school does regarding people's opinions and beliefs. What Natasha is describing is not unprofessional, but the school's tactics of making it seem so allow the school to continue operating as they are and trivialize Natasha. When talking about her experiences with other teachers of color, she explained that they

"have a similar mindset" and the school can make them feel incredibly "radical" for their views because they are so different from others. Natasha even said that she did not feel safe because whenever she brings something up, she's shut down. She expressed feeling like she had to "put parts of [herself] away to survive" in this environment. Overall, Willow's culture harmed Natasha and left her feeling frustrated and minimized.

In contrast to the other teachers who spoke about how their schools supported their teachings regarding race and ethnicity, Natasha spoke about the institution as a challenge. She explained:

> The challenge is going to be that you are at a predominantly white institution. So, I think I'm the only person of color who's even at a middle leadership level… senior leadership, there's no one at all. So, I think if the culture supports [an investment in teaching about race and ethnicity] that it's going to happen. But if it doesn't, then you're going to keep hitting walls. So, from a personal standpoint, I would love to completely diversify my curriculum, but I feel like there are constraints, because then you'd have to get the entire department on board.

Natasha's observation encapsulates a major theme of my research: that school support and school culture significantly impact the kind of instruction teachers can provide regarding race and ethnicity. While the majority of schools where I interviewed teachers were able to have more robust conversations about race and ethnicity, they were also the schools that cared about this topic and wanted their teachers to provide this instruction. Even the fact they agreed to allow me to interview teachers shows their investment in this topic. So, while these private schools have the autonomy to critically engage with race and ethnicity, they also have the autonomy to refuse to do so, reflecting Natasha's point that the school culture is a contributing factor to what teachers can

do in their classrooms. Regarding DEI programming, Natasha explained there used to be an officer, but the officer left because he did not feel supported, and the role has not been filled since. She pointed to the lack of DEI initiatives as isolating, and said it makes "you feel like you're on an island…because you feel like you are a minority." Again, this comment speaks to the isolation Natasha feels when trying to advocate for things like a diversified syllabus. While the white teachers at the other schools were able to keep the conversations focused on the syllabi or curriculum, the school's resistance to racial equity takes a personal toll on Natasha.

When talking about what needed to be done at Willow to improve school culture and climate, Natasha pointed to a schoolwide approach to diversity, equity, and inclusion. She spoke to the systemic resistance to talking about race and ethnicity at the school and the need for an intentional push towards equity. She explained that while the school claims to be "open-minded" and "liberal", in reality, there is resistance to anything that may make white teachers or students uncomfortable. Natasha even questioned the extent to which her colleagues were "truly allies" by asking "to what extent [is the school] willing to do the work and listen and rather than just reassure [themselves] that, [they're] good people?" Here, the concept of diversity is used as something to relieve white people of guilt or shame rather than a tool for equity. It also centers whiteness. Natasha's points highlight the need for a school-wide cultural shift and increased awareness relating to race and ethnicity in order to properly educate students and facilitate this kind of learning. Like Oak Academy, Natasha was not able to meaningfully talk about the genocide happening in Gaza and other current events. Referencing Palestine specifically, she explained it was a "difficult area to navigate", and the "school's approach often is just don't talk about it or pretend like nothing exists. Because [the school] is 'not political'. But for any marginalized community, the political is personal". Natasha highlights the ways that silence and silencing are

political acts that prevent self-expression (Sosa, 2020). She also identifies how the "non-political" rhetoric is, in fact, political, and the stance the school takes by refusing to discuss these topics has significant political implications by affirming white institutional dominance (Irby & Clark, 2018).

Ongoing Challenges

Like other teachers who talked about challenges with teaching certain texts, Natasha spoke to the difficulty of teaching some of her texts that feature non-white voices. She gave the example of Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*, saying, "it's such a challenging text. So, how many students are even going to access it? Or understand, right? Because unfortunately, it's still very highbrow literature. It's such a niche." She brings up the point of accessibility, reflecting on the difficulty of getting students to understand this text in compassion to other more familiar, or white, narratives. This point relates to other teacher's reflections on how there is additional scaffolding needed for certain texts. While many of those teachers had extra support systems, such as interdisciplinary class structures, Natasha did not have that same support. This situation highlights what happens when teachers try to teach more diverse texts without adequate support, and what is needed to make accessible texts accessible.

Another challenge Natasha spoke about was creating diverse, inclusive syllabi and curricula across the English department. Since Willow adheres to external curriculums, there is less autonomy than at other schools. Natasha acknowledged that there are non-white options but "classic, predominantly white male author texts [still] run the curriculum." Authors of color seemed to be more of an addendum rather than part of the curriculum. Natasha further reflected on this point, saying:

> Sometimes it can just feel tokenistic, like a checkbox. l don't think there's enough in terms of representation and diversity… I could probably count the examples on my hand. I feel

> like it's not balanced yet. We can do three, or four texts by Shakespeare, but we'll do one text by a different marginalized voice. So, I think that's probably an ongoing goal for the department.

Natasha raises an important point regarding the treatment of diverse texts and the balance between white and non-white texts. By placing one or two non-white texts on the syllabus without proper integration into the curriculum, the placement can seem awkward and disconnected from the overall goal of the class. In a way, this treatment "others" non-white texts which can negatively affect student engagement. These points highlight the benefits of other tactics teachers used where they had a thematic thread throughout the course that engaged with all the texts and had more diverse texts in general. However, due to limitations, Natasha found it difficult to diversify, and this is an ongoing goal. Overall, Willow prevented Natasha from incorporating diverse texts and facilitating conversations about race and ethnicity. While other teachers were concerned with deepening student understandings and moving from basic conversations to more nuanced one about systemic racism, contemporary issues and so forth, Natasha had to fight to even include a non-white text on her syllabus. Her experience highlights the impact school culture and the institution has on how teachers approach race and ethnicity in the classroom.

Policy Implications

Since Illinois private schools are largely outside of the Illinois Department of Education's jurisdiction, my policy recommendations are aimed at public schools. If private schools want to adopt these polices, they could and these policies would benefit them, but since the government cannot mandate what these schools are doing, these suggestions are directed at public schools. Also, public school teachers are not immune from the challenges of teaching about race and ethnicity, so these recommendations will help teachers across the diverse public school landscape.

Also, within public schools, there are still entire schools with high populations of white, affluent students, classes within schools that are segregated amongst racial and socioeconomic lines, and schools focused on college prep, such as the Chicago selective enrollment schools (Parrish & Ikoro, 2023). Therefore, this paper's findings based on student demographics are still relevant to public schools. Funding for these measures should come from the state's budget.

Updated Curriculum Guidelines

Since the teachers spoke about the benefits of text guidelines, I believe updated public school curriculum guidelines and resources would be helpful. Since my research showed that teacher autonomy helps teachers develop personalized, effective instruction, I am not proposing a prescribed reading list, but rather guiding standards for what kinds of texts should be included. This policy could look like state collaborations with the Common Core Curriculum, which Illinois public schools follow, to update those standards or separate standards that accompany the Common Core. With these updates, there should also be a standard relating to students' engagement with race and ethnicity. Currently, race is not even mentioned in the curriculum standards (*Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts*, 2010), so I believe it should be listed to ensure that all classrooms are building student's racial literacy. As seen in the interviews, there is no prescriptive way to teach about race, so I propose the state continuously evaluate if these curriculum updates are helpful and what can be improved. These evaluations can be conducted by a committee within the Department or a contracted third party. These evaluations should compose of teacher and student interviews and class observations.

Resource Guides

In addition to the updated text guidelines, I propose a publicly available resource guide with helpful tips for talking about race and ethnicity and handling challenging situations. In my

research, teachers spoke about the importance of having support when navigating conversations about race, and the teachers found advice from their peers partially helpful. Having a statewide online database with strategies and advice, that is vetted by the Department of Education, would be a helpful resource as teachers adopt a curriculum that explicitly talks about race. Private school teachers could access this guide as well.

Investments in DEI and Professional Development

Finally, investments in DEI and racial literacy based professional development would be helpful. As stated in the literature, professional development improves teacher's ability to talk about race in the classroom (Martell, 2017). My findings support this claim as the teachers I interviewed talked about the benefits of training programs and having access to DEI resources. Following these findings, I propose a statewide fund where any accredited school, including accredited private schools, can apply for DEI resources. Parents, teachers, and students can also apply for these funds as well to ensure all voices are being heard. Having an application process will efficiently identify which schools have a need and want for this programming. Then, funds can be dispersed relatively quickly. In addition to this fund, the state, or an approved third party, should begin evaluations where they investigate public schools and identify which schools would benefit from DEI resources and professional development. While this measure is time consuming, it ensures that all public schools and all students have access to these resources.

Future Research

Based on the research I have presented, I suggest three different research topics to continue analyzing how race and ethnicity are being taught at private, college prep schools and compare findings in private schools to public schools. First, I propose student-centered research at private, college prep schools. A limitation of my study is that it does not identify how the instruction is

landing with students and their perspectives on how race and ethnicity are currently being taught as compared to how they would like it to be taught. It is important to explore how students of color feel in these spaces, and if the measures teachers describe regarding protecting students of color are effective. To better understand how race and ethnicity are being handled in these predominantly white, affluent spaces, it is necessary to understand both teacher pedagogies and student experiences. Next, I recommend a comparative analysis with public schools. If this research is to be extended to public schools regarding different resources or approaches to teaching that would be helpful, a specific analysis of public school settings is necessary to identify what can be translated to this sphere. I believe a study of a similar format to this one, looking at teacher pedagogy and perspectives, carried across different kinds of public schools, such as magnet, selective enrollment, and traditional, would offer deeper insight into the current situation of how race and ethnicity are being taught. Finally, while interviews offer helpful perspectives, I believe an ethnographic component would enrich the research and give additional insights. For instance, there may be conversations or situations not reported by students or teachers. Having a third party observe and document what is happening in the classrooms would bridge some gaps that are present in the interviews. In addition to classroom observations, faculty meeting observations would be valuable. A lingering question I had from the interviews was David's comment on teacher positionality. When talking about his syllabus, David explained he did not receive parental pushback about his syllabus, but that he had seen his younger, female colleagues get questioned. He speculated that his age and gender were a factor. This point about a gendered positionality was interesting as he was the only teacher who talked about how gender affected his ability to make unquestioned decisions. This point raises questions on how support is applied differently amongst different faculty. Thus, observations of faculty dynamics would be valuable.

Discussion & Conclusions

In this paper, I addressed how English teachers at private, college preparatory high schools facilitate learning about race and ethnicity in their classrooms. This research fills a gap in the literature by focusing on teacher perspectives at predominantly white, affluent schools that are invested in academic rigor. Through twelve teacher interviews across six schools, I uncovered different factors that affect the ways race and ethnicity are talked about and the different methodologies teachers are using. The biggest factor affecting teacher approaches was institutional buy-in and support, which affected the way race and ethnicity were either centered or ignored in overall school culture. While all teachers talked about the importance of exposing students to diverse narratives, some teachers expressed that they wanted their students to build upon these understandings to work towards racial equality and justice. Since the students seemed to be starting from a limited understanding of race, these teachers seemed to be doing foundational work. For most teachers, the college prep focus of their schools did not limit their ability to diversify their syllabi, nor did it influence teachers to focus on canon texts. While most teachers shared successes in the classroom, all teachers identified ongoing challenges when getting their students to talk about race and ethnicity and building a diverse syllabus. The teachers expressed that successfully approaching conversations about race and ethnicity require constant learning, evaluation, and changes.

This research supports previous research about the helpfulness of CRP and provides examples of tolerance-oriented and equity-oriented approaches to race. This research affirms the importance of integrating race and ethnicity into the curriculum as private school acts as a "bubble," limiting students' exposure to different people and perspectives. My policy suggestions are directed at the Illinois Department of Education and revolve around improving public school curriculums regarding race and ethnicity. From this research, new avenues of research are opened

in the private school field regarding student representatives and the public school realm regarding reform informed by the practices in private schools. Regarding limitations, I was unable to interview teachers who were not interested in teaching about race and ethnicity or do research at many schools resistant to this kind of teaching. Thus, there are gaps about what's happening in other private school settings and whether the investment in educating about race seen in many of the schools in the student is the exception or the norm. Despite these limitations, this paper provides specific insights from high school level English teachers at private, college prep schools, enhancing the literature on private schools, teacher pedagogy, and race in predominantly white, affluent spaces. The importance of teaching students about race and building their racial literacy is emphasized in this paper since the students are relatively unaware of racial histories and struggles or have more tolerance-oriented mindsets.

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