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## Antiracism and Culturally Responsive Teaching: Elevating Student Voice to Lead Critical Dialogue on Race

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ANTIRACISM AND CULTURALLY RESPONSIVE TEACHING:  
ELEVATING STUDENT VOICE TO LEAD CRITICAL DIALOGUE ON RACE

By

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A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in Education.

Hamline University

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION

### Introduction

American schools have operated to generationally displace learners of color. From the onset of the forced assimilation of Native children in Boarding Schools, extending beyond the inequitable integration of schools following *Brown v. Board of Education*, formal learning institutions in America have prescribed the construct of whiteness and have been unable to untangle themselves from white supremacy (Paris & Alim, 2014). In 2021 we are living in the midst of an uprising. The Black Lives Matter Movement, and the fight to abolish white supremacy in all spaces and systems that oppress the Black, Indigenous, Hispanic, and Asian citizens of America, has put vital conversations about race on the forefront of national consciousness. In this moment it is imperative that our schools show our Black, Indigenous, and students of color that we see them and we hear them, and show that we are willing to radically shift how we instruct to reflect this truth. Our schools today must be antiracist, providing opportunities for learners to hold dialogue on race, so they are prepared to lead the construction of a more equitable world. This research project is an investigation into how teachers can embody antiracist practices to hold space for students to lead critical dialogue on race in the classroom. My research question driving this work is: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?* This project hopes to add to the literature showing culturally and linguistically responsive teaching is best practice

and can promote student-led, antiracist learning environments that authentically address race.

The audience for this project will be teachers looking to facilitate conversations about race with students, teachers integrating culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and white educators striving towards antiracism. With this work, I will design a culturally and linguistically responsive course titled “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity and Revolution”. This high school English elective uses music as the lens to interact with identity and social movements, offering students the space to lead through dynamic discussion. This curriculum aspires to stand in direct opposition to the systems of oppression intersecting in public schools today, striving to subvert Eurocentric, teacher-centered pedagogy to radically allow students to explore and lead dialogic spaces. I will explore how this work can create antiracist spaces of learning, and investigate how students perceive and respond to leading critical conversations on race in the English classroom.

In this first chapter, I will describe where my passion for this work derives. I will share my experience in culturally responsive teaching, antiracism, and facilitating student to student conversations on race, and then explain the rationale for this work. Chapter two of this project will include a literature review of relevant sources pertaining to the climate of racism embedded in schools today, culturally responsive teaching, antiracism, and student engagement in conversations on race. Chapter three will include a detailed description of my project, followed by chapter four which will conclude this study with a reflection and explanation of findings.

## **Personal/Professional Experience**

As a 7th grade English teacher, my passion for education lies in helping students to harness their voice so they can speak out and demand a more just and equitable future. My classroom is anchored in student-led conversation. To do this, I embody culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, validating and affirming the home cultures of students with intentionality while building and bridging towards purposeful academic aims. This work falls entirely short if not rooted in antiracism. Antiracism is of paramount importance in schools today. Our education system is founded on the promotion and preservation of whiteness (Paris & Alim, 2014). To give our students the skills they need to create a world rooted in antiracism, equity, and justice, teachers must commit to culturally responsive practices and antiracism in all they do. My journey to this work was long, and I, like all teachers, have more work to do in order to further my commitment to my learners in antiracism. This section will illustrate my path to this research question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?* After explaining my passion for this work, I will describe the rationale and necessity for culturally responsive teaching and antiracism in all student-led classroom spaces.

I recently completed my 6th year teaching 7th grade English at Brooklyn Center Community Schools. This school district borders North Minneapolis as a first ring suburb of the twin cities. Brooklyn Center has a population that is over 92% students of color, serving over 94% of its learners who qualify for free and reduced lunch services. This

population does not match my identity. I identify as a white, cisgendered, straight, able-bodied man. I grew up in a middle class household, graduating from Roseville Public Schools in 2011, and Gustavus Adolphus College in 2015. My educational experiences and needs are different than those of my students. I believe it is my role as an educator to ensure my students at Brooklyn Center learn in an explicitly antiracist classroom. It is my responsibility to deliver a curriculum that reflects all my learners racially and culturally, ensuring students see and share stories of hope, strength, and power. As a white teacher in a space that is over 92% BIPOC, I must center the voices of my students and constantly reflect on and address the harmful bias and notions of white saviorism that white educators like myself are indoctrinated within our society. While I approach my 7th year teaching at Brooklyn Center proud of the strides I have made in my career, I look back on my first year as a teacher, humbled by the challenges I faced as a white educator who failed to interrogate my whiteness, and implicitly and explicitly embodied harmful, traditional teaching practices.

I entered my teaching profession bright eyed and optimistic. I thought I would connect through hard work and good intentions with my new population of over 45% black learners, 22% Hispanic students, 18% Asian learners, 9% white students, and 2% Indigenous learners. I chose a racially authentic, deeply rich text to dive in for our first unit, a book called *The Rock and the River*. This book focuses on the upbringing of a black 12 year old living in Chicago; he is forced to choose a path in activism by following his father in the Nonviolent Movement, or join his brother in the Black Panthers. This text is engaging and accessible, relatable in theme and experience to many



learners in my class. However, I still found great trouble instructing--despite my intentions, I was failing as a teacher.

I knew I wanted to maintain a classroom environment where students engaged with racially relevant texts, and lead conversations making connections to their lives and the world around them. Yet, I struggled again and again in my first year to foster this space. As an outsider to the school community, and a teacher trying to find his footing instructionally, many students naturally held distrust for me. I responded in the way many white educators wrongfully do, and tried to establish control in the space, falling into patterns of traditional teaching, and exclusionary, teacher-centered classroom management. As this failed again and again, I knew I needed to change. I was forced to reflect on myself and my practice, and dive deep into how my whiteness impacted the way I experienced the world, and informed my assumptions on how a classroom should go. I learned that while much of my content was racially responsive, my mindset, classroom systems, and pedagogy did not match. I had to earn the trust of my students and the new community I worked within. It was through culturally responsive pedagogy that I began to see my classroom buy in. Teachers, specifically white educators, need to commit authentically to culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy and be relentless in antiracist aims to help their students connect to school, engage in academic work, and lead the conversation.

My experience confirms the claims of Ladson-Billings and Paris & Alim who argue that Culturally Responsive Pedagogy and Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy stand in opposition to the exclusionary racism latent in teacher-centered, antiquated instructional

practices that pervade education today (Ladson-Billings, 2006, Paris & Alim, 2014). My life experiences and professional work has illuminated their work confirming that in culturally responsive pedagogy, students are called into the classroom as leaders who are actively represented, engaged, and empowered.

I believe that by pairing racially relevant curricular design with culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, antiracist teachers can help learners feel affirmed in schools, academically achieve, and reduce the racialized discipline gap. School systems in America are still rooted in systems of white supremacy in 2021. Schools maintain rigid paradigms for what students should look and act like, and uniform ways to show learning or academic prowess all formed from the construct of whiteness. Schools and teachers reinforce exclusionary practices when they teach any content in only traditional styles. My first year teaching, I instructed in a way that could only connect with a learner like me, one raised and primed to thrive culturally and complicity in a traditional learning environment. This meant that without being aware or able to unpacking it, I fit the mold of a teacher-centered, stationary educator, who only gave one way for learners to show their ideas; and when students did not meet me where I assumed they should be, they were further marginalized. I know and believe now, that the classroom can be vibrant and fun for all learners, when a teacher is able to move beyond traditional forms of instruction. Students of color can be centered in any classroom or content, through the use of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy that engages all through movement, dynamic discussion, student-led autonomy, and the validation and affirmation of cultural capital that has been long cast aside in education.

This project is my passion because it changed how I teach and approach the classroom, and through this I saw my students engage, sparking conversations, forming connections, and driving dialogue. The rationale for this work centering conversations on race is evident beyond my own experience, or my own classroom. Students need a space to discuss race in school. This is not to imply that Black, Hispanic, Asian, Indigenous, and white learners do not have the environments to hold these conversations in their homes or communities. But if our schools are community centers striving to provide our learners with the skills needed to engage with and reform the ever-evolving world, we need to elevate our student's voice and address race in the classroom.

Our nation is in an uprising. Tragedy in Minneapolis has brought conversations BIPOC activists have been leading for years on the state's horrendous inequities to the mainstream. On May 25th, 2020, George Floyd, a 46 year old Black man, was murdered by 4 members of the Minneapolis Police on 38th and Chicago avenue. This racist killing follows the state sanctioned executions of Philando Castile, Jamar Clark, and more in the Minneapolis area. Since the vile police murder of George Floyd, Dolal Idd, Daunte Wright, Winston Smith, and others have been executed, horrifically, by police with impunity. This city is in a cycle of hurt. Our nation is in need of radical change. Our students see this, and they feel it. Minneapolis has long boasted academic prowess in their schools, while maintaining some of the most egregious racial disparities in the nation. Our schools disproportionately discipline students of color and systematically fail our Black, hispanic and indigenous learners. We need to construct space for our learners to process and discuss their thoughts, connections, and feelings about race and racism.

This is not to assuage white guilt about educational inequities, or to have students educate white teachers and students on how they can be better. Discussing race in school is a necessity of the 21st century classroom. In this moment our students need us to trust them to lead the conversation on race so our schools can be spaces of uncompromising antiracism. Learners already navigate a world filled with systems of oppression and racism. By centering critical conversations on race in the classroom, students will be better equipped to raise their voices and recreate a better, more equitable society when they leave the walls of our schools.

My path towards fostering a classroom community rich with student-led conversations on race was through the embodiment of culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Our schools must be spaces of antiracist, daring conversation, elevating the voices of our learners so they are equipped to tackle the harsh inequities of our world and channel their intersecting identities to create change. Writing curriculum for my new English elective, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution” will help me to deepen my practice of culturally sustaining pedagogy and approach my work in antiracism more intentionally. Through this work, I hope to better meet the needs of my students and put the culturally and linguistically responsive protocols in place needed to let them flourish and to let them lead. This course will stand on the shoulders of culturally sustaining pedagogy, working intentionally in opposition to traditional educational norms that restrict and oppress. It is my hope that through the research and implementation of this task, I can better listen to my learners, offering insights to other teachers in this work to establish antiracist schools.

## Summary

In conclusion, I am conducting this action research project to further my commitment to my students in antiracism. My journey as an educator has led me to believe culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy can engage students, validating and affirming the cultural background and race of everyone in the classroom. This study will offer the curricular resources needed to foster critical conversations about race in a student-centered classroom. Through elevating the voices of my learners, I plan to study the effects of a classroom centering dialogue on race. This work is of paramount importance to my core beliefs as an educator, and critical to the moment facing our nation as a whole. We need to take a long look at how racism pervades our school systems. By listening to our learners, we can give them the tools they need to make a better future for themselves. In the next section of this paper, I will analyze literature related to the racist tradition of American schools, and discuss how culturally responsive pedagogy, antiracism, and students leading dialogue on race can better answer the question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?*

## CHAPTER TWO

### LITERATURE REVIEW

#### Introduction

American schools perpetuate racism. To combat this, educators must lead in all they do with antiracism. Ibram X. Kendi, in *How To Be An Antiracist*, states “antiracism is a powerful collection of antiracist policies that lead to racial equity and are substantiated by antiracist ideas” (Kendi, 2019). To combat racism, and encourage sustained antiracist ideation and action, educators must hold space for students to critically discuss race in school. For our learners to leave school prepared to disrupt racism and enact a more just world, they must have space in school to talk critically about race. My research question driving this capstone is *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?*

In this chapter, I will explore the systematic racism that pervades our schools today. While the central literature driving my work lies in culturally sustaining pedagogies, more specifically the discussion protocols located in culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, I argue the importance of first outlining the culture of racism present in American schools. I will discuss the implicit racism in white educator bias, the disproportionate disciplining of students of color, the presence of a Eurocentric curriculum, and the inequitable achievement of students of color by traditional academic metrics, to necessitate my project in culturally sustaining pedagogy. These first sections

outline the backdrop for my project, and call for antiracism in the schools today.

Following this section will be a review of recent literature articulating the importance of antiracist, culturally responsive, student-led discussions on race in schools which will support how the curriculum developed in my course “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution” will help me, as an educator striving towards antiracism, intentionally combat these systems of oppression through the facilitation of my course centering student courageous dialogue on race and identity.

### **Teacher Bias**

In the United States, 51% of Kindergarten through twelfth grade students are white, 25% are Hispanic, 14% are Black, 5% are Asian, and 5% are Indigenous or identified as “Other” (US Bureau of Education, 2019). Projections indicate that Hispanic, Black, and Asian student populations will continue to rise, and the percentage of white learners will decline in the coming decade. While the student demographics in American schools has seen an influx in diversity, the teacher population has remained homogenous and overwhelmingly white. American public school teachers are over 82% white (Department of Education, 2016). The teaching population in this country does not reflect the learners they serve. Compounding the issue of inadequate representation in teachers is the presence of implicit and explicit, racist white teacher bias that exists in a society that is racialized.

The social construct of race and whiteness is inherently oppressive, and works to subjugate people of color. In “The Racial Contract”, Charles Mills articulates the presence of a racial contract, explaining how white supremacy works as a political system

designed to preserve a racist hierarchy, elevating the status of those deemed white as the norm and pinnacle of society, and degrading people of color as lesser than (Mills, 1997). This contract, or racist governing ideology, permeates American life and the schools today. Students are funneled through a school system that maintains whiteness as the norm. Teachers, both implicitly and explicitly, instruct with bias that derives from this racial contract.

Teachers and schools, despite best intentions, fail to address biased practices and internalized impulses. A study from the Yale Child Study Center led by Walter Gillman in 2016 tested random teachers in a series of tasks to determine and track teacher bias in a preschool classroom (Gillman, 2016). Teachers watched videos of students doing harmless tasks, and had their eyes tracked as they registered and anticipated potential “challenging behaviors” from the Black boy, Black girl, and white boy and white girl, in study (Gillman, 2016). The results show that teachers tracked Black boys a disproportionate 42% of time during the study, over-reporting their movements as demonstrating a “challenge” to the learning environment. The authors stated, “sex and race of the child may contribute to greater levels of identification of challenging behaviors with Black preschoolers and especially Black boys, which perhaps contributes to the documented sex and race disparities in preschool expulsions and suspensions” (Gillman, 2016). Teachers harbor implicit biases towards students of color, particularly Black young men. These biases lead to disproportionate send-outs for perceived behaviors that in actuality are over-policed and over-criminalized. Our nation faces a



crisis of bias, yet a commitment to culturally sustaining pedagogy may offer a path forward.

Beyond the bias of white teachers on the excluding of students of color from the classroom, research shows that white educators are prone to racist bias in gauging the emotions and educational needs of students of color. First, studies show that white educators often misinterpret the emotions of students of color. A study published in the *Contemporary Education Society* states, “emotion-related behaviors of Black students, and particularly boys, are indeed less well understood than the emotion-related behaviors of their White counterparts” (Halberstadt et al., 2018). The article continues to show that not only are white educators culturally misinterpreting the emotions of their Black students, they have a tendency to adhere to racist stereotypes in their assumptions about Black student emotion, often perceiving Black students as angry, hostile, or aggressive when they are not. This study connects to the biases leading to the disproportionate disciplining of students of color and to the over referral of students of color for emotional behavior services, and special education services. In *The Journal of African American History*, Kathy-Anne Jordan writes that the disproportionate referral of Black students to special education services is tied to the assumptions and biases white teachers project onto the cultural differences, and different learning styles, many Black students may hold (Jordan, 2005). White teachers perpetuate bias in their misinterpretation of Black student emotion, tying into the over referral of Black students to Emotional and Behavior Disorders in the schools and the overrepresentation of Black students directed to Special Education Services. This bias infiltrates how white teachers assess and perceive student

intelligence in general education classes, as well. The following chapter will show how white teacher bias extends beyond classroom discipline to the perceived intellectual abilities of students of color.

Insidious white educator bias causes teachers to diminish and doubt the educational abilities and intelligence levels of students of color. A 2020 study, published by Educational Researcher shows that teachers often implicitly question the ability levels of Black, Hispanic, and female students in regards to their math abilities, with the largest of these biases negatively perceiving Black and Hispanic girls (Copur-Gencturk et al., 2020). Adding to this finding is literature suggesting teachers are more likely to give better grades across all subject areas if the student matches their racial identity (Ouazad, A., 2014). Given the surplus of white teachers, and an increasing population of learners of color, the bias of white teachers is overwhelmingly harming the learning environment and opportunities of Black students, Indigenous learners, and students of color.

Teacher bias, even among well-intending, kind educators, must be interrogated and addressed. White teachers exemplify racist bias by perceiving students of color as more disruptive or disobedient than their white peers, misinterpreting the emotions of Black students, over referring Black learners to Special Education Services, and undervaluing the educational abilities, thoughts, and achievements of students of color. Given the overrepresentation of white educators and an increasingly diverse population of students, the issue of white educator bias is a critical issue. I argue that teachers who fail to engage deeply with their whiteness and fall short in a commitment to culturally

sustaining pedagogy are disposed to harmful bias in their practice. This issue is heightened in the disproportionate disciplining of students of color in American schools, which will be the focus of the next section in this literature review.

### **Disproportionate Disciplining of Students of Color**

Across America, educational systems are entrenched in discipline practices that disproportionately remove students of color from the classroom. A comprehensive study published in *The Future of Children* Volume 27, states, “Latino, American Indian, and Black youth--specifically Black males in special education--are significantly more likely to be referred to school administrators for discipline problems” (Gregory and Fergus, 2017). Students of color are targeted, tracked, and punished for behavioral issues at a drastic rate compared to white peers. This same study contends, “Black students are at risk for receiving harsher sanctions when compared to white students whose misconduct was equally serious” (Gregory and Fergus, 2017). Nationally, white teachers struggle to connect with and engage students of color. This disconnect is tangible in the displacement of students from the classroom through unjust referrals, suspensions, and expulsions. This issue is localized and even heightened in Minnesota. The *Star Tribune*, citing a study from the Department of Human Rights, explained:

Students of color accounted for 66 percent of all suspensions and expulsions in 2015-16 even though they represent only 31 percent of the state’s student population...Black students in the state were eight times more likely to be suspended or expelled than their white peers, and

American Indian students were 10 times more likely — disparities worse than those reported nationally. (Lonetree, 2018)

At my own school, Brooklyn Center, 85% of the 240 out of school suspensions were for Black students, despite Black learners making up only 46% of the school's population in 2018 (Minnesota Department of Education, 2018). From a national lens, to a pronounced issue in Minnesota, down to my individual classroom at Brooklyn Center Schools, disproportionate discipline of students of color, specifically Black students, is a critical issue with widespread ramifications.

Student referrals from the classroom and suspensions from school negatively impact student achievement. A nationwide study from the Alliance of Education, reports that, “Being suspended just once in ninth grade is associated with doubling the risk of a student dropping out of high school (from 16 percent to 32 percent). The rate increases to 42 percent if a student is suspended twice in ninth grade.” (Cardichon, 2013). If a student is forced to leave the classroom due to actions perceived as disrespectful or insubordinate, they miss the learning from that period. When a student is suspended, they not only miss learning from teachers and peers, but become untethered from the supports of the school system as a whole. Since students of color are disproportionately disciplined with removal from school, Black and brown learners are targeted and pushed towards disparate school achievement.

Inequitable discipline practices harm the social-emotional development of students of color. Black and brown students, when sent out of the classroom, are shown to develop distrust for the school system as a whole. The physical removal from a place of

learning is mirrored by an internalized distance from school itself. A 2017 study titled, “The Socioemotional Impact of Disparate Discipline” by Amelia Barbadoro found, “In reaction to unfair disciplinary practices and teacher biases, students will attempt to protect themselves by immediately activating ego defenses; they will generally see the failure to receive fair treatment in terms of codified norms/beliefs about social equity and justice. The resulting emotions will, in turn, activate feelings of anger on top of the shame and disappointment felt from the initial disciplinary act.” (Barbadoro, 2017). Racially biased classroom mismanagement not only hurts students of color in academic achievement, but disrupts a healthy connection to school, and positive social emotional development of self. According to the Elementary School Journal, these negative feelings are compounded by a decrease in academic self-efficacy when a student is sent out of class or school (McMahon and Rose, 2009). The criminalization of students of color in American schools has devastating social emotional implications, harming healthy psychological connections to school, self, and future learning potential.

The disproportionate disciplining of students of color amplifies the racist inequities that saturate our school system. My project attempts to combat the disproportionate discipline of students of color by engaging learners deeply in the learning process through culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. The following section of this literature review will explore what and how educators choose to instruct falls within a paradigm of whiteness that further excludes learners of color, even when they are present in the classroom.

### **Eurocentric Curriculum**

Toni Morrison, the late Black, American author, famously responded to the insinuation that she should want to write stories of and for white people in her novels, “our lives have no meaning and no depth without the White gaze. And I’ve spent my entire writing life trying to make sure that the White gaze was not the dominant one in any of my White books” (Morrison, 1998). The American school system, curriculum, and expectations of learning are inextricably tied to the white gaze, or through the perspective and promotion of whiteness, white stories, and white ideals. This section of the literature review will detail the Eurocentrism of school curriculums, and how the way in which educators traditionally instruct is tied to the preservation of white learning styles and values.

John Willinsky, in *Learning to Divide the World: Education at Empire’s End*, traces the history of US education to a history of European imperialism. He writes that formal education gave the West an opportunity to take the rest of the world “in hand, whether by conducting geological surveys, preserving ancient texts, or setting up schools...The globalization of Western understanding was always about a relative positioning of the West by a set of coordinates defined by race, culture, and nation” (Willinsky, 1998). Regarding this quote, Christine Sleeter writes that this is not to imply American education has wholly ignored the rest of the world; rather that the relationship between schooling in America and limited multicultural perspectives is of hierarchical origin, favoring an imperial power imbalance (Sleeter, 2000). The United States school system is tied to white, European-based colonialism. This Eurocentrism extends into the curriculum and literature students historically and currently read in the school system.

Schools today teach an overwhelmingly white curriculum where Eurocentric history, white authors, and white perspectives are pushed forward as universal (Paris & Alim, 2014, Stallworth et al., 2006). A large scale study conducted by Stallworth, Gibbons, and Fauber, indicates that the majority of English teachers teach literature and curriculums favoring white authors (Stallworth et al., 2006). They continue to show that a greater part of white educators are widely unfamiliar with texts written by authors of color, thus resistant to pedagogical changes radically centering Black, Hispanic, Asian, and Indigenous voices (Stallworth et al., 2006). Building on this literature, Kathleen Riley and Katherine Crawford-Garrett, in “Critical Texts in Literacy Teacher Education: Living Inquiries into Racial Justice and Immigration”, call for educators to embrace multicultural texts, and elevate authors of color in English classrooms, and in all content areas to promote critical conversations among students that will prepare them to engage in a diverse, justice-oriented world (Riley & Crawford-Garrett, 2016).

Multicultural texts, and literature by authors of color can promote classroom communities engaging in critical reflection, dialogue, and action against racism, however multicultural instruction requires intentionality and grace. Sleeter contends curriculum teaching multicultural perspectives is only as good as an educator’s understanding of this work, and their role within instructing it (Sleeter, 2000). Teachers must interrogate their whiteness and their bias, ensuring their pedagogy is racially rich, and their knowledge and delivery is authentic and nuanced. Others push forward a critique of multiculturalism for failing to integrate a critical lens on the intersectionality of race, power, culture, class, and whiteness. Marla Morris, in “Multicultural Curriculum Topics”, explains that it is not

enough to add authors of color to a curriculum previously promoting whiteness (Morris, 2016). It is essential to analyze how these authors of color and their powerful perspectives intersect with the structures of power, privilege, and race that govern America (Morris, 2016). To eschew the Eurocentrism embedded in schools today, educators must not only consider intersectionality in what content they teach, but also in how cultural learning styles must be addressed pedagogically.

Even in classrooms featuring a diverse bookshelf, or a racially authentic focal text, Eurocentrism can persist. Dr. Sharroky Hollie explains that traditional classroom instruction is rooted in white Anglo-Saxon culture through the adherence to predominantly individualistic, competitive, objective, linear, standardized, and prompted learning opportunities (Hollie, 2018). When teachers lead an instructor-centered classroom, they fall short in educating students who do come from home cultures that instill sociocentric, cooperative, subjective, relational spontaneous cultural learning styles that are often marginalized in American schools (Hollie, 2012). Educators have a duty to their learners to teach diverse texts with a pedagogical depth and instructional fluidity, keeping the preservation of cultural and racial traditions in mind at all times.

The American school system is designed to promote the values of a white, European culture. This is traceable from the formation of Boarding schools to the whitewashed texts educators continue to teach, and also in the traditional, teacher-centered instructional styles that exclude learners who seek to preserve other cultural learning styles. Assata Shakur, in her autobiography, writes:



When I think of how racist, how Eurocentric our so-called education in amerika is, it staggers my mind. And when i think back to some of those kids who labeled ‘troublemakers’ and ‘problem students,’ i realize that many of them were unsung heroes who fought to maintain some sense of dignity and self-worth. (Shakur, 1987)

Teachers must join students in the fight against Eurocentric ideals and curriculum and trouble the notion that whiteness is the norm in learning through authentic application of culturally sustaining pedagogy. This Eurocentric bias is deeply harmful to students and foundational to the opportunity gap that exists between learners of color and their whitecounterparts, which is the focus of the following chapter.

### **The racist creation and assessment of a perceived achievement gap**

In an educational system where teachers do not look like the majority of their students, pervasive bias exists within educators, a Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogical style excludes students of color, a growing opportunity gap exists between learners of color and white students according to traditional educational metrics. It is critical to make a distinction: the prescribed gap in achievement is not a divide in intelligence or aptitude, it is a gap measured and created by systematic racism. Gloria Ladson-Billings describes the “achievement gap” as a term that “refers to the disparities in standardized test scores between Black and White, Latina/o and White, and recent immigrants and White students” (Ladson-Billings, 2006). This section of the literature review serves to outline the landscape of disparity in standardized testing scores, briefly

articulate why this system of measurement does not serve or represent our learners of color, then pivot to why we need a new educational norm of antiracist, culturally sustaining, student-led learning.

The U.S. Department of Education documents an American school system stratified by race. According to 8th grade reading metrics in 2018, “White students scored 25 points higher than Black students, 22 points higher than American Indian/Alaska Native students, 20 points higher than Pacific Islander students, and 19 points higher than Hispanic students.” (de Brey et al., 2019). This report outlines corresponding gaps in math assessment scores, graduation and high school dropout rates (de Brey et al., 2019). In Minnesota, these disparities are aggravated. The Federal Reserve Bank of Minnesota finds across all standardized metrics, Minnesota racial disparities in education have increased, with the report concluding in 2018, “Minnesota was among the states with the largest achievement gaps” (Grunewald & Nath, 2019). Nationally American students are put through a system that produces a rift in achievement between white learners of color and white students. In Minnesota these disparities are even higher. While the achievement measurements show a stark divide, these metrics of academic scoring are inequitable and unrepresentative of the gifts and learning of students of color.

Standardized testing in America operates under the guise of equal opportunity, but in reality reinforces racial inequalities. In “Standardized Testing and School Segregation: Like Tinder for Fire?” by Matthew Knoester and Wayne Au, they argue standardized tests work as a construct of white supremacy, upholding the idea of a meritocracy by providing ‘scientific’ justification for a racial class order under the implication of testing being

objective and equal (Knoester & Au, 2015). In American schools tests assume neutrality, while actively promoting whiteness. Standardized tests are biased. Maria Veronica Santelices and Mark Wilson found, in a thorough study of the SAT, that language used in standardized testing is biased towards white Americans, and is particularly exclusionary towards Black Americans (Santelices & Wilson, 2010). The language of standardized testing enforces white supremacy, and offers inequitable opportunities to students of color. The educational achievement gap is an inherently inaccurate representation of the learning and skills of the diversity of learners in our country.

The educational achievement gap provides a false narrative that Black, Indigenous, and students of color are intellectually trailing their white peers. This process of testing in America is embedded in systematic racism. From the bias of white educators, to the disproportionate disciplining of students of color, to curriculums favoring Eurocentric ideals to a system of testing that upholds bias towards learners of color, our American school system is racist. To combat an institution of learning that is unequivocally working against BIPOC students, educators must strive to be antiracist in all that they do. The following section of this literature review offers an analysis of literature describing antiracist pedagogy, and its necessity given our current educational system divided.

### **Antiracist Education**

It is not enough for educators to merely not be racist; we must strive to be actively antiracist in all that we do. To counter the bias, overt racism, and insidious systems of oppression governing America today, the education system must be rooted in antiracist

policy, practice, and action. “Anti-racist education teaches students to recognize, and work to disrupt the deeply embedded, interconnected webs of racism in society that are sociological, institutional (the school being one), economic, and political in nature” (Allison Skerrett, 2011). Antiracist teaching centers the learner, providing a critical space where students can engage in dialogue and learning on how to design a more equitable world. This section will cite relevant literature to define antiracism and articulate the importance of antiracist pedagogy in the 21st century classroom.

For educators to embody antiracism they must go beyond acknowledging racism exists, or that individuals hold bias. Antiracist education must provide opportunities for students to be engaged and critical in their learning about intersectionality of power in a society governed by white supremacy. Antiracism embodies much of the principles and practice of Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory is a movement of activists and scholars “engaged in studying and transforming the relationship among race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). Arlo Kempf writes Critical Race Theory demands, “critical reading, reflection, and transformation of the world through engagement with the word, and vice versa, critical pedagogy seeks to develop the agency of all in the learning relationship, in critical collaboration toward the operationalization of a just world” (Kempf, 2020). This definition of Critical Race Theory lives in the work of antiracism and implies an active learning where students make high level connections to inquire and to change. Antiracism unpacks the intersection of oppressive structures to inform activists, and to engage learners in the act of courageously redesigning an equitable world.

Antiracist education stands in stark opposition to the bias and racism that implicitly and overtly infiltrates the school systems in America. This work is critical to the development of equitable learning environments and fosters learners who engage in nuanced thinking and dynamic dialogue examining the intersection of oppressive power structures. Antiracist space is foundational to culturally relevant, sustaining pedagogy. The following section of this literature review will explore culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, and how it can infuse best practices to elevate the antiracist classroom.

### **Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy**

Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy offers best practice instructional tools to validate and affirm a student's cultural identity, while intentionally building and bridging towards more traditional school skills (Hollie, 2018). This work elevates student voice and empowers the brilliance of cultural behaviors often cast aside in our schools. In this section, I will define Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy, and situate this work within the tradition of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy that comes before it as authored by Gloria Ladson Billings and then Django Paris and H Samy Alim. I will offer "loving critique" (Paris & Alim, 2014) of ways culturally relevant pedagogy has been reductive and fallen short of radical antiracist aims, encouraging white educators to hold reflection and intentionality at the center of their work in sustaining, relevant pedagogy.

In an effort to shift dialogue from deficit thinking surrounding Black American education, Gloria Ladson-Billings elevated the idea of culturally relevant pedagogy.

Ladson-Billings wrote that scholarship celebrating the academic success of African-American students came at the expense of Black culture (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Black students were forced to assimilate, and exemplify white, Eurocentric values and learning styles in order to gain academic merit in schools (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This conception of schooling maintained whites as the sole proprietors of accepted knowledge deeply ignored and failed Black students. Ladson-Billings' work proposed "a beginning look at ways that teachers might systematically include student culture in the classroom as authorized or official knowledge" (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This approach to schooling, according to Ladson-Billings must advance students academically, grow and support cultural competence and recognition, and nurture a critical awareness (Ladson-Billings, 1995). Ladson-Billings later published "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy 2.0: aka the Remix", where she summarized, "teachers undertaking culturally informed pedagogies take on the dual responsibility of external performance assessments as well as community and student-driven learning" (Ladson-Billings, 2014). The development of culturally relevant pedagogy works to see Black culture, and cultures cast aside by white supremacy in the schools as assets to the mainstream learning environment.

Building on the work of culturally relevant pedagogy is culturally sustaining pedagogy. H. Samy Alim and Django Paris, in "What is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Why Does It Matter?", credit Ladson-Billings, but respectfully push her work further. They define their culturally sustaining pedagogy, or CSP, as:

CSP seeks to perpetuate and foster--to sustain--linguistic, literate, and cultural pluralism as part of schooling for positive social transformation.

CSP positions dynamic cultural dexterity as a necessary good, and sees the outcome of learning as additive rather than subtractive, as remaining whole rather than framed as broken, as critically enriching strengths rather than replacing deficits. Culturally sustaining pedagogy exists wherever education sustains the lifeways of communities who have been and continue to be damaged and erased through schooling. (Alim & Paris, 2017)

This definition moves beyond the notion of culture being “relevant” but instead argues that cultures long cast aside by schools are imperative as the very strength and essence of all education. Culturally sustaining pedagogy makes note to widen the conversation about the multiplicities of underrepresented cultures in traditional schooling, including the inclusion of youth culture. Through culturally sustaining pedagogy, Alim and Paris call not only for teachers to change how they instruct to honor the life ways of communities of color, but call for a change in the power dynamic in which education lives, and in the way our American society operates, away from the traditions of white supremacy (Alim & Paris, 2017).

Offering a toolbox of best practices, protocols, and strategies to enact the ideas of culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy in any classroom is the work of Dr. Sharroky Hollie and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. Culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy, or CLR, founds its work on the ideas of both culturally relevant pedagogy and culturally sustaining pedagogy. Culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy validates and affirms the home language and cultural

behaviors of students typically underrepresented in the traditional classroom paired with the building and bridging of “school” language and skills through responsive pedagogy and activities (Hollie, 2018). CLR outlines best practices for teachers to sustain student culture, offering varied movement, discussion, response, literacy, and vocabulary protocols (Hollie, 2018). These tools give educators ways to show they see, value, and hear their learners through their instructional techniques. While these tools and strategies can elevate the classroom culture and learning within an antiracist pedagogy, they are subject to caring critique when implemented inconsistently from their sustaining intention.

Culturally sustaining pedagogies are subject to critique in the efforts to help these movements achieve their aims in antiracism. In “What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward” by Paris and Alim, they advance the work of sustaining pedagogy by revisiting how this work centers the “the rich and innovative linguistic, literate, and cultural practices of Indigenous American, African American, Latina/o, Asian American, Pacific Islander, and other youth and communities of color” (Paris & Alim, 2014). They offer that any pedagogy must be flexible in the ways that communities of culture have dynamic, adapting cultures (Paris & Alim, 2014). They argue that these cultures must not be used as resources to obtain more successful education in the power structure of white supremacy, rather that CSP must work to shift the power from traditional educational targets to ones representing the rich heritage and power of communities of color (Paris & Alim, 2014). Furthering the critiques of Paris & Alim, Justin Ginage writes, in “Singing and dancing



for diversity: Neoliberal multiculturalism and white epistemological ignorance in teacher professional development”, that racial equity professional development workshops often produce sustaining pedagogical training that lacks a critical lens (Grinage, 2020). Grinage argues that when culturally sustaining pedagogies are introduced to white educators, there is a tendency to replace critical conversations about white teacher’s role complicit in systems of oppression, with watered down strategies and vague language that absolves educators from their moral conundrum working in our racist schools (Grinage, 2020). Culturally sustaining pedagogies only can truly sustain and uplift the voices of their students and communities of color if they are grounded in antiracism. White educators can stand in solidarity as agents of antiracism if they engage in the neverending work of interrogating their whiteness and authentically integrating culturally responsive and sustaining pedagogies that engage learners critically in the intersectionality of race and power structures of oppression in America.

Culturally relevant pedagogy, as theorized by Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995), recontextualized the necessity for communities of color to have their culture centered in the instruction of mainstream classrooms. This work, built upon by Samy Alim and Django Paris (2014, 2017) found fruition in culturally sustaining pedagogy, which argued that the strength of a classroom lay in the cultural values and patterns of learners of color. This work strove to change the power structures in the classroom, and the norms of what traditional education sought to teach. Culturally sustaining pedagogy takes the power of education from Eurocentric, white stakeholders, and advocates for the uplifting of the culture of learners of color in place of traditional educational norms. Culturally and

linguistically responsive pedagogy offers tools that teachers can use to enact the work of sustaining pedagogy in the classroom. However, educators must take care to ground their culturally responsive and sustaining work in antiracism to combat white supremacy. Simply utilizing static strategies does not suffice to see students, and absolve from the work needed to fight white supremacy in schools. The following section of this literature review will explore how student-led dialogue on race in the classroom can engage students in taking control in the classroom, and advocating for a more equitable, antiracist world.

### **Student-Led Discussions on Race**

To act out their antiracist, culturally sustaining ambitions, schools must hold space for students to lead critical conversations on race. In order to provide learners the skills they need to engage in the ever-evolving world, we have to ensure schools are institutions of racial literacy. This section will explore literature surrounding student-led conversations about race in the classroom. It will discuss the impact and importance of racial literacy, and how white educators can engage diverse classrooms in antiracist dialogue and learner-centered spaces of critical conversation.

First, white teachers holding space for dialogue about race in the classroom must be constantly reflective, aware, and proactive about their impact and intersecting roles of power while instructing. Karen Buenavista Hanna writes, in “Pedagogies in the Flesh Building an Anti- Racist Decolonized Classroom”, that the enactment of an antiracist dialogue by a white educator “requires constant reflexivity about how our raced and gendered embodied presence, regardless of our best intentions and our aligned identities,

might impact the people who congregate with us in learning and vice versa” (K.B., 2019). For teachers to ask students to actively analyze the various power dynamics in play in antiracist, classroom dialogue, teachers must first do this work, and live within the tension of their role in a space traditionally constructed through white supremacy. Adding to this notion, in their journal entitled “Antiracist Solidarity in Critical Education: Contemporary Problems and Possibilities” Noah Livosoy and Anthony Brown articulate that white educators must commit to their work in solidarity of students of color and “possess a kind of ‘silent presence,’ in which their activism entails a careful and thoughtful listening, as opposed to being the redemptive voice of social action” (Livosoy & Brown, 2013). White educators striving towards antiracism must not take up the space they set out to hold for learners of color. White educators must lead with their intentional presence, their reflection on their role in white supremacy, their commitment to students through listening and learning, and their measured, consistent actions.

Second, white teachers must ground all dialogue on race in a strong classroom community that is built on deep relational respect and efforts for cross-cultural sharing and understanding. Stephen Brookfield, in *Teaching Race : How to Help Students Unmask and Challenge Racism*, states, “While racial dialogue should challenge positionality, privilege, and truth claims, such challenges must occur through relationships built through an ever-evolving process of attaining knowledge and making connections with the other” (Brookfield, 2019). He argues that classroom culture must be established before learners maintain a safe and trusting environment to engage in critical conversations on race (Brookfield, 2019). For learners to take the lead, and offer

honest dialogue sharing how their evolving identities intersect with power structures in place in our schools and our world, they must trust that their teacher and peers see, hear, and respect them.

When educators provide the literature and structures in place to step aside and offer learners the floor to discuss race, they help learners develop racial literacy. Allison Skerrett's article, "English teachers' racial literacy knowledge and practice, Race Ethnicity and Education" writes that racial literacy is "an understanding of the powerful and complex ways in which race influences the social, economic, political, and educational experiences of individuals and groups" (Skerrett, 2011). Through student-led dialogue, learners can develop their voices in racial literacy to advocate for themselves and others. Skerrett continues in her study of racially diverse secondary English classrooms to deduce:

The teacher's openness to discussing racial categories and ascriptions, and her discursive framing of race as an unstable social construct, allowed students to learn from each other about the socially constructed and contested nature of race. Such complex understandings are an essential component of racial literacy. (Skerrett, 2011)

Antiracist classrooms engage in critical conversations on race, and analyze texts that connect students to challenge the intersection of their identity, and power structures prevailing in systematic oppression. By generating a classroom where students engage in challenging, earnest conversations on race, teachers promote

citizens who are racially literate, ready to activate and demand a more equitable world order.

### **Summary**

Our schools are fraught with racism. From their construction, our education system was designed for white learners. This lingers today in white educator bias, the disproportionate discipline of students of color, a Eurocentric curricular focus, racially inequitable measurements of assessment, by design. To fight this, educators have to engage in antiracism. To redesign a school system that sees, uplifts, and honors our learners of color as essential, we must adapt antiracist, culturally sustaining, deeply critical, and honest spaces of student-led discussion. In this, we can offer our learners a chance to actualize a just, antiracist society.

In the following chapter of this Capstone Project, I will describe the methodology investigating my central research question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?*

## CHAPTER THREE

### METHODOLOGY

My qualitative Capstone project works to gauge the impact of student-led, critical dialogue on race through culturally sustaining discussion protocols. I hope to design a curriculum that centers race in student conversation and connection making. This work will challenge learners to address the intersectionality of oppressive systems, and give students the space to engage in deconstructing racist systems. My project is necessary in the current climate of racism in American schools and politics. I hope this work adds to the literature citing culturally sustaining pedagogies as best practices, and strengthens the call for white teachers to commit to antiracism in student-centered classroom communities. This capstone project, ultimately, strives to answer this research question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?* In this chapter, I will detail the rationale for my research, articulate the methodology of study, and offer my means of data collection.

#### **Study Rationale**

My capstone project is indebted to the work of antiracism in culturally sustaining pedagogy and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Hollie, 2018; Kendi, 2019; Ladson-Billings, 2014; Paris & Alim, 2014); Delgado & Stefancic, (2017). This study aspires to counter a culture of racism pervading American schools through critical racial dialogue in the English classroom. In striving to elevate student voice and power, this project gauges the potential for scholars to critically engage in racial literacy. My

project is the creation and implementation of a high school English elective course titled “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”. This course uses music as the means to facilitate student-directed conversations on race and identity, and how learners can engage with and add to the history of social movements in this country. By listening to students hold space for race-conscious discussion and monitoring their perceptions of this learning experience, this project hopes to add to the literature on culturally sustaining learning and culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy. The audience for this work is white educators deepening their commitment to antiracist practices and English language arts teachers establishing student-centered dialogic spaces.

### **Research Paradigm**

My research project will be a qualitative study. John Creswell describes qualitative research, in *Research Design*, as involving “emerging questions and procedures, data typically collected in the participant’s setting, data analysis inductively building from particulars to general themes, and the researcher making interpretations often meaning of the data” (Creswell, 2018). This approach will allow me to gather narrative feedback from participants in my study, and inquire through open-ended questions to elicit student feedback. As the very nature of my project is to engage students in honest, critical conversation, this format of data collection matches my aims of listening to learners, and providing space for personal nuance and individual responsiveness.

My study is based in Constructivism and Transformative worldviews. In Constructivism, I recognize how my investment in this study impacts my analysis given my world view and experiences. My positionality as a white educator striving to foster spaces of critical, learner-led dialogue informs my interpretation of my study, and impacts each interaction I lead with my student participants. Through a Transformative worldview, my study is located in the inquiry of how students can critically contend with the racist power structures of American society. In student-led conversation about race, I hope learners feel inspired to raise their voice to challenge and dismantle systematic oppression. With race at the center, my study is informed by Constructivism and Transformative worldviews.

### **Timeline, Setting, and Participants**

This qualitative capstone research project will take place in my high school English elective classroom at Brooklyn Center Secondary during the 2021-2022 school year--my seventh year teaching English at this school setting. The specific study will be conducted in the span of a semester-long course extending from September to January in the fall of 2021, and from January to June in the spring of 2022. In the following paragraph, I will outline the setting and population of my participants.

Brooklyn Center is a self-contained school district bordering North Minneapolis. The school serves a population of nearly 700 learners in its 6th-12th grade building. The student population is diverse racially and culturally, with over 92% students of color. More specifically, 45% of the student population are Black, 22% are Hispanic, 18% are Asian, 9% are white, and 2% are American Indian. Roughly 82% of learners at Brooklyn



Center are categorized as economically disadvantaged, and qualify for free and reduced lunch services. The participants in my research project will be the high schoolers in my classroom at Brooklyn Center who consent to participation in this work, and have chosen to enroll in the English class elective, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”.

### **Curriculum**

**Understanding by Design** This unit was created using the Understanding by Design curriculum model framework. In Understanding by Design, teachers manufacture units of study that are driven by student inquiry, with cohesion and multiple checks for understanding (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008) Understanding by Design, or UbD works to employ backwards design, or constructing summative assessments first to then scaffold a sequence of daily work towards a unit’s big ideas (Wiggins & McTighe, 2008). By adhering to the principles of Understanding by Design, my unit offers all learners a path to successfully engage in critical dialogue on race in the 7th grade English classroom.

**Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy** The unit created through Understanding by Design intentionally embeds protocols from Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching Pedagogy, as designed by Dr. Sharroky Hollie, to sustain the layered, powerful cultures of my diverse learners (Hollie, 2018; Paris & Alim, 2017). Through the discussion protocols of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy, or CLR, I hope to validate and affirm the cultural background of my learners while scaffolding varied opportunities for academic discussion. While some of the strategies have been modified to match my personality, practice, and specific setting, the

essence of the protocols remains to validate and affirm students and their cultural backgrounds and behaviors. With these CLR strategies, this unit works to hold space for students to analyze the intersection of race and power structures that prevail in society today.

**Minnesota State Standards** This project is orchestrated in accordance with the Minnesota State Standards for English Language arts. This study specifically targets the following speaking and language standards below:

9.9.1.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups, and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 9–10 topics, texts, and issues, including those by and about Minnesota American Indians, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively: (a) Come to discussions prepared, having read and researched material under study; explicitly draw on that preparation by referring to evidence from texts and other research on the topic or issue to stimulate a thoughtful, well-reasoned exchange of ideas. (b) Work with peers to set rules for collegial discussions and decision-making (e.g., informal consensus, taking votes on key issues, presentation of alternate views), clear goals and deadlines, and individual roles as needed. (c) Propel conversations by posing and responding to questions that relate the current discussion to broader themes or larger ideas; actively incorporate others into the discussion; and clarify, verify, or challenge ideas and conclusions. (d) Respond thoughtfully to diverse perspectives, summarize points of agreement and disagreement,

and, when warranted, qualify or justify their own views and understanding and make new connections in light of the evidence and reasoning presented.

9.9.4.4 While respecting intellectual property, present information, findings, and supporting evidence clearly, concisely, and logically such that listeners can follow the line of reasoning and the organization, development, substance, and style are appropriate to purpose, audience, and task (e.g., persuasion, argumentation, debate).

9.9.6.6 Adapt speech to a variety of contexts, audiences, tasks, and feedback from self and others, demonstrating command of formal English when indicated or appropriate. (Refer to grades 9-10 Language standards 1 and 3 for specific expectations.): (a) Apply assessment criteria to evaluate oral presentations by self and others.

**Historically Responsive Literacy Model** While this project ensures students receive a Language Arts instruction that meets the standards of the state, my course places priority on following Gholdy Muhammad's Historically Responsive Literacy Model. Gholdy pulls from the rich history of Black literary communities to conceptualize four instructional goals: literacy as identity meaning-making, literacy as skills, literacy as intellect, and literacy as criticality (Muhammad, 2020). My project outlines a semester course featuring six instructional units all aligned to Muhammad's framework. This is done intentionally to acknowledge that instruction targeting state sanctioned standards in isolation does not uphold the vibrant traditions of Black literature communities to holistically see, challenge, and foster the rigorous development of well-rounded scholars

(Muhammad, 2020). My project follows this tradition and employs the Historically Responsive Literacy Model to “take culturally responsive theory and put it into a practical model that teachers can take up in classrooms across content areas” (Muhammad, 2020).

**Assessment** My capstone project details a semester-long course entitled, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”. Within this high school English course outline, there are 6 units of study that will feature both formative and summative lesson plans, resources, and Google Slideshow presentations. The assessments in each unit offer various student-led discussion protocols that are derived from Dr. Sharroky Hollie’s work with culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy (Hollie, 2018).. The first unit of study culminates in a research paper and personal playlist, but is assessed through a peer review exercise called “Move-It-To-Improve-It”, a culturally responsive discussion protocol. The next unit builds up to a gallery walk assessment where students lead a display and discussion of their personal artist presentations. The third instructional unit in this course concludes with a Open-Mic student creative work presentation. The fourth unit is assessed through student-centered debates, while the fifth unit concludes with a socratic seminar assessment. The sixth and final unit assesses student learning through a learner-facilitated town hall discussion forum. All six of these assessments feature detailed descriptions and rationales for both their instructional purpose and how they incorporate culturally sustaining pedagogy with intentionality.

To assess the success of my project, these varied discussion protocols and formative assessments will be of paramount importance. Beyond this, I will employ

frequent formal and informal reflections and self-assessments from students and their families to ensure that their feedback and perceptions are not only elicited, but actively heard and incorporated into the curriculum writing and revision process. This capstone project will achieve its aims when students are wholly facilitating daring discussions without scaffold, and applying their dialogue to action in our school and larger Brooklyn Center community.

### **Researcher Role, Assumptions, and Data Analysis**

As an educator at Brooklyn Center, and a part time regional teacher coach for the Institute of Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Teaching, I am intimately invested in my research study, and subject to bias. To minimize the extent of my potential bias in this study, I will rely on direct citation from my participants, and a commitment to objective, open-ended inquiry into the experience of my participants.

Ultimately this study works to elevate the voice of my students, and decentralize my power and control in the classroom space. While I am an active participant and contributor to the classroom I maintain, I hope this work functions to let my students be heard.

### **Summary**

This section of my Capstone research project works to outline the rationale for my research, as well as the guiding paradigm, methodology, setting, participants, curricular design, and researcher role in question. Through this work, I strive to answer my research question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and*

*identity in an English classroom?* In the following chapter, I will conclude the findings of my project, reflecting on what I have learned, and discuss the implications of my work.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### CONCLUSION

Students in American schools are subjected to systems of white supremacy that oppress learners of color, specifically harming Black and Indigenous youth. This stark injustice necessitates the work of bold, unwavering antiracism in schools today. My role as an English education teacher at Brooklyn Center schools, a community school serving a population of over 90% learners of color, demands an ongoing commitment to abolishing white supremacy in myself and in my classroom. Embedded in this obligation is providing an education that centers my learners as leaders who are given the space to analyze their identities, discuss race, and explore how their voices can actualize a more equitable world. This pursuit led me to explore the research question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?*

In this fourth, concluding, section of my paper, I will reflect on the process of my capstone project. This section will revisit the literature review, and discuss the implications, limitations, and next steps of my work. Finally, I will draw significant conclusions from this capstone project.

#### **Critical reflection**

The completion of this capstone project has been a rewarding challenge. First, this work has pushed me to interrogate my journey and reassert my passions as an educator.

Writing the first chapter of this paper called me to unpack the struggles I went through as a young, white educator striving to serve a Brooklyn Center community that demanded I refuse to regress into harmful, traditional teaching practices. I was forced to look deep at the ways white supremacy was enacted through practices I was complacent in as an educator. Through this project, I was able to trace my growth as a professional, and deepen my commitment to my students in antiracism.

This project has pushed me to further my understanding of culturally sustaining pedagogy, and design a classroom space that elevates student voice through culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols that specifically invite students to discuss race, identity, and the world around us. The development of an antiracist, culturally responsive curriculum for my new English elective course, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”, was preceded by the challenge of diving deep into my role as a researcher, and developing scholar.

I love teaching. And like many educators, I struggle as a student. Applying myself as a researcher in this capstone project was a true test. I find joy in teaching through connecting with students, and stepping back to see learners explore and apply their learning in new and profound ways. Until completing the literature review of this course, I failed to fully understand how the hands-on work that I do with students is indebted to the scholarship and literature preceding us.

This project fully called for me to open myself up to critical literature. By this I mean I had to find patience in my new role as a student and active researcher. I was



pushed to slowly give myself to texts, allowing myself to deeply consider what scholars argued without pretext. This work was draining, and required a willingness to embrace a criticality that pushed myself to constantly reassess my own practice, and the state of education at large. While researching the structures of racism and oppression in American schools, I found grave frustration at how white supremacy has governed a harrowing reality for learners of color. As I pushed on to my study of antiracist, culturally sustaining pedagogy, I localized hope and began to reimagine a path forward that students could lead. This study too stretched me. It forced me to earnestly question how I could leverage my role as an English teacher, to ultimately step aside and foster a place where students were radically encouraged to lead dialogic spaces that questioned who they were, and what their role could be in forming a different, spectacular world.

My curriculum writing was inspired by this notion of hope in student agency. I found a renewed purpose as an educator, imagining a course that harnessed my commitment to antiracism in subverting a learning environment that truly called students to the forefront in culturally sustaining discussion. My project, the outline and corresponding culturally responsive lesson plans for my course, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”, was a privilege to take on. In this work, I feel I better discovered myself as an educator, researcher, scholar, and curriculum writer. What I have accomplished situates itself within a tradition I am indebted to in culturally sustaining pedagogy and antiracist education practices.

## **Literature review**

The impetus of my research was found reading “What is Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy and Why Does it Matter? By H. Samy Alim and Django Paris. They write:

The purpose of state-sanctioned schooling has been to forward the largely assimilationist and often violent White imperial project, with students and families being asked to lose or deny their languages, literacies, cultures, and histories in order to achieve in schools. (Paris & Alim, 2017)

This statement propelled my literature review in two parts. One, I devoted the first half of my review to better understanding the racist climate in American schools, stretching from teacher bias, exclusionary, racist discipline practices, the prevalence Eurocentric curriculum, and the construction of a supposed achievement gap. After establishing this backdrop of structural violence in American schools, I was pushed to explore scholarship that strives to abolish and upend these racist realities. The second part of my literature review focused on antiracism in the schools, and ultimately settled on how culturally sustaining pedagogy can empower students to lead culturally and linguistically responsive discussions that can liberate and transform.

**Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy** Paris and Alim’s work on culturally sustaining pedagogy guided me through the completion of my literature review, and ultimately my project. The urgency of culturally sustaining pedagogy spoke to me immediately. Chapter one of this work forced me to look directly at how my positionality as a white educator indoctrinated me into traditional teaching and learning patterns that could be massively harmful to the community I strive to work alongside. Paris and Alim’s words struck me,

“Increasingly, we can no longer assume that the White, middle-class linguistic, literate, and cultural skills and ways of being that were considered the sole gatekeepers to the opportunity structure in the past will remain so as our society changes.” (Paris & Alim, 2014). Through this project, it became increasingly clear that my work in culturally sustaining pedagogy required me to reject any semblance of gatekeeping in my work. I knew, through Paris and Alim, that a curriculum rooted in culturally sustaining pedagogy called for me to facilitate.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy informed my student-led curriculum building. The literature demanded that I innovate and defy the impulse to control or regress into comfortable, traditional pedagogy. Paris and Alim articulate that effective educators deftly uphold the multiplicity of student voice, understanding “to offer youth full access to power, then, we must understand that power is now based in part on one’s ability to communicate effectively to more than ‘standard’ English monolinguals/monoculturalism” (Paris & Alim, 2014). I found these words advancing my work, fervently calling me to question what formative and summative assessments could best represent my learner’s growth, passions, and nuanced cultural identities. As I wrote and rewrote curriculum, I reflected on these words from Paris and Alim, “As youth continue to inhabit a world where cultural and linguistic recombinations flow with purpose, we need pedagogies that speak to this new reality—as Pennycook (2007) puts it, pedagogies that ‘go with the flow’” (Paris & Alim, 2014). To mirror this truth, and enact dynamic instruction that would center my learners--and call them in to speak and act freely--I engaged deeply with

Dr. Sharroky Hollie's work of CLR, or Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy.

**Culturally and Linguistically Responsive Pedagogy** Deepening my understanding of Dr. Hollie's work through the completion of the literature section illuminated pedagogical tools that enabled me to write discussion-based curriculum. I found CLR useful in its articulation of specific protocols and how they can validate and affirm learners and the cultural behaviors that schools historically reject. This work gave me a blueprint to play with various forms of academic and informal student-led discussion formats, all while maintaining a nuanced, cultural lens. While writing curriculum, I referred back to my literature review to inform a mindset of constant revision to ensure that the best practices I pulled from CLR were used with fidelity and care.

**A Loving Critique** Foundational to my development as a researcher, scholar, writer, and curriculum author, was the scholarship of critique that I engaged with through my literature review. I deeply admire the pivotal works of Gloria Ladson-Billings, where she "Remixes" her previous scholarship to critique and further her seminal writing on culturally relevant pedagogy (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Akin to this, is Paris and Alim's writing in "What Are We Seeking to Sustain Through Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy? A Loving Critique Forward" (Paris and Alim, 2014), where they, too, challenge and deepen pioneering works in the field of culturally relevant and sustaining pedagogy. Lastly, I was moved by Justin Grinage's piece, "Singing and dancing for diversity: Neoliberal

multiculturalism and white epistemological ignorance in teacher professional development” (Grinage, 2020). These texts embodied the essence of growth, criticality, and loving revision that I aspired to emulate in my capstone project. My personal journey to truly embracing culturally sustaining teaching required me to constantly critique myself and my practice. I was only able to see myself following the tradition of these authors through an omnipresent willingness to reinvent myself as an educator striving for antiracist, authentic culturally sustaining instruction.

Grinage’s work sharpened my perception of authenticity in the implementation of a culturally responsive and sustaining curriculum. Grinage argues that white supremacy in the form of neoliberalism often dilutes and derails antiracist aims in culturally sustaining pedagogy (Grinage, 2020). Furthermore, Grinage cautions that many well-intending, white educators co-opt the language of liberation, and complacently subscribe to surface level applications of culturally sustaining pedagogy. This piece deeply resonated with my commitments to antiracism and work to embody sincere principles of justice and equity in all that I do. I have been pushed, through this literature of critique, to devote my work fully to the aim of creating a living curriculum that sincerely elevates my students as radical learners who push down walls of resistance to unpack their identities, and discover how they, as a classroom community, can deeply engage with dialogue on race and revolution.

## **Implications**

This project serves as a framework for all educators, specifically secondary English teachers, seeking to ground their classroom spaces in student-led, culturally and linguistically responsive places rich with critical dialogue. I hope this work shows that culturally sustaining pedagogy lives beyond academic theory, and has a place in every classroom and in every lesson. In this project, my curriculum overturns notions of stagnant, antiquated pedagogical patterns and sees student agency at the core of each exercise, inviting learners to raise their voice to better find themselves and demand community-centered change. Too often, culturally and linguistically responsive pedagogy is seen as an aside, or a nice notion that supplements a comfortable, traditional teaching baseline. My course seeks to show that culturally sustaining, student-directed discussion is an applicable, necessity in the 21st century classroom.

### **Limitations**

Although I would argue that my course curriculum shows that culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols can be embedded in any formative or summative assessment in any content area, potential limitations may lie in the specificity of my design. I set out to create a course that is offered as an English elective for 9th and 10th grade students at my personal school setting. The content of this course focuses on the genre of hip hop, and leveraging controversial music as a lens to discuss identity and revolution. Some may find that this focus is hard to relate to their, potentially more restrictive, school settings. I am perpetually grateful to instruct in a school district that asks teachers to embody abolitionist theory and apply liberation into the essence of their

lesson design. Through my six years of teaching, I am disheartened to learn that this is not the norm for many districts. At the very least, I hope that this project offers practical resources for educators who are finding space to experiment with discussion formats and begin the journey of holding learners and their voices up as central to classroom culture.

### **Next Steps**

I am thrilled to be teaching the course, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”, that I designed in this upcoming 2021-2022 school year for 9th and 10th graders at Brooklyn Center Community Schools. I will be teaching this semester-long course in both the fall and the spring semesters. First, it is my duty to take this curriculum that I have created over the summer on my own, and begin to collect feedback from esteemed colleagues, and most importantly to open the course outline up to students, their families, and community members. As I get into the school year, and develop a rhythm teaching and learning alongside my new students, I commit to being reflexive in my work, constantly modifying, adapting, and adding to the curriculum as currently outlined. Proposing this new course to my school district and writing the curriculum has pushed me outside of my comfort zone. I must stay in this generative space and openly receive feedback from my students, as this class, and its corresponding curriculum, evolve to best meet the needs, demands, and interests of my students who I value and respect deeply.

### **Summary**

Taking on the challenge of this capstone project has afforded me the opportunity to realign my personal and professional values. Through the completion of chapter one, I took space to critically reflect on my positionality as a person and an educator who is committed to the ongoing work of combating and dismantling racism on an individual and structural level. This pursuit was bolstered and critically informed through the scholarship and literature I engaged with in the literature review. Chapter three prepared me to outline the curriculum for my course, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”, whose completion set out to answer the research question: *How can the implementation of culturally and linguistically responsive discussion protocols elevate students to lead critical conversations about race and identity in an English classroom?*

Through my inquiry, reflection, and curriculum development, I have reaffirmed my calling as an educator. It is my hope that through this project, and through the work I accomplish as a teacher, that students will have the space and freedom to radically call out, question, and develop tools to topple the racist structures that oppress and restrict. This overwhelming task finds footing, or at the very least, a starting point in my course, “Me Against the World: Hip Hop, Identity, and Revolution”. I hope to better live out the work of antiracism by following the lead of my learners as they leverage their identities, experiences, and voices to courageously push on together.



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