Avoiding "Oh my God" Experiences: How White Female Developmental Literacy instructors (Dis)Engage Race in their instructional Decision Making

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This dissertation explores the instructional decision making of White female community college developmental literacy instructors in order to better understand pedagogical practices that impact educational inequities for Black male students in developmental literacy classes. Historically, the U.S education system has underserved Black male students, and college success rates demonstrate that educational inequities persist for Black male students today. Although much research has focused on educational inequities for Black male students in K-12 and university environments, little research has focused those inequities for Black male students in community colleges. In addition, although research that explores Black male experiences in educational settings provides an essential basis for more equitable educational opportunities, the educational system also needs a better understanding of the how educators’ conceptions about race and education impact the instructional decisions they make. Thus, this study addresses the gap in research by studying the praxis of White female instructors in community college developmental literacy classes.

I employed a theoretical framework composed of critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality to analyze data I collected from interviews, focus groups, and course
documents of five White female developmental literacy instructors from one community college. My analysis of the data revealed that three overarching themes informed the praxis of these five White female developmental literacy instructors. The instructors employed culturally responsive teaching practices to engage students in coursework and to help students establish meaningful connections with the texts, their classmates, and the instructor. Additionally, the instructors took deliberate steps to create a safe and comfortable classroom environment for their students and themselves. However, in an effort to maintain comfort and safety in the classroom, the instructors avoided direct discussion of race. My findings suggest that White female developmental literacy instructors’ discomfort in engaging race in the classroom may result in inauthentic classroom practices that are unlikely to engage Black male students.
AVOIDING “OH MY GOD” EXPERIENCES: HOW WHITE FEMALE DEVELOPMENTAL LITERACY INSTRUCTORS (DIS)ENGAGE RACE IN THEIR INSTRUCTIONAL DECISION MAKING

BY
ALISON M. DOUGLAS

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A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

DEPARTMENT OF CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Doctoral Director:
Jodi P. Lampi
I am so grateful for the many supporters who kept me sane on this doctoral adventure. All journeys start with a single step, and I was fortunate to have Dr. Sonya Armstrong by my side as I made my foray into doctoral classes. Without her calm, demanding presence, I would have stopped before I started. Throughout the years, colleagues, classmates, and friends have made this process less lonely and more joyous. Special thanks to Mary Perkins, Tina Ballard, Colleen Stribling, Kristen Walsh, Eric Junco, and Julie Schaid whose support, friendship, and humor kept me going.

I was blessed to have continuous support from my advisor and committee chair, Dr. Jodi Lampi, as well as committee members who challenged me, pushed me, and taught me to trust myself: Dr. Laura L. Johnson, Dr. Jeanine Williams, Dr. Mike Manderino, and Dr. Corrine Wickens.

This journey has changed me, and in the process changed my relationship with those closest to me. I am forever grateful to the friends and family who shared this journey and were willing to grow with me: AJ, who walked me to my first classes and always believed in me; Nate, who helped me think and challenged my data; Karen, whose curiosity and pride kept me moving forward; Pam, who celebrated the process and each small victory; my sister Melanie, my muse and my audience, who asked questions and listened to the answers. Last, but never least, my partner, Don, who read every single word in every single draft, who learned about Foucault, who listened to me think out loud on our weekly walks, and who always asked, “How did dissertating go today?” Sharing the journey made all the difference.
DEDICATION

I am who I am because of my parents, J. David and Susan Jeanette Douglas. I am grateful every day for your presence in my life.
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The public education system in the United States, from Pre-K through graduate studies, offers opportunities for students of all backgrounds to learn and grow in order to achieve the American dream. Or so our national narrative goes. In fact, the history of public education in the U.S., like all history, is complicated. In particular, this dissertation considers the ways that the history and structure of racism in the U.S. generally and in the education system specifically complicate instructional decision making and obstruct Black male students’ access to the promise of American education. In Chapter 1, I explain the problem addressed through the study and provide an overview of the study’s parameters. This chapter begins with an exploration of what matters in the context of this study, and an overview of the context and background that frame the study, followed by the problem statement, purpose, and research questions. The chapter ends with the rationale and significance of the study along with the definitions of key terminology used in this study.

What Matters?

College success matters. By almost any measure, college graduates have greater access to the goods of U.S. society and experience fewer of its ills. According to the Association of Public and Land-Grant Universities (2020), bachelor's degree holders are more engaged in their communities and in leadership within them. Additionally, college graduates are 24% more likely to be employed and will earn substantially more, both on an annual basis and over a lifetime,
than high school graduates. Table 1 summarizes just a few of the many benefits of a college degree (Trostel, 2015). Because of these and many other socioeconomic benefits both tangible and intangible, a college degree remains a relevant and potentially life-altering investment. However, inequitable college persistence and completion rates consistently limit access to the returns of a college degree for many Black students.

Table 1

Socioeconomic Benefits of Earning a Bachelor’s Degree Compared to Earning Only a High School Diploma

<table>
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<th>Benefit</th>
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<td>Annual Earnings</td>
<td>$32,000 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lifetime Earnings</td>
<td>$625,000 higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty Rate</td>
<td>3.5 times lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of having employer-provided health care</td>
<td>46% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Likelihood of reporting good health</td>
<td>44% higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Probability of being imprisoned</td>
<td>4.9 times lower</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation in school and community organizations</td>
<td>1.9 times higher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership in school and community organizations</td>
<td>3.2 times higher</td>
</tr>
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Source: Trostel, 2015

Therefore, equitable college success matters. According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2019), Black students in U.S. colleges and universities from 2011–2014 demonstrated the lowest persistence rates of any other demographic. Similarly, Black students from the 2010 cohort of “first-time, full time bachelor’s degree seeking students at 4-year
postsecondary institutions” demonstrated the lowest graduation rates of any other demographic (NCES, 2020b). Although increasing college persistence and graduation rates for Black students will not “cure” the U.S. of the impacts of historic and systemic racism, doing so will increase equity and justice (Stewart, 2017) by increasing Black graduates’ access to social and economic benefits of a college degree.

In such efforts to increase equitable college success, literacy matters. Because college coursework across disciplines requires reading and writing competence, literacy achievement creates either a bridge or a roadblock to college completion (Burrus et al. 2013; Howard, 2013; NCES, 2020a; Rowley & Bowman, 2009; Tatum, 2008). For students who have not acquired needed literacy skills, pre-college or developmental courses offer an opportunity for students to catch up to their more academically prepared classmates. On the surface, the U.S. education system provides postsecondary opportunities for both the well-prepared and the under-prepared. Those students who achieve sufficient levels of literacy skill at each level move through the educational system with relative ease. For those who leave high school without demonstrating requisite literacy skills as described above, developmental literacy courses can provide much needed on-ramps to postsecondary success (Caverly, et al, 2004; Chen & Simone, 2016; Nist & Holschuh, 2012; Simpson & Nist, 2013; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). However, because success rates in developmental literacy courses reflect the overall inequitable educational achievement rates in the U.S., concern for educational equity calls for additional focus on developmental literacy course success.

Such a focus requires that we hold in our minds both the parts and the whole. Apple (1993) insisted that the U.S. education system is not neutral because the systems and values on which our schools and curriculum are based reflect a White-centric meritocracy that largely
ignores the effects of racism, both in causing harm to Black folks and in privileging White (King, 1991). And, although schools are “central to a group’s movement into mainstream social life” (Markus et al., 2000), the values and beliefs which undergird educational structures often serve to hinder specific groups’ upward movement.

Awareness of such counterproductive structures inherent in the U.S. education system could lead individual educators to despair. However, within the larger systems essential parts exist – specific classrooms, individual students, and individual teachers. Markus et al. (2000) insisted that “psychological tendencies and individual actions foster and maintain, but can sometimes change (emphasis added) these …structural realities” (p. 248). Educators’ individual actions arise not only from their psychological tendencies but also from the educational theories to which they align themselves. As Lather (1991) explained, the intersection of educators’ classroom action and educational theory is their instructional “praxis …the self-creative activity through which [they] make the world…. Philosophy becoming practical” (p. 11). In this study, I recognized the power of individual instructors to change or reinforce structural realities through their own instructional praxis and recognized classrooms significant sites from which social power can be both perpetuated and challenged (Roman, 1993, p. 83).

Because of their power to perpetuate or challenge educational inequities through their instructional decision making, teachers matter. Beyond recognizing the social power of the classroom, through this study I sought to understand how community college developmental literacy instructors could harness the power of the classroom to create change by increasing equity. To that end, this study focused on the praxis of White female developmental literacy instructors as significant parts of community college classrooms that exist within the whole of
the U.S. education system. Thus, while I situate this study within the racial structures of the U.S., I simultaneously acknowledge the power of the individual educator.

Developmental Literacy: Consequence and Cause

As briefly cited above, extensive data has focused educators’ and policy makers’ attention on statistical evidence of disproportionate achievement for Black students across the United States. Quantitative studies have demonstrated the extent of educational inequities in U.S. public schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), the levels and impact of teachers’ expectations for Black male students (Strayhorn, 2008; Warren, 2015a), and racial differences in school attachment and student engagement (Johnson Kirkpatrick et al., 2001). From such studies, informed educators know that many students of color, and specifically Black male students, fail to thrive in the U.S. educational system. At the postsecondary level, metrics for gauging students’ progress may include rates of “college readiness” and placement into developmental coursework, persistence and retention, and rates of degree completion. By any of these measures, levels of academic achievement for Black male students are cause for concern for postsecondary educators and institutions. Standardized measures such as the ACT and SAT tests have provided postsecondary institutions with quantitative metrics of students’ secondary academic achievement and the likelihood of success in college for many years. In addition, colleges and universities have used scores on such standardized tests as a first measure to determine students’ placement into either college level or developmental courses. The purpose of this study is not to evaluate the effectiveness or appropriateness of these college entrance tests as they have been used for placement by colleges and universities.
Instead, because scores on such standardized tests are one factor in students’ access to college level courses, the differences in students’ results on these tests are an essential fact in the context of this study. According to College Board (2019), 21% of Black students in the class of 2018 who took the SAT met the test’s college ready benchmarks, compared to 47% of all test takers. Similarly, Black students’ average composite scores on the ACT were lower than any other ethnic groups’ scores (ACT, 2019). Across the U.S., concern for the inequitable college access and placement resulting from these test score differences have led many colleges and universities to use “multiple measures,” especially high school grade point average (Hodara & Lewis, 2017) for college acceptance and determination of course placements. However, the inclusion of grade point average (GPA) has done little to change the national picture for Black students who, according to the Nation’s Report Card, earned a lower overall GPA than any other racial or ethnic group (NCES, 2020b). Additionally, when achievement data has been disaggregated by race and gender, on average, Black male students have scored lower than their Black female counterparts (NCES, 2020b).

Given such differences in high school success rates, standardized college entrance test scores, and GPA, Black students have been more likely than any other subgroup to be placed into pre-college, developmental courses (College Board, 2019). National data indicated that between 2003 and 2009, 78.3% of Black students took developmental literacy courses in community colleges compared to 63.6% developmental course enrollment for White students and 68.1% for Asian students (Chen & Simone, 2016). Although completion of developmental courses appeared to have had a positive impact on persistence, retention, and degree completion (Chen & Simone, 2016), only 49% of the students who enrolled in developmental courses completed them, and at community colleges, students who did not complete developmental coursework
were less likely to earn a degree or certificate or to transfer to a university (Chen & Simone, 2016).

The educational inequities that result in and derive from developmental placements should be understood not only as data points in current time but also as the logical outcome of the racial history of the U.S. education system. Because developmental placement has decreased the likelihood that students will persist in college, the impact of such placements for Black male students have been analyzed by theorists and studied by researchers (Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2010; Howard, 2013; Kirkland, 2013; Ladson Billings, 1992; Tatum, 2008;) who have voiced concern over both inequitable placement and persistence rates for Black students. Studies of educational inequities have correlated Black students’ inequitable achievement in U.S. schools with factors arising from the inequitable structures of the U.S. culture including family structure, socioeconomic status, perceptions of masculinity, and school climate (Orrock & Clark, 2015; Toldson et al., 2009).

Focusing on educational inequities experienced by minoritized populations through analysis of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey, Roscigno (1998) conceptualized forces that interact to influence academic achievement. One such force was “school attributes” including the representation of class and race within the school as well as the available resources in the school. A second force was “family background” including family structure, socioeconomic status, and peer groups. A third force was “teacher expectations” including the perceptions of student placement and tracking systems. Understanding how each force has stemmed from historical systems of oppression can help educators move beyond an individualistic and decontextualized understanding of student achievement (Bridges, 2011; García & Guerra, 2004; Shorette & Palmer, 2015; Yoon, 2016). Without discounting the impact
of other forces affecting Black male students’ college success, in this study, I focused on the third force – the teachers.

In examining inequitable rates of academic achievement, educators must consider how students’ experiences and challenges contribute to their success rates, but it is equally important to recognize the role teachers play in facilitating success or creating barriers for minoritized students. Strayhorn et al. (2015) documented three “bins of knowledge” about Black males’ college success: “well-being, sense of belonging, and college transitions” (p. 128); the interactions between students and teachers can impact all three factors. Research shows that student-teacher relationships play a significant role in students’ persistence and success (Barr, 2011; Boucher, 2016; Claessens et al. 2016; Crosnoe, et al., 2004; Lyons, 1990). However, because they are White and female, White female teachers are unlikely to share significant academic, social, and cultural experiences with the Black male students they teach. The differences in their experiences combined with the invisible normalcy of the White experience in U.S. culture may impact students’ sense of belonging in college classes (Alquist, 1991; Apple, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Sleeter, 1993, 2001).

Thus, we must understand our education system as part of a whole. As one element of the context of the U.S. education system, developmental courses should be understood as both a bridge and a roadblock to student success (Center for Community College Student Engagement [CCCSE, 2016; de Brey et al., 2019; Hern, 2012; Stahl & Armstrong, 2018). If developmental education provides a needed catch-up opportunity, it should ultimately promote increased equity for students of color. But low success rates for Black students in such courses demonstrate that the opportunity of developmental literacy courses is equity offered but rarely conferred. Creating real opportunity for equity and justice demands deep and critical study, not only of the students
the system has failed but also of the educators entangled in unseen and unacknowledged conflict, trying to teach equitably within an inequitable system from which they have benefitted. Because White females are the most typical case of educators in the U.S. education system, and because reading and writing are critical skills for academic success, understanding how White female developmental literacy instructors engage race as they plan for developmental literacy course instruction can help educators to create needed change for Black men in community college developmental literacy courses.

Why Study White Women?

Most educators in the U.S. are White and female (NCES, 2020a, 2020b). The students most poorly served by the U.S. education system are Black and male. In this study, I focused not on the Black male students’ actions or experiences, but on those of the White female instructors. As Ladson-Billings (2007) explained, “the achievement gap makes us think that the problem is merely one of student achievement. It comes to us as if the students are not doing their part” (p. 316). Instead of focusing on the students’ behaviors, any effort to ameliorate the “educational debt” (Ladson-Billings, 2006) requires a better understanding of the praxis of the White female instructors who, through developmental literacy courses, are charged with reducing inequities in literacy achievement that impact students’ postsecondary success. By examining White female instructors’ engagement with race in their decisions about texts and text-based activities and assignments, I intentionally shifted the focus from what the students are doing to how the instructors are thinking about instruction in their multicultural classrooms.

Understanding the dynamics involved in instructors’ instructional planning requires not just understanding the individual instructors but also understanding the educational and cultural
systems of which they are a part. Because of the racist history and structures inherent in U.S. educational systems, researchers and theorists writing from a critical race theory (CRT) perspective have suggested that teachers and administrators need to see school structures from the minoritized students’ perspective (Harper & Harris, 2010; Howard et al., 2016). Once seen, these structures can and should become part of a culturally responsive education. Individual educators are an essential part of an educational system and the curriculum it delivers. Teachers play a powerful role in determining what students read and write about as well as what and how they discuss those texts in class. As the individuals who implement course curriculum, instructors embody the power of curriculum to reinforce or resist racist structures in the U.S. education system (Apple, 1993, 2004; Pinar, 1993; Stuckey, 1991). Thus, in addition to achievement differences, literacy educators need to be aware of the systemic structures that work for or against Black students and impact achievement (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Harper, 2012; Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011; Strayhorn, 2010), and they need to be able to see themselves as part of those structures that promote or discourage educational equity.

Therefore, through this study, I focused attention on a significant but unexplored part of the equity equation. Previous qualitative and quantitative studies of educational inequities have focused on mentorship between Black students and Black teachers (Brooms & Davis, 2017) and on relationships between at-risk students and K-12 teachers (Boucher, 2016; Camangian, 2010; Popp et al., 2011; Warren, 2015a). Studies have interrogated Black male students’ perceptions of their White female teachers (Guiffrida, 2005; Wood & Newman, 2017) as well as the impact of gender-based fears in student-teacher interactions (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2009, 2012; Lewis, 2016). Significant research has uncovered the effects of stereotype threat on Black male student
success (Aronson et al., 2009; Cohen & Garcia, 2005; Solórzano et al., 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995), and of low teacher expectations (Goodwin, 2002; Strayhorn, 2008; Swanson et al., 2003). However, very little of this research has focused on community colleges and none has focused on the experiences and thought processes of White female developmental literacy instructors in community colleges. By exploring White female postsecondary instructors’ engagement with race in their instructional planning, I hoped to both shine a light on and ignite crucial conversation about developmental literacy educators’ awareness of and attentiveness to these structural inequities.

White Investigating White

In this study, I am far from a neutral reporter or observer; instead, my experiences, values, and beliefs as a White female educator provide essential context. Milner (2007) recommended a framework of researcher racial and cultural positionality which included four aspects: “researching the self, researching the self in relation to others, engaged reflection and representation, and shifting from self to system” Rather than attempting to “detach themselves from the research process,” Milner (2007) recommended that researchers engage in critical self-reflection and be open about the “tensions that can emerge when conducting research where issues of race and culture are concerned” (p. 388). Like the participants in my study, the intersections of my race, gender, and role as an educator contribute to my position as a researcher.

I am proud to call myself a teacher. I “believe [my] work [is] artistry, not a technical task that [can] be accomplished in a recipe-like fashion” (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 163). My teaching career began in a small Idaho town where, as a newly certified and unemployed English
teacher, I had the great fortune to teach an after-school creative writing class to ten giggling Latinas in a Catholic elementary school. Their eagerness and willingness stood in stark contrast to the casual and generally authority-challenging behaviors of the all-White rural high school students from an even smaller Idaho town where I had completed my student teaching. In retrospect, I can recognize the patterns of gender and race that granted me authority and respect with the Latinas but required me to fight for it in the male-dominant White high school. From these two groups, I began to formulate my teaching persona, learning how a young woman who was smaller and often looked younger than her students could “manage a classroom” and still connect and engage. Rejecting what I still see as the public shaming of “Assertive Discipline” techniques in vogue at the time (Canter & Canter, 1976), I instead began to weave personal, caring relationships with and between students into webs of shared purpose. It did not always work, and I can still recall the names and faces of the students who schooled me when I failed to connect. I remember AJ, whose skill at verbal wordplay fascinated me, who loved Ta-Nehsisi Coates’s memoir, Between the World and Me, and who disappeared before midterm. I remember Marcus, silent, and remote, a whiz at finding irrelevant videos that were so much more fun than the group projects I assigned. On-going efforts to reach the next AJ or Marcus have honed my teaching persona over the years as I have gained experience and pedagogical knowledge.

Today, as a tenured and senior faculty member, I could choose to teach only the highest achieving students. But I choose to teach developmental literacy in a community college. Contrary to the pejorative line about those who can’t do, I teach because I can. Through teaching, I can contribute to my students’ journeys. While respecting, honoring, and celebrating their voices, I can also leverage my own social and political capital to help my students gain access to new routes to success and new ways of seeing themselves and their destinations. I teach
so that students can explore and affirm the power of their voices. I teach because I can make a difference. My developmental literacy students enroll in college with varying levels of hope, trepidation, and self-confidence about their college journeys, but are required to take and pass my course before they can take the college level classes that will prepare them to be accountants, firefighters, and nurses. Because their grades and test scores do not meet “college readiness standards, they are seeking a second chance at higher education denied through the educational system, life’s hiccups, their own choices, or all of the above. They bring to the classroom their excitement and hopes as well as their fears and their institutional distrust. In my role as their teacher, I work to “look beyond … behaviors characteristic of ‘disengagement’ or ‘resistance’ to see how such feelings developed over time” in large part as a result of the racist structures of our schools (Howard et al., 2016, p. 1). Thus, teaching developmental literacy has become not just my job, but my social justice work.

This study, however, derives not from my successes as an educator but from my failures and the failures of the educational system I am a part of – the failure to teach Black boys and men equitably. Although I have come far from those early experiences in Idaho, throughout my teaching experiences, I have felt the inadequacy of my pedagogical approaches to reach, engage, and teach my Black male students. I have observed my own actions and reactions when many of my Black male students seem to resist my efforts to engage them and connect with them. I have recognized and agonized over the low success rates for Black male students in my classes. Of course, the failure is not just mine. As the director of my community college’s “college readiness” program, I have watched similar outcomes on a local and national scale in annual student success reports. While I have found personal satisfaction and fulfillment as part of large-scale efforts to promote culturally responsive, student-centered pedagogy, the realization that
such projects have not increased equity for Black male students highlights a failing – an insufficiency – not in our students, but in our systems and in ourselves, the educators.

I began taking doctoral courses in postsecondary literacy searching for theory and pedagogy which would expose that missing piece -- the silver bullet that would help me improve my efficacy, especially with my Black male students. (Yes, today, I am aware of both the naïveté and the hubris of that quest.) My search led me to explore the theories and practices of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies, and I was surprised to recognize that culturally relevant pedagogy is “just good teaching” (Ladson-Billings, 1995). At the same time, my reflections led me to ponder why, with all our training and good intentions, the “good teaching” my colleagues and I practiced was not impacting the success rates of our Black male students in equal measure to that of other students in our classrooms. Such ponderings led me to deeper explorations of critical race theory and systemic racism. Over the past six years, I have begun to comprehend the complexities of systemic racism, of Whiteness, and of the intersections of race, class, and gender in U.S. classrooms. Although I know I cannot see the U.S. education system from my Black male students’ perspectives, the historical lenses of Anderson (1988, 2006) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) showed me the lack of institutional trustworthiness inherent in the U.S. education system. The fact that my first exposure to the writings of W.E.B. DuBois and Carter G. Woodson occurred at this late stage in my educational journey attests to the continued bias of that system. To broaden my White, female, middle class teacher’s viewpoint, I have been guided by the voices of Black male students describing their experiences of marginalization, silencing, and deficit narratives in the research of Cuyjet (1997), Harper (2009, 2012, 2014, 2015) Kirkland (2006, 2011a, 2011b, 2013), Strayhorn (2008, 2010, 2014), and others.
As a result of this research, I have identified color blindness and Whiteness in my own racial and cultural heritage and my teaching practice. I have begun to recognize the economic, social, and institutional systems that situated ten creative Latinas in a private school and all White students in a public school -- in a region of the country the Nez Perce, Cour d’Alene, and Palouse nations called home and where Buffalo Soldiers were once stationed. Recognizing hundreds of years of injustice and inequity, I have felt White fatigue (Flynn, 2018) as well as White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018) but also a conviction that recognition of systemic and institutional racism does not give me a “pass.” In order to address the impact of these systems on my students, I continue to do my own work to recognize and address my privilege and the assumptions I make because of it. The centrality of racism means that my work there is not and will never be done.

I believe that as an element of the system, I am both a part of the problem and part of the solution. While recognizing and taking into account the systems of power and privilege that have inevitably brought us to the racial tensions and inequities of 2021, I resist victimhood and fragility either for my Black male students or for myself and my colleagues. The foundation of our educational system was not designed for Black male success, and I am a part of that system. I may not have the power to create systemic change alone, but as a White female developmental literacy educator, I am uniquely situated to examine educational inequity through educational praxis. In fact, as a White female developmental literacy educator, I undertake this study because I believe it is my responsibility to do so. While developing and conducting this study, I have faced concerns and queries about whether a White woman is an appropriate person to study Black male student success. My firm response is that White women must study Black male student success. White women must study Black male student failure. White women must study
educational inequities that impact Black male students more harshly than any other population. And then, White women must stand up and study themselves.

Informed by extensive research conducted by our colleagues of color, White women must consider how race and gender impact our praxis if we hope to increase educational justice and equity for our Black male students. In seeking to understand how White female developmental literacy instructors engage race in their instructional planning, I situate myself within the culture of my study participants. As an individual actor, I am both a part and a beneficiary of the system that has consistently created educational inequities for Black male students. Although I am, in this case, the researcher, not the participant in the study, through my data collection and analysis, I seek to position myself as one who is seeking to understand and make meaning of our praxis rather than one who stands in judgment of their praxis.

The Need for This Study

In examining the praxis of White, female developmental literacy instructors in one community college, this reciprocal ethnographic case study addressed two gaps in research on college success for Black men. First, most studies of educational inequities focus on four-year institutions or students in the K-12 system (Harper, 2014). The experiences of Black community college students are rarely represented in such studies. The lack of research on educational inequities for Black men in community colleges is especially concerning given that, because the above-noted opportunity gaps exist throughout the educational spectrum, Black men are more likely to begin their postsecondary education in a community college (Harper, 2014). Secondly, whether they are deficit-based studies trying to determine the behaviors and sociocultural factors that hinder academic success or asset-based studies that focus on the individual and sociocultural
strengths that correlate with postsecondary success, studies of educational inequities have tended to focus on Black students and the assets or deficits they bring to their educational experiences. Research focused only on the students suggests that more equitable education and career opportunities are available if only the students would or would not take certain actions. But laying responsibility for national educational inequities at the feet of individual students disregards the structural and institutional factors that can either increase or decrease students’ engagement and success (Henfield & Washington, 2012). Although some research has considered the attitudes and classroom practices of educators, like studies of minoritized students, research on literacy educators’ instructional decision-making has focused primarily on the K-12 system. This study begins to address those gaps in the research by examining the instructional decision-making of White female developmental literacy instructors at one community college.

Theoretical Framework

To examine how White female developmental literacy instructors engage race, I stood on the shoulders of generations of researchers and theorists focused on critical race theory, Whiteness, and intersectionality. This research and theory allowed me to develop a critical lens that incorporated critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality to shine a new light on White female developmental literacy instructors’ praxis – the ways that educators make theoretical perspectives and educational philosophies practical in their teaching (Collins & Bilge, 2016; Lather, 1991). Pedagogical frameworks like multicultural education (Cicchelli & Cho, 2007; Howard, 2000; Ukpokodu, 2003) and culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995) seek to shift focus from students’ skill, knowledge, and behavior gaps to
educators’ skill, knowledge and awareness gaps. Working with dedicated instructors who
demonstrated cultural sensitivity as well as gaps in their anti-racist thinking, I sought to turn a
critical eye to the impact of race on their instructional decision-making. I built on the
assumptions of liberatory pedagogies rooted in critical race theory to underscore that persistent
educational inequities stem from the structural inequalities framing educators’ actions and
inactions (García & Guerra, 2004) but also from the understanding that as dedicated instructors,
their cultural awareness and culturally responsive pedagogy were, like mine, works in progress.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT), especially its emphasis on the centrality of race and racism
and its commitment to social justice, provides an essential theoretical framework that scaffolds
the study (Solórzano, 1997). CRT focuses on the ways that power is transferred to maintain
unequal social order. Emphasizing the power to control, Howard-Hamilton and Hinton’s (2011)
explanation of racial domination which “is exhibited by the desire to keep the oppressed muted,
dependent, and domesticated” (p. 21) mirrored Foucault’s (1979) account of “docile bodies”
through which the power of the oppressor becomes so dominant that the oppressed become a
“disciplined mass” (p. 168) which unknowingly “colludes” (Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011,
p. 23) in its own oppression, internalizing the inferiority-reinforcing messages of the oppressor.
CRT’s commitment to social justice emphasizes that White educators should be concerned about
educational inequalities, and CRT’s recognition of the centrality of race and racism insist that
educators not only recognize the structural inequities that contribute to racial inequities but also
address them in their instructional practices. For the White female developmental literacy
professor, racial inequities first manifest in her classrooms’ overrepresentation of students of color and continue through the unequal retention and success rates of minoritized students.

**Whiteness Theory**

In addition to CRT, Whiteness provided a second leg of the study’s theoretical framework. Whiteness theory, growing out of the works of W.E.B. DuBois, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, and others, started as an effort to understand and document White culture for the survival of non-Whites (hooks, 1997; Roediger, 1991). Like critical race theory, Whiteness theory focuses attention on the inescapable presence of race. However, Whiteness theory additionally emphasizes that while White folks have the privilege of not acknowledging race (or choosing to be “colorblind”). Thus, well-meaning White folks may well claim to “not see race” or to “just see the real person, not their skin color” and, in these colorblind stances, may do more harm to Black students (Bonilla-Silva, 2015; DiAngelo, 2018; Powell Pruitt, 2004). Whiteness is the often invisible but dominant fact of U.S. culture, values, and institutions. Whiteness theory includes recognition of the social construction of race and the historical shifting of “White” as a social category. Whiteness theory recognizes both the invisibility of Whiteness for White people and the privileges they are granted as a result of its power.

**Intersectionality**

Because the White instructors in this study are both White and female and because the students whose educational futures provided the impetus of the study are both Black and male, through this study I also looked through the lens of intersectionality. Intersectionality provided a means for understanding community college classrooms as relational sites in which students
interact with other students and with the professor. In a student-centered learning environment, instructors may provide cooperative, collaborative, and interactive instruction, but in doing so, they also seek to maintain appropriate levels of power and control (Bryson & Bennet-Anyikwa, 2003; Weiler, 1991). Intersectionality provides a framework to understand how race and gender impact these interactions as well as the class culture that develops from them (Gonsalves, 2002; hooks, 1997; Kirkland, 2013; Lather, 1991). Considerations of the complex intersections of race, gender, and power have provided a lens through which to understand and address social and educational inequities in the context of this study. Gender and race constitute two major demographic patterns of power and identification. Thus, intersectionality has provided a lens through which the study participants and I have explored the ways that White female instructors understand the overlapping impact of their gender and race as well as their students’ gender and race and the extent to which those understandings impact their pedagogical decision making.

Historically, Crenshaw (1989, 1991) and Cho et al. (2013) proposed intersectionality to describe the multiple forces of oppression impacting Black women, specifically in legal systems. Cho et al. (2013) affirmed that “single-axis thinking undermines legal thinking, disciplinary knowledge production, and struggles for social justice” (p. 787). By incorporating an intersectional lens, I did not intend to co-opt intersectional theory as it relates to people experiencing multiple sites of oppression, but instead to explore the intersections of race and gender as they are voiced in White female instructors’ instructional decision making and as they impact their knowledge production and struggles for social justice within their classrooms (Abes et al., 2007; Elsworth, 1989; Jones, 2017; Jones et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2014; Utt & Tochluk, 2020; Walkerdine, 1989; Yoon, 2016).
A Three-Legged Framework

In Chapter 2, I expand each of these brief explanations of critical race theory, Whiteness theory and intersectionality. As a theoretical framework, the three were interwoven in the design of my study, in the themes I drew from the data, and in my analysis and recommendations. Although the three theories have their proponents and experts, all derive from a critical lens that recognizes race as a “multifaceted, deeply embedded, often taken-for-granted aspect of power relations” (Gillborn, 2005). Critical race theory shines a broad light on the centrality of race and racism in the U.S. while Whiteness narrows the focus to expose Whiteness “as a socially constructed signifier” (Leonardo, 2002, p. 31). Intersectionality also highlights the centrality of racism and the social construction of Whiteness while drawing attention to race as one element of power within a complex web of individual identity and social structures.

Statement of Purpose

Combining these three lenses to create a theoretical framework, my goal in this study was to understand how White female literacy instructors in one community college engage race in their instructional decision-making processes. “Engage” in this context came to signify the ways the instructors discussed or drew on race as a concept, the ways they incorporated and considered their students’ racial experiences and backgrounds, and the ways they considered their own race, either consciously or unconsciously in planning instruction. Using an ethnographic case study approach allowed me to examine the thought processes and decision-making of White, female educators in one midwestern community college through interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. In exploring these instructors’ engagement with race in instructional decision making, I
sought a sociocultural interpretation of the collected data. This study design allowed study participants, together with the researcher, to explore the subtle ways that attitudes about race may be impacting and be impacted by the sociocultural context of the classroom and teaching environment as embodied in intersections of race and gender.

I focused my research on the overarching question, how do White female community college literacy instructors in one community college engage race in their instructional decision-making processes? I centered interviews, focus groups and document analysis on the following subquestions:

1. How do White female community college literacy instructors engage with race in selecting texts for their literacy courses?
2. How do White female community college literacy instructors engage with race in developing and planning classroom learning activities based on texts?
3. How do White female community college literacy instructors engage with race in developing and planning text-based assessments?

What Matters: Equitable Developmental Literacy Instruction

I bring this chapter to a close with a return to its opening -- College success matters. Equitable college success matters. Equitable literacy education matters. Teachers matter. The rationale for this study derived from the social and economic impact of the disproportionate persistence and success rates for Black collegiate men (NCES, 2020b). Educational disparities parallel social and economic differences that perpetuate unequal opportunities in employment (Cuyjet 1997; Thompson et al., 2006) which result in a wasteful cycle of inequity. Thus, addressing the lack of persistence and success for minoritized male students in developmental
literacy courses is a question of social justice in which developmental literacy instructors play an important role. As Pruitt (2004) explained,

“Black underachievement” is not a simple knot tied within and among the Black community but is actually composed of many strands of differently weighted rope, some of them black and some White. The White strands are woven into the black in a convoluted way that can passively prevent the knot from loosening. (p. 235)

This study is about understanding some of the White threads in the knot of Black educational inequities. Black student success is a partnership between student and teacher, between White and Black; focusing on the thought processes and experiences of White female instructors acknowledges that partnership and recognizes the multiple sites from which the threads of inequity are drawn.

Thus, the race and gender of the instructors in this study matter (Jenks & Phillips, 1998). Because White females make up the majority of the K-12 teaching population in the U.S (Davis & Fry, 2019; deBray, et al., 2019; Educators for Excellence, 2018; NCES, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016), students’ educational experiences have been largely formed by their interactions with White women. As a result, White female literacy instructors may be both consciously and unconsciously perpetuating pedagogical decisions and practices that reflect the oppressive culture(s) in which many minoritized students struggle.

The community colleges in the United States serve a “democratizing mission” intended to provide underprepared students with second chances and marginalized students with additional access (Fonte, 2011; Rose, 2012; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015; Sheldon & Durdella, 2009). As a result, community college instructors are uniquely situated to break the instructional patterns that have created barriers for students of color. However, even with increased institutional attention to multicultural and culturally responsive pedagogy (Gay, 2000; hooks,
minoritized students’ success rates have not increased, and many minoritized male students who struggle academically begin their college experience at the community college (Wood & Ireland, 2014).

By investigating how White female community college literacy instructors engage race in their selection of texts, classroom activities around texts, and text-based writing assignments, this study can help White female educators begin to conceptualize strategies for seeing and hearing their minoritized students in ways that facilitate increased student success.

Definition of Terms

Black – In this study, I use the word Black to refer to students of color who do not identify as Latino or Hispanic, Middle Eastern, or Asian American/Pacific Islander. In the literature, both African American and Black are used to refer to this population. The socio-political and cultural contexts of the two labels are beyond the scope of this study. However, “African American” appears to limit the population to a specific regional origin whereas “Black” appears to encompass a broader spectrum of students who identify with this race/ethnicity. Additionally, I have capitalized all references to White and Black people, cultures, or races consistent with the guidelines of the American Psychological Association’s Publication Manual (7th ed.) but also consistent with the critical attention I brought to race in this study. When capitalization of race is not consistent with mine, I have maintained the capitalization used in my sources when quoting.

Developmental Education – The term “developmental” refers to courses that seek to help under-prepared students build skills and thinking processes needed for success in college level reading and writing tasks. Developmental education has been variously and often
 interchangeably called pre-college, remedial, and developmental (Hughes & Scott-Clayton, 2011). However, the term “remedial” with its focus on remediation suggests a deficit perspective rather than a growth perspective (Arendale, 2005; Armstrong et al., 2016; Stahl & Armstrong, 2018). Throughout this document, I will use “developmental education” with an intentional focus on the opportunities it provides for student growth and development both cognitively and psychologically.

**Educational Inequities:** Especially when using qualitative methodology, the differences in educational attainment and success described here are often referred to as “the achievement gap.” However, because the term reinforces a deficit narrative, unfairly ascribes blame to the non-White victims of structural racism, and measures achievement against the assumed norm of White, middle class, male students (Garo et al., 2018; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Toldson, 2018) in this study, I will instead refer to differences in educational attainment or educational inequities.

**Engage:** I use the word “engage” in my research questions and throughout the study to evoke several closely related meanings. On the one hand, “engage” means to attract, capture, and catch. This sense of “engage” is appropriate in my discussion of the strategies instructors use to catch students’ attention, to attract students to participate in developmental literacy activities. At the same time, my study of ways the instructors “engage” race also encompasses an understanding of “engage” as “deal with” or “interlock with.” In this sense, I am interested in the extent of instructors’ taking up of race (theirs or their students’) in their instructional planning, the extent to which their pedagogical planning engages race the way a driver’s foot engages the gears of a car’s engine.

**Essentialism:** Essentialism implies either that individuals sharing an element of identity (gender, race, class, sexuality) will express and live that identity in the same way or that an
individual expresses a static identity rather than constructing “subjectivities” (Collins & Bilge, 2016) in response to specific situations. Data collected in this study explores the ways race and gender impact these specific instructors’ instructional decision making and cannot be generalized to suggest the same processes or thinking for all White or all female or all developmental literacy instructors.

*Racism:* In this study, I accept an understanding of racism as described by Bonilla-Silva (1994, 2014) as structural rather than simply individual. With this understanding, racism is less about overt bad behaviors and more about structures that support and perpetuate racial inequities as well as those overt bad behaviors. A structural understanding of racism allows us to view the pedagogical decision making of White instructors as informed by and part of a racial structure and to recognize them as beneficiaries of that system without problematically casting them as “bad people.” To understand racism as structural is to problematize White actions within that structure.

*White:* In this study, I use the term “White” to refer to those who hold the privilege of Whiteness by virtue of loosely defined and frequently changing cultural conceptions. Historically, the term “White” was first used to distinguish Europeans from members of indigenous nations (Roediger, 1991). But determination of who possesses Whiteness has been socially constructed and both broadened and restricted over time to maintain power and privilege for those generally of European descent (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Roediger, 1991). Currently, the NCES (2020a, 2020b) defines “White” as “a person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa” (p. viii). Although skin color has been historically relevant in determining Whiteness, “White” is not literally a question of melanin, as can be seen in the designation of White identity to people of various skin tones.
Summary of Chapter 1

In this chapter, I presented the background and context, problem statement, contextual framework, purpose, and significance of this study. I also provided the guiding research questions and a list of defined terms. This document comprises five chapters including this introduction. The second chapter is a review of the literature relevant to the study. The review includes a discussion of national achievement data and the historical structures and systems that have facilitated educational inequities as well as an overview of relevant studies of Black male students and of White female teachers which have informed the development of this study. Additionally, Chapter 2 includes extended explanations of Whiteness theory, intersectionality, and critical race theory, the three critical lenses through which I constructed the study and analyzed data.
CHAPTER 2
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I provide an overview of theoretical and empirical literature detailing the historical, cultural, and structural nature of educational inequities for Black males in the U.S., in order to demonstrate the need for research focused on the instructional planning of White female literacy instructors in community colleges. Because the current state of education for Black students in the U.S. represents a moment in time shaped by the country’s past, I begin with an overview of the history of Black education in the United States. That overview is followed by a discussion of studies that have examined intersecting structural and cultural factors to explain the persistence of educational inequities for Black male students. The studies presented reveal that although much research has been conducted to determine causes and consequences of educational inequities, the persistence of disproportionate outcomes for Black male students demonstrates the need for additional research. In the final section of this chapter, I contextualize studies of educational inequities within the theoretical frameworks of intersectionality, Whiteness, and critical race theory outlined in Chapter One and explore how those frameworks provided fruitful points of view from which I considered the role of race in White female developmental literacy instructors’ instructional planning.

Although educational theorists and researchers have focused attention on educational inequities for years, many with an intentional lens on Black males, most such studies have focused on either K-12 students, teachers, and systems or four-year university students,
instructors, and systems. Such research provides a strong foundation for this study; however, very little research on educational inequities for Black men has focused on community colleges and none of that has studied the instructional decision making of White female instructors. Through this chapter, I will show that the intersection of race and gender in U.S. classrooms has perpetuated inequitable educational outcomes for Black males that increase their need for the educational access provided by community colleges. The low success and completion rates for Black male students in community college developmental courses highlight a need to further explore the intersections of race and gender in the instructional decision-making processes of White female developmental literacy instructors in community colleges.

Education of Blacks in the U.S.: A Historical Overview

Inequitable educational outcomes are the reasonable result of the U.S. educational system’s racial history. Recent studies of educational inequities have placed blame for Black students’ failure to thrive in U.S. schools on multiple factors such as family structure, socioeconomic status, perceptions of masculinity, and school systems’ failure to create environments conducive to Black student success (Orrock & Clark, 2015; Toldson et al., 2009). These factors, however, stem from the historically racist structure of the U.S. social and educational system. Roscigno (1998), in his hierarchical modeling of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey and the Common Core of Data, conceptualized three forces that interact to influence academic achievement: “school attributes,” the class and race of the school and the resulting available resources in the school; “family background” including family structure, socio-economic status, and peer groups; and “teacher expectations,” including student placement and tracking systems. Understanding how each force has stemmed from historical systems of
oppression can help educators move beyond an individualistic and decontextualized understanding of student achievement (Bridges, 2011; García & Guerra, 2004; Shorette & Palmer, 2015; Yoon, 2016).

Efforts to Secure Rigorous Curriculum for Black Students

Despite historical and current assumptions that Black students do not care about education (Harper & Davis, 2012), the history of Black education in the U.S. demonstrates Black folks’ radical efforts to secure the economic and social benefits of education despite a White social and economic structure that actively sought to limit Blacks’ access to knowledge and power. Prior to emancipation, the education of enslaved people was illegal in slave states. However, Williams (2005) delineated the passion with which the enslaved sought out and fought for education despite the risks of severe punishment, and Franklin (1986) reminded readers that many enslaved people were literate. Counter to the White mythology of Black education in the U.S., Anderson’s (1988, 2006) review of historical documents demonstrated that Black folks did not depend on well-meaning Whites to interest them in schooling or to provide it for them. Instead, after emancipation, the freedmen led the fight for Black education which resulted in thousands of Black private schools taught and managed by Black educators in the South. Additionally, Black people in the South led the fight for a public education system for all.

Even when Black folks’ fight for schooling led to the creation of public schools and colleges for Black pupils, practical and philosophical battles raged over appropriate curriculum in such schools. Because the majority of Blacks required basic literacy skills, such was the focus of Black school curriculum (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Franklin (2011) documented that during the reconstruction era, both in the North and in the South, Whites generally accepted that
education for Black folks should be separate and different from that offered to White folks, due to the Whites’ belief in Blacks’ inferior mental and moral capacities. Franklin (2011) reported that even in abolitionist societies, Black education was encouraged not only to prepare students to become good citizens but also to overcome an assumed bad moral nature and a tendency to laziness. As a result, Kendi (2016) noted, schools for Black students during reconstruction paid “lip service to the cause of Black uplift while supporting racist policies that ensured the downfall of Black people” (p. 228). Beyond basic literacy skills, arguments over the appropriate curriculum for Black schools arose.

These disagreements were embodied in the debate between Booker T. Washington and W.E. B. Du Bois over industrial or classical education. Washington, in the “Atlanta Compromise,” endorsed the Tuskegee/Hampton Model (Anderson, 1988; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007) which offered an industrial curriculum and prepared Black students to work in low-skilled manual labor. In his speech to the Atlanta Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895, Washington insisted that Black people needed to start at the bottom of the laboring class to developing morality and industry and that Black students had little need for the literacy skills that would allow them to compete in established White cultural and social structures. According to Anderson (1988), Washington’s Tuskegee Institute and Samuel Armstrong’s Hampton Institute purported to educate while in fact reinforcing patterns of White oppression. DuBois (1901/2009), on the other hand, advocated for a classical education “that provided a discipline of the mind which would enable Black leaders to guide the rest of the Black community to freedom and political and civic equality” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 283). While Du Bois called for a curriculum that would prepare future Black leaders, the Tuskegee/Hampton models intentionally underprepared Black teachers who would reinforce the Whites’ ideal of a Black,
uneducated, and docile workforce prepared for little more than menial labor. As in the South, in
the North, Black students were encouraged toward a vocational, rather than a college preparatory

Beyond the years of reconstruction, teachers continued to assume the intellectual
inferiority of Black students and to support a White-centered curriculum that perpetuated racist
perspectives and social structures (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Even many of the historically
Black colleges and universities were managed by White philanthropists or White public officials
who controlled a curriculum that largely erased or misrepresented Black culture (Anderson,
objected to curriculum that ignored the history and historical achievements of Blacks in the U.S.
and around the world but instead taught both Black and White students to admire the
achievements of Whites. At the same time, Woodson also rejected the classical education models
that prepared Blacks to enter either a White world where they were not welcome or a Black
culture for which they were no longer prepared. Regardless of debates and objections from Black
educators, as Franklin noted, White-centered curriculum became a self-fulfilling prophecy.
Because teachers tend to teach as and what they were taught, a curriculum lacking in Black
history has resulted in teachers, both Black and White, who are unprepared to teach Black
history or literature (Franklin, 1986). As a result, Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) noted that “for
years, Whites deliberately structured education to fortify the existing racial order and provided a
White-washed curriculum that left Black and other people of color inferior and ignorant of their
cultural and linguistic histories” (p. 287).

In their protests in the 1960s and 1970s, students argued for relevant curriculum
(Anderson, 2006) and were successful in moving textbook publishers to adopt less White-
centered curriculum and to promote multiculturalism and diversity (Katz, 2005). However, the back-to-basics movement of the 1980s, followed by No Child Left Behind, led to standards-based education which has forced schools to narrow curriculum and to focus their attention on students whose standardized test scores can be quickly improved (Apple, 2004). The shift back to standardized curriculum and assessments did not benefit Black students, and standardized assessments by which students might access rigorous curriculum and elite colleges often served as gatekeepers limiting Black students’ participation (Lee, 1998). Ladson-Billings (1999), in her review of K-12 teacher education and diversity training, noted the irony of training teachers to teach diverse students in “public school systems that work actively at creating school failure” (p. 211) through a number of conscious and unconscious choices.

Students in U.S. schools today are still taught a “test-driven, Eurocentric curriculum” that does not connect with non-White students’ historical and sociocultural experiences (Metropolitan Center for Urban Education, 2008, p. 3). Research has shown that standardized instruction, founded in the White expectations and values of the U.S. education system, has limited non-White students’ ability to engage in their own learning in meaningful ways. In struggling, low-income schools, the emphasis on standardized testing has led to standardized curriculum “that engages students in working at a low cognitive level on rote tasks that are disconnected from the skills they need to learn to meet the demands of modern life” (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 291) – not a far cry from the Hampton/Tuskegee Model schools’ curriculum. As Lee (1998) noted, “it is rare, if ever, that one sees included in examples of rigorous, standards-based objectives, curricula, or assessments anything that smacks of ethnic or linguistic diversity” (p. 269). Thus, despite the efforts and passions of Du Bois and Woodson, despite the student
protests of the 1970s, curriculum remains a point of friction in the education of Black students in the U.S.

Segregation, Integration, and Affirmative Action

White-centered curriculum was just one part of an educational system that was not designed to serve Black and White students equally. Even in the pre-Civil War North, any commitment to the equality guaranteed by the constitution was not accompanied by a cultural expectation for equal opportunity, as the educational system practiced segregation through separate buildings or separate classes or by separation of students within the classroom (Anderson, 2006). Following emancipation, federal and state governments inconsistently provided needed funding for Black schools, and taxes paid by Black citizens were directed first to fund White schools; the formerly enslaved people often had to fund schools themselves, despite their impoverished circumstances (Anderson, 1988, 2006). Through the Morrill Act of 1890, which provided federal funding for Black state-supported institutions and legalized segregation of Black and White schools (Harper et al., 2016), governing Whites were able to assuage their guilt over the conditions in which Black folks lived while also controlling curriculum to maintain White supremacy. Thus, the Morrill Act assured a docile and largely uneducated Black workforce, and kept Black students out of White schools (Allen & Jewell, 2002; Harper et al., 2016).

Despite these inequities, Anderson (2006) noted that a pattern of “relatively equal educational opportunities” (p. 23) existed for Black and White students in public schools in the South in the mid-1800s in part driven by Supreme Court rulings. *Plessy V. Ferguson*, in 1896, affirmed the legality of segregation as long as students had equal facilities. However,
increasingly disproportionate funding for Black and White schools gave lie to the “equal” provision of “separate but equal.” The 1954 ruling in Brown v. Board of Education abolished the legal standard of “separate but equal” and mandated the integration of White schools. A further ruling in 1955 demanded that states desegregate “with all due speed.” The 1955 ruling increased states’ compliance with Brown, but colleges and universities would take another 10 years to desegregate, finally prompted by the 1964 Civil Rights Act that denied federal funding for schools that restricted access based on race (Harper et al., 2016).

Although the 1954 decision in Brown vs. the Board of Education gave Black students access to public education and the better-funded White schools, the ways Brown actually manifested in communities and public schools across the U.S. led to additional distrust in the U.S. education system. Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) noted that tracking systems continued to push Black students into industrial education programs and limited their access to high quality postsecondary education, and DeCuir and Dixson (2004) indicted tracking systems as a less overt but no less damaging strategy for within school segregation. Additionally, Anderson (2006) explained that as they won the right to attend White schools, Black students lost two important elements of their previous educational system. First, they lost the cultural identities that came from belonging to a school community. White schools maintained their routines, buildings, and traditions, and the Black students who began attending them had to assimilate into that culture as best they could. Second, because integrated White schools would not accept Black teachers to teach White students, Black students lost their Black teachers who, as hooks (1997) described, had often taught their students with a cultural mission and a sense of common good. The loss of Black teachers meant the loss of a group of adults who believed in and demanded that Black students could achieve excellence (hooks, 1997). According to hooks (1997), this shift in
teachers resulted in a shift from education “as the practice of freedom” to “education that merely strives to reinforce domination” (p. 4). Thus, Brown resulted in legal equality but cast Black students as intruders. Both the White and Black public schools had been designed to prepare students for their “appropriate role” in the racial system of the U.S., and by the continued exclusion of Black students from academic courses and the White school culture, the U.S. education system continued to promote and support the racist social structures in the U.S. Additionally, White flight, the tendency for White people to move away from the city centers where poor and non-Whites tended to live, created a de facto system of segregation with the largest population of White students in the more affluent suburban schools and the largest population of non-White students in inner city schools. In Millikin v. Bradley (1974) the Supreme Court ruled that plans to desegregate schools were not required to cross school district boundaries, making White flight a legal and effective strategy for maintaining school segregation.

In the aftermath of Brown, affirmative action became the driving force for educational equity through 1995. President Johnson’s Executive Order 11246 established the precedence of affirmatively opening opportunities to minorities, and Allen (2005) noted that equal opportunity programs provided a ray of hope to non-White students. Karen (1991) noted that from 1960-1976 affirmative action programs correlated with increased high school graduation rates, increased enrollment in postsecondary institutions, and increased racial awareness for non-White students. However, as the 1970s ended, the fiscal damage of the Vietnam war provided the impetus for decreasing funding for equal opportunity programs and countermobilization against affirmative action. By ruling that affirmative action benefits for minorities could not be gained at the expense of the majority population, the 1978 ruling in University of California Regents v.
Bakke ushered in a wave of anti-affirmative action lawsuits. Bakke was followed by California and Washington states’ bans on affirmative action and Florida’s decision to remove race as a factor in college admissions. Although two Michigan cases (Gratz v. Bollinger and Grutter v. Bollinger) established that college integration (diversity) was a compelling interest from which all students benefited, Allen (2005) asserted that the result of anti-affirmative action cases was that U.S. colleges and universities began to resegregate.

The Current State of Black Education in the U.S.

The current U.S. education system reflects and perpetuates the mixed legacy of Brown v. Board through underfunding of and correspondingly inadequate resource distribution to predominantly Black attended schools. Such educational inequities are a direct result of the U.S. housing laws which created Black ghettos where Blacks continue to be isolated from economic and cultural opportunities (Rothstein, 2017) and even from opportunities for adequate health and nutrition – all factors that impact students’ cognitive development and academic success. Additionally, school facilities in such urban, predominantly non-White areas often lack sufficient structural maintenance as well as the instructional resources that can be found in suburban and predominantly White schools (Foote, 2005; Katz, 2005). Not surprisingly, neighborhood schools in these marginalized areas provide less than adequate resources for students, creating a discriminatory reality that Fine (2004) defined as “redlining access to rigor” (p. 250) – less access to early college credit, lower academic expectations, and less qualified instructors. A significant resource for any school is the quality of its teachers, and just as the Hampton/Tuskegee Model deliberately underprepared teachers for Black students, historical forces in the U.S. have sent many of the least prepared educators to predominantly non-White
schools, a trend that has been directly correlated to low student achievement (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fine, 2004; Kunjufu, 1990). Roscigno’s (1998) quantitative analysis of data from the National Educational Longitudinal Survey and Common Core of Data revealed that Black students attended schools with higher teacher-student ratios, lower spending per pupil, and lower teacher expectations than White students; all factors which negatively impact the educational success students experience. As Fine (2004) indicated, “Across schools, we see that Black and Latino students have the very least access to qualified educators …. White students enjoy disproportionate access to qualified and certified educators” (p. 251). Thus, structural impediments such as inequitable funding for schools and neighborhoods have resulted in a segregated educational system that fails to promote Black male persistence and success.

However, inequitable educational outcomes are not isolated to low-income urban schools. Fine (2004) noted that in-school segregation continued to reduce opportunities for non-White students in suburban schools as well. Black students have been segregated, even within integrated schools, by systemic processes that remove them from educational opportunities. For instance, historical efforts to deny educational opportunities to Black students are reflected in disciplinary patterns that disproportionately target Black males – a result that Kunjufu (1990) partly attributed to lack of qualified educators. Toldson and Lewis’s (2012) quantitative review of the Civil Rights Data Collection showed that Black male students were more likely than any other demographic group to be suspended or expelled in K-12 settings, effectively denying them access to education. In addition, both Fine (2004) and Solórzano and Ornelas (2004) documented racially disproportionate enrollment in honors and AP classes even within integrated schools. More recent quantitative analysis of AP course offerings and enrollment in Georgia conducted by Scafidi et al. (2015) documented that Black students “are more likely to be enrolled in AP
courses than otherwise identical White students;” however, their results “point to the large role of prior achievement in keeping African American and Hispanic students out of AP and other advanced courses” (p.366). In other words, ongoing educational inequities result in inequitable enrollment in the honors and AP courses that might give Black students access to more exclusive postsecondary opportunities. Concerted efforts to incentivize and prioritize enrollment in AP courses have shown some positive results in recent years. McBride Davis et al. (2015) documented that the number of Black students taking AP exams increased between 1997-2012 in Texas, New York, and Florida. On the other hand, “the percentage of Black students who did not pass an AP exam persisted at or above 60% over the 16-year time period” (p. 145). Such results affirm that increasing access to rigorous coursework may increase equality; however, without systemic changes that improve students’ achievement throughout the educational pipeline, such access does not increase equity.

For many Black students who persist through high school and into college, inequitable educational structures and patterns of low expectations follow them from secondary to postsecondary settings. Harper’s (2009) study of Black male undergraduates at predominantly White colleges and universities (PWIs) and Brooms’s (2018) and Clark and Brooms’s (2018) study of Black Male Initiative programs at three campuses demonstrated the negative impact of low expectations and the need for Black student success programming to counteract that impact. Similarly, Harper et al. (2018) in their case study of students, faculty, and administrators at an urban university, encountered anti-Black structures that undermined Black students’ sense of belonging and therefore impacted their success. As these studies demonstrate, Black male students are negatively impacted by systems and structures that hinder and discourage their success. Understanding those systems means seeing both the forest and the trees – recognizing
the larger systemic racism even as we simultaneously acknowledge the role and impact of individuals within the system, specifically the White educators.

While the loss of Black teachers was a consequence of *Brown v. Board*, Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) also documented that recently increased career opportunities outside of education, as well as the relatively low pay and status of teachers in the U.S., have continued to produce a teaching force that is mostly White and female (Davis & Fry, 2019; deBray et al., 2019; Educators for Excellence, 2018; NCES, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As a result, students’ educational experiences nationally have been largely formed by their interactions with White women whose academic, social, and cultural experiences are unlikely to be similar to the experiences of the Black male students in their classrooms (Michael, 2015). Instead, in the context of this study, White female literacy instructors may be both consciously and unconsciously perpetuating pedagogical decisions and practices that reflect the historically oppressive culture of the United States. The U.S. educational system has reflected the cultural and institutional structures and beliefs that maintained an inequitable economic and social order (Anderson, 1988, 2006; Woodson, 1933/2017). Even in Black schools, Woodson (1933/2017) claimed, Black folk were taught through a White lens with texts that taught them disdain for their Black heritage and culture. This White lens has reproduced and maintained historical structures of White supremacy that contribute to patterns of Black male underachievement (Harper, 2009, 2015; Tatum 2008, 2014).
The Research Context: Factors Impacting Black Male Academic Achievement

The above summary of the history of Black education in the U.S. highlighted racist assumptions about the capabilities of Black students and the role of Black people in the U.S. The resulting inequitable educational structures and opportunities have led to their intended result: the continued oppression of Black people and the preservation of a docile workforce to maintain White culture. Gould’s (1981) *The Mismeasure of Man* documented early attempts to justify such racist structures by explaining racial disparities in terms of genetic or biological differences, and Hernstein and Murray’s (1994) *The Bell Curve* included genetics as a possible cause for differences in Black students’ achievement. However, as Sternberg et al. (2005) stated, studies that correlate “intelligence, race, and genetics . . . are not grounded in scientifically derived constructs but rather in folk theories about them” (p. 46). Additionally, theories that ascribe intelligence to genetic and racial factors stem from *a priori* assumptions that intelligence is a clearly defined and measurable construct (Sternberg et al. 2005). But tests, whether of IQ or literacy, cannot adequately exclude past learning nor account for factors that impact past and present learning -- including sociocultural factors such as motivation, opportunities to learn, and systemic racism that impact both. Therefore, the studies discussed in this chapter deny differences in cognitive capacity based on race but recognize the structural and cultural factors that can impact students’ learning and students’ demonstration of learning. The following section focuses on how theoretical literature and empirical studies have employed these factors to understand enduring educational inequities for Black males.
Economic Factors

In 1995, Bell responded to Hernstein and Murray’s (1994) *The Bell Curve* by arguing that educational aptitude could not be reasonably evaluated as Hernstein and Murray proposed because civil rights legislation had not ended racism in the U.S. “While some blacks are doing very well – the true beneficiaries of the civil rights era—more than one-third of all black people are mired in poverty that is degrading, dispiriting, and destructive” (Bell, 1995, p. 903). Research and theory have emphasized the ways that economic dynamics facilitate and perpetuate educational inequities for students of color. In a cycle of devastating consequences, segregation and educational inequities have created income disparities which have resulted in housing disparities, which have reduced educational opportunities which have continued to limit income.

Currently, according to the United States Census Bureau (2020), 22.5% of Black/African Americans reported living below poverty in the last 12 months compared to 10.9% of Whites. Poverty rates have impacted educational equity because, as Taylor and Piche’s (1990) examination of school funding across the U.S. demonstrated, states’ reliance on property taxes resulted in inequitable opportunities which disproportionately harmed non-White and low-income students. More recently, Morgan and Amerikaner (2018) analyzed per-pupil spending in each U.S. state and found significant racial and wealth disparities in educational funding; school districts that served predominantly Black, Latinx, or American Indian students received 13% less funding than predominantly White schools, and schools in low-income districts spent 7% less per pupil than high-income schools. As a result, these lower-funded schools spent less on educational resources and teachers, and students received lower quality school experiences ranging from less qualified teachers, to less innovative curriculum, to less appropriate texts and
materials (Darling-Hammond, 2007; Noguera, 2003, 2008; U.S. Department of Education, 2016). As these studies show, economic disparities have led to a cycle of lost opportunities for Black students.

Economic disparities have also impacted students’ ability to benefit from educational opportunities outside of classrooms. Nebbit et al.’s (2009) survey of 238 Black adolescents in public housing demonstrated that low-income students often do not have access to or the ability to take advantage of after-school activities which provide contexts for students to develop leadership and other social skills. Participation in enriching after-school programs gives students access to a hidden curriculum that is often denied to low-income students who, as noted above, are disproportionately non-White. Roscigno and Ainsworth-Darnell (1999) also indicated that Black students were less apt to participate in school-related cultural trips which would give them access to both social and cultural capital.

Likewise, poverty has been correlated with fewer home and family based educational resources. Dixon-Roman (2012) demonstrated that economic capital and home based cultural capital intertwined to create educational impediments for Black students. Dixon-Roman’s statistical analysis described three levels of parents’ occupational cultural capital, demonstrating that higher occupational cultural capital (i.e.: work in White collar vs. blue collar jobs) “had a meaningful positive association on [students’] … level of performance in math and reading achievement” (p. 22). In fact, Dixon-Roman reported a “10.2-point difference in the level of reading achievement at age 10 between Black males coming from traditionally middle-class homes vs. poverty” (p. 27). Lee (2005) noted that significantly fewer Black parents reported that their child owned more than 50 books, a proposed measure of kindergarten readiness. Given disproportionate poverty rates, book ownership may reflect economic rather than cultural factors,
including the results of housing disparities resulting in fewer book stores and libraries in low-income neighborhoods. Researchers have also studied the influence of Black students’ home environment on student success. Joe and Davis (2009) analyzed data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study: ECLS-K to understand the impacts of home literacy activities in preparing Black boys for kindergarten. Their quantitative analysis showed positive correlations between cultural and school-reinforcing parenting behaviors and students’ cognitive outcomes. Although Joe and Davis (2009) focused on the impact of parental attitudes on students’ kindergarten readiness, they also argued that factors that either enhance or detract from students’ early childhood readiness set the trajectory for students’ school experiences and continue to impact students’ academic success throughout school. Nebbit et al. (2009) documented a negative correlation between parental involvement and academic performance and students’ attitudes toward deviance, leading to increased disciplinary action and therefore time away from the classroom. Piazza and Duncan’s (2012) case study identified “academic risk factors” for Black students including influences outside of students’ control such as “parental incarceration, violence, poverty [and] drug use” (p. 249). Again, the systems that actively work to keep Black males economically and educationally marginalized are self-perpetuating.

Such cycles of waste are dramatized by Mocombe’s (2011) analysis of one popular rap song which demonstrated that hip hop artists, athletes, and drug dealers appeared to offer young Black men a more viable route out of poverty than the White path through academia. Mocombe (2011) maintained that the cultural attitudes of such role models demonstrated a role conflict resulting from the U.S. capitalism, situating Black males in ways that worked against their academic achievement. Thus, economic factors resulting from systemic racism play a significant role in maintaining educational inequities for Black men.
Deficit Narratives

While cultural mythos of the rap stars, athletes, and drug dealers tell stories of Black men finding success through resistance to the normative path of the U.S. education system, deficit narratives highlighting disproportionate levels of educational failure, criminality, and underemployment of Black males have fueled the national understanding of Black males as dangerous, lost, at risk, or delinquent (Dixon-Roman, 2012; Kirkland, 2013; Landsman, 2018; Love, 2014). Such narratives have further cemented the low expectations educators and educational systems hold for Black male students.

Because the learning environment provides an important background from which students construct their own identities (Noguera, 2003), teachers’ expectations can be important structural catalysts for or inhibitors of academic achievement (Delpit, 1986; Ferguson, 2003; Goodwin, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Harper, 2012; hooks, 1997; Ladson Billings, 1992, 1999; Popp et al. 2011; Strayhorn, 2008). Swanson et al.’s (2003) quantitative longitudinal study of Black male students in 8th, 9th, and 10th grade demonstrated that stereotyping and low teacher expectations had negative impacts on students’ academic achievement. Students’ perceptions that teachers held low expectations of them were statistically significant predictors of “bravado attitudes” (p. 625) in students – and such attitudes were related to disengagement with the educational process. Swanson et al. (2003) emphasized the importance of training teachers to understand Black male student development in order to break the negative cycle created by low teacher expectations. Finerty’s (2018) review of studies of unconscious bias among K-12 teachers emphasized that even well-intentioned teachers underestimated and therefore limited the learning potential of their Black students. In five composite counternarratives, Harper (2009)
demonstrated the experiences of 143 Black male college students from 30 predominantly White colleges and universities. Harper’s counternarratives confirmed that low expectations for Black male student achievement created obstacles that successful students had to expend time and energy to negotiate.

Similarly, research has focused on the ways teachers’ fears and beliefs fueled by deficit narratives influence Black students’ success. Michael’s (2015) inquiry work with White K-12 teachers demonstrated the teachers’ struggles to recognize and address the beliefs that impacted their classroom environment and consequently students’ construction of self. Ukpokodu (2003) noted that White preservice teachers expressed a general fear of unfamiliar, non-White environments, which extended to fear of urban schools, communities, and students. Harper (2009) reported that,

> The typical Black boy in a K-12 educational setting is taught almost exclusively by White women who combine an insufficient anticipation for his academic achievement with high expectations for disruptive behavior, intellectual stupidity, and a dispassion for learning that will ultimately culminate with high school dropout. (pp. 697–698)

Thus, expectations, whether intentionally or unintentionally communicated about Black males’ ability to succeed academically, result in fewer opportunities for Black males to perform at high levels.

**White Dominant Culture in Schools**

In addition to economic factors, the attitudes and expectations of the dominant (White) culture likewise contribute to educational inequities by creating classroom environments that hinder Black student success. In a case study of one Black eighth-grade boy, Enriquez (2013) showed how standardized curriculum hindered rather than promoted this student’s reading.
Enriquez’s observations of Derrick over a school year demonstrated that although Derrick was an avid reader of graphic novels and was passionately interested in learning about Japan, his interest and motivation to learn were interrupted by a standardized curriculum, and Derrick’s authentic engagement with his chosen texts was not incorporated in the school’s assessment of his academic achievement or potential. Enriquez’s study demonstrated that the school’s efforts to increase students’ reading tended to focus more on the quantity of reading rather than on the “genuine meaning making and engagement” (p. 40) that characterized Derrick’s independent reading. The U.S. academic culture’s emphasis on accountability and measurement blinded educators to Derrick’s legitimate curiosity and motivation to learn. Additionally, Enriquez emphasized that “Derrick’s perceptions support findings that the constant scrutiny of low-income Black males’ school literacy and an overrepresentation of their achievement profiles in federal reports . . . still centers on concerns about social behavior” (p. 43). Despite Derrick’s personal engagement with texts, the messages he received from his school and teachers demonstrated greater concern for his behaviors and compliance than his actual intellectual interests.

Differences in language use have also been shown to contribute to educational inequities. Lee’s (2001) discourse analysis of under-achieving Black high school freshmen demonstrated the impact of their home language, African American Vernacular English (AAVE), Black Language (BL), or African American Language (AAL) on their self-concepts and behaviors in a freshman English-Language Arts class. Research has shown that educators tend to perceive students who use AAVE to be lacking intellectual development because AAVE has not been valued by the dominant school discourses (Baker-Bell 2018; Enriquez, 2013; Lee, 2001; Smitherman, 1997). However, Lee’s (2001) study demonstrated that an effective teacher could “consider in strategically informed ways the generativity of what students bring to the space of
classrooms” (p. 135). Lee (2001) emphasized that when the school language -- the language that has value and receives attention and praise in the classroom -- differs from students’ home language, they may experience alienation and a loss of confidence that can impact engagement in the classroom.

The cultural and structural environment in which Black males come to maturity has also been identified as a factor in educational inequities. A lack of cultural capital in terms of education or social power, -- anything that separates them from the dominant White culture -- has been associated with Black male underachievement. Noguera (2008) summarized research which tied Black male educational inequities to rap music, parental influences, and cultural influences that differentiate Black males from the dominant White culture. Although oppositional culture theory (Ogbu & Wilson, 1990) has met with much criticism (Ainsworth-Darnell & Downey, 1998; Dixon-Roman, 2012; Mocombe, 2011; Noguera, 2001, 2003, 2008), the theory has had a significant impact on educational theory and research about Black male academic underachievement. Ogbu and Wilson (1990) conducted case studies of two mentoring programs for Black youth. They argued that Black male underachievement was the result of a culture of poverty that devalues education and that Black males underachieve to avoid association with the White culture or to avoid accusations of “acting White.” According to Ogbu and Wilson, “language and cultural differences. . . [are not] barriers to overcome . . . [but] symbols of identity to be maintained” (p. 43). Thus, Ogbu and Wilson claimed that Black male underachievement was a form of resistance. Similar to the oppositional culture theory, stereotype threat -- “being at risk of confirming as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797) -- has been shown to cause students to underperform in educational environments (Aronson et al., 2009; Steele & Aronson, 1995). Thus, a structural
cause (racism) has led to students who “blame others, underutilize resources. . . [and] develop a victim mentality” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 798) -- all of which can result in poor academic performance. In these ways, Black students’ position as “other” within a White cultural system puts them at risk of underachievement.

**Asset-Based Perspectives**

Researchers have suggested that educational inequities have resulted from the educational system’s failure to value the cultural assets Black males bring to school. For instance, despite cultural assumptions to the contrary, research has shown that Black males do value academic success (Harper & Davis, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2010), and Wood and Palmer (2013) noted that Black male community college students’ goals include developing academic and social skills that will contribute to economic security and leadership potential. Similarly, through analysis of national survey data, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) argued that Black students “if anything maintain more pro-school values and are more likely to esteem their high-achieving peers than Whites” (p. 551). However, Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey (1998) stated that such goals and aspirations have not been sufficient for most Black males to find academic success without an educational system that values the assets they bring to the classroom. Black males will continue to fail if they are taught in an educational system that devalues their culture and measures them against a White ideal (Gordon et al. 2009; Tatum, 2009).

Smitherman (1994), Gay (2000), and Tatum (2008) rejected the deficit models attributing Black male achievement to cultural insufficiencies and instead focused interventions on the richness inherent in, but undervalued outside of, Black culture. Thus, Smitherman’s (1994) glossary of “words and phrases from the Hood to the Amen corner” both elucidated and
validated *Black Talk* that Smitherman claimed as Black cultural heritage. Similarly, in her 1997 study of linguistic play in hip hop music, Smitherman celebrated the assets of communicative fluidity that are consistent with Black language traditions. Whereas a deficit model emphasizes the disadvantages Black students experience if they lack fluency in Standard American English (SAE), Smitherman focused on the historical and cultural roots of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black Language (BL) or African American Language (AAL) (Baker-Bell, 2018). Although Black Americans come from diverse economic and environmental backgrounds, Smitherman (1994) noted that “regardless of job or social position, most African Americans experience some degree of participation in the life of the community . . . This creates in-group crossover lingo that is understood and shared by various social groups within the race” (p.25). This code-switching or code meshing is a “choice bilingual/bicultural [people] can make to establish, affirm, and authentically convey their identities” (Bernfeld, 2020, p.118). Reflecting Smitherman’s valuation of AAVE, Kirkland (2010,2011a, 2011b) and Lee (2001, 2005), recommended that schools and teachers likewise value and tap into the richness of Black students’ language, including the linguistic richness of rap music, not just to engage Black male students, but to help them “bridge to other genre” (Enriquez, 2013, p. 36) and to give credence to the funds of knowledge inherent in the language Black students often bring (Kirkland 2011a).

Using an assets-based approach, educators have brought Black males’ language skills to bear on traditional academic tasks. For example, Lee (2001) used Black language play to help students access academic literature. Lee noted that in cultural behavior known as “signifying,” (a form of language play that can involve loud speech, insults, and boasting) students unconsciously use literary devices including metaphors, similes, irony, and symbolism. Through signifying, Lee brought Black students’ funds of knowledge to bear on a more standard academic
task of interpreting literature. Lee’s (2001) analysis of one day’s class discussion demonstrated the rigor and the community-building generated by such culturally responsive teaching that valued students’ language skills. Similarly, Kirkland (2010, 2011b) emphasized that schools and teachers need to broaden their understanding of language to include non-White language traditions. Without this broader understanding, schools have reproduced one sort of “linguistic capital” while ignoring the value of others. By creating a “linguistic third space” (Kirkland, 2010, p. 303), educators have allowed Black students to further engage in the classroom and therefore to increase their “task performance” (Gay, 2000). Thus, rather than seeing Black male language patterns as deficits to be overcome, these researchers and educators have suggested they are assets on which to build.

Increased awareness of cultural assets has also prompted educators to help students understand and respect historical cultures that neither their home cultures nor their school cultures may value. Tatum (2009) documented the historical role of literature and Negro literacy societies that promoted “training youth in the habits of reading and reflection, cultivating the mind, and improving the heart” (p. 18). Tatum and Gue (2010) implemented a summer writing institute -- the African American Male Summer Literacy Institute -- to give Black males the opportunity to recreate the sociocultural experiences of such literacy societies by using “raw” writing that would not necessarily conform to traditional academic expectations for writing, but that would allow Black males to find their voices and to express the real experiences of their lives. Using these literacy societies and the textual lineages of historically significant Black men, Tatum (2009) argued that “high quality literacy instruction” needed to include the kinds of texts and expectations that will help students overcome the structural and cultural disadvantages that impact their academic success (p. 21). To this end, Tatum (2009) studied and documented the
textual lineages of Black males to determine the kinds of literature that may contribute to adolescent males’ development of self. Tatum (2009) identified “four characteristics that African American males found significant and meaningful” (p. 76). Tatum (2014) used these textual lineages as the basis to survey 73 Black adolescent males and to document their “meaningful literacy exchanges” (MLE). He concluded that MLEs were too infrequent in Black males’ school reading but that, when MLEs occurred, they contributed to positive changes in their academic engagement. Tatum (2009) described these socioemotional orientations of “hope, encouragement, self-esteem, etc.” (p. 45) as important but insufficient in themselves for a lasting impact on Black males’ achievement.

As the theoretical and empirical literature reviewed in this section has highlighted, cultural and structural factors that favor the dominant White culture have created impediments for Black students. A focus on student deficits caused by these structural and cultural factors has promoted the alienation and disengagement of Black males from their educational experiences. However, asset-based models have provided Black students the opportunity to bring value to the classroom and to maintain their cultural dignity as they develop the academic skills that will give them cultural power in a broader context. Although little research has focused on educational inequities for Black male community college students, studies of Black male students in K-12 systems provide an understanding of common educational experiences that Black male students bring to their postsecondary education. Studies focused on Black male college students demonstrate that racist systems and structures experienced in elementary and secondary school systems are repeated in postsecondary educational systems. These studies provide the context for this study.
Theoretical Framework

Whether they are deficit-based studies trying to determine the behaviors and sociocultural factors that hinder academic success for Black men (Delpit, 1986; Ferguson, 2003; Goodwin, 2002; Guiffrida, 2005; Harper, 2012; hooks, 1997; Ladson Billings, 1992, 1999; Popp et al., 2011; Strayhorn, 2008) or asset-based studies that focus on the individual and sociocultural strengths that correlate with postsecondary success (Harper & Davis, 2012), studies have highlighted the long-term impact of the history of intentional and structural racism in the U.S. However, when such research is focused only on the students marginalized by U.S. racism, it suggests that more equitable education and career opportunities are available if only the students would or would not take certain actions or if colleges would or would not provide certain opportunities or programs. But laying responsibility for national educational inequity at the feet of Black students disregards the structural and institutional factors throughout the school and in the classroom that can either increase or decrease students' engagement and success (Henfield & Washington, 2012).

While it is important to understand how students’ experiences and challenges contribute to educational inequities, it is equally important to recognize the role teachers play in facilitating success or creating barriers for minoritized students. Because White women make up the majority of the K-12 teaching population in the U.S (Davis & Fry, 2019; de Bray et al., 2019; Educators for Excellence, 2018; NCES, 2018; U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Warren, 2015a, 2015b), students’ educational experiences have been largely formed by their interactions with White women (Michael, 2015; Warren, 2015a, 2015b) who are culturally situated in ways that affect their perceptions of power and their interactions with students. The sections that
follow demonstrate how three theoretical frameworks, critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality, provide lenses for understanding the educational system in which Black male students and White female teachers interact and for understanding how race and gender create intersections in classrooms.

**Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) exposes racial subordination and power inequities (Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005). Originally designed as a legal framework, CRT is identified with legal scholars and foundational theorists including Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Kimberlee Crenshaw, Angela Harris, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. As described by Delgado and Stefancic (2012), CRT grew out of pre 1970s radical feminism and critical legal studies, building from each movements’ focus on the often unseen role of power in social institutions. As a result, CRT developed on the foundation of previously established concepts including “habitus” and “hegemony.”

Awareness of habitus allows critical theorists to problematize accepted truths that unconsciously direct behaviors and interactions. Bourdieu (1990) used habitus to emphasize the subjectivity of knowledge, exposing the ways experience creates an understanding of “things to do or not to do, things to say or not to say” (p. 53) which then becomes the basis for future actions. Habitus is what people do, what seems natural and normal, but it is constructed by and reciprocally constructs collective norms. DiAngelo (2018) explained that habitus also “includes a person’s internalized awareness of their status as well as responses to the status of others” (p. 112-113). Love (2014) simplified the philosophical argument by identifying habitus as “power” (p. 296). Human beings all exist within a habitus and are largely unconscious of its functioning.
As Flynn (2018) explained, “Simply stated, habitus can be considered as the sum total of an individual’s experience and the ideals, values, dispositions, codes, etc. that form how that individual understands and interacts with any given social context” (p. 136).

When the behaviors and understandings that are guided by one’s habitus gain the social power of rules, then the Gramscian concept of “hegemony” is in play. Hegemony creates rules that privilege one group over others, whether based on race, class, gender, or sexuality (Bonilla-Silva, 2015). In the U.S., White habitus is largely invisible to White folks because, as the privileged habitus, it holds the power to determine right and wrong, desirable and undesirable, normal from abnormal. When White students or teachers claim that they “don’t have a culture,” they are speaking from a place of great privilege. Their culture is so dominant that it is “that absent presence that outlines the cultural capital required for favored citizenship status” (McLaren, 1999, p. 50). A critical race theory lens uses the concept of hegemony to expose White folks’ “vast privileges (better police treatment, judicial process, housing, education, jobs, medical care, etc.)” (Prendergast & Shor, 2005, p. 379). Through the exposure of these privileges, CRT theorists have sought to deny “the status quo’s claim to meritocracy . . . to being a color-blind system where hard-working, ‘innocent’ Whites earn their advantages while black folks just don’t have what it takes” (Prendergast & Shor, 2005, p. 379). For critical race theorists, exposing hegemony, making Whiteness “less invisible” has been part of an effort to decrease the oppression of non-Whites (McLaren, 1999, p. 50).

Building on these previously established conceptions of habitus and hegemony, theorists and researchers began employing critical race theory which was variously described across the scholarship but consistently emphasized the centrality and intersectionality of race (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Ladson-Billings (1999) stated that CRT does not adhere to a single set of
methodologies or tenets except the criticality of White supremacy in the U.S. culture and the accompanying oppression of people of color. As such, CRT focuses on the ways that power (White hegemony) is transferred to maintain unequal social order. Howard-Hamilton and Hinton (2011) explained the power of racial domination “to keep the oppressed muted, dependent, and domesticated” (p. 21). This power mirrored Foucault’s account of “docile bodies” through which the oppressor becomes so dominant that the oppressed become a “disciplined mass” (Foucault, 1979, p. 168) unknowingly colluding in its own oppression and internalizing the inferiority-reinforcing messages of the oppressor. Although definitions and foci have varied somewhat as theorists and researchers have applied CRT to specific fields, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) noted that educational research has emphasized four elements of critical race theory: the centrality and intentionality of racism in the U.S; the challenge to dominant ideology; the centrality of experiential knowledge; and the commitment to social justice. The next sections will focus specifically on further explanation of these four elements through a review of empirical and theoretical literature on Black male students throughout the U.S. educational system.

The Central Role of Race in U.S. Educational Systems. CRT confirms and spotlights the normalcy of race and racism. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) emphasized that racism is “not aberrational” but is “the usual way society does business” (p. 7). Thus, CRT maintains that racism exists explicitly because it serves the needs of those in power. In fact, Bell (1993) insisted that because racism was so deeply entrenched in its culture, the U.S. will always be a racist country. As previously discussed, the ways that Black education was historically structured to maintain a docile workforce (Anderson, 1988) or the ways that housing practices created de facto and de jure segregation in the maintenance of White supremacy (Rothstein, 2017) are just two examples of Whites self-servingly and intentionally creating racist structures that impacted
education. Although the historical viewpoint highlights the prevalence and intentionality of U.S. racism, White habitus dictates that all but the most overt racism is invisible for most White folks. “Like air pollution, it is hard to see clearly, yet it is out there poisoning us all” (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, p. 186). When White parents move to the suburbs for the “good” or “safe” schools, they choose to continue school segregation, and they fail to see that their choice stems from their White privilege. Because the White culture is so dominant and normalized in the U.S., Ladson-Billings (1999) emphasized that eradicating racism will never be as simple as teaching individuals to behave better or even providing educators with “multicultural education.” The history of Black education in the U.S. has demonstrated that even a Supreme Court decision like Brown did not eradicate White dominant structures, and, as White resistance to busing for integration and White flight demonstrated, White privileging structures have been too well established in U.S. culture for simple acts of caring and concern to remove them. Reflecting the CRT focus on the normalcy of racism, Harper (2009) chided White-dominant educational institutions that “continue to claim an ethic of care for Black males without tending to the racism and structural barriers to achievement and justice” (p. 699).

Moving from a claim of caring to responsible action requires educators to be aware of the unconscious and damaging ways school systems marginalize Black men. The Black male body has provided a dramatic canvas on which the centrality of race and racism has been painted. Sociocultural efforts to claim a post-racial or colorblind society have ignored “the fact that one’s own and other people’s bodies are always perceived through categories of perception” (Bourdieu, 1980. p. 77), and that Blackness is perceived through categories of “otherness.” Such “otherness” can be heightened in educational institutions where Black students often experience “onlyness” . . . the psychoemotional burden of having to strategically navigate a racially
politicized space occupied by few peers, role models, and guardians from one’s same racial or ethnic group” (Harper, 2012, p. 13). According to Harper, being “the only” Black male in a university classroom, even for highly engaged and successful students, heightened their experience of racism. Harper (2009) used the term “niggering” to emphasize the violence Black male students experience when, because of their Blackness, teachers frame them as unlikely to succeed. Studies of Black male high school and university students have demonstrated that White fear of Black bodies distorted young men’s self-image and led them to withdrawal and resistance (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2009; Kirkland, 2013). CRT seeks to make such symbolic violence visible by exposing the culturally acceptable ways structural racism controls Black bodies. Research has demonstrated that when Black male students experienced such “persistent anti-Black male stereotyping and marginality (Black misandry)” in hostile university environments (Brooms, 2018) then, like the Black male high school students Kirkland (2013) studied, they felt “policed” and as a result began policing themselves and questioning their abilities.

Studies of Black male literacy practices in middle and high school (Enriquez, 2013; Kirkland, 2011a, 2011b; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Tatum, 2008; Tatum & Gue, 2010, 2012) have demonstrated that standardized instruction, founded in the “standards” of the White habitus of the U.S. education system, have limited non-White students’ ability to engage in their own learning in meaningful ways and have thus created “public school systems that work actively at creating school failure” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 211). From a CRT framework, when educational systems and individual educators fail to recognize White habitus, they fail to validate non-White ways of knowing and being known that constitute alternative but equally viable literacy practices. Such hegemonic practices ensure and reinforce the racial disparities that place
Whites in the winner’s circle. Kirkland’s (2013) study of Black male high school students exposed the ways in which the school failed his Black male participants by failing to recognize the complicity in their lack of academic success. The assumptions noted in Kirkland’s extensive case study have been supported by other foundational studies that emphasize the impact of White teachers’ expectations and microaggressions against Black adolescent students’ identities (Swanson et al., 2003). By shedding light on the social norms that reinforce and perpetuate racism, CRT places the responsibility for changing those norms on White dominant institutions, including predominantly White colleges and universities (PWIs). Recognizing that the structures of racism are inherent in U.S. educational systems, researchers and theorists employing a CRT perspective have suggested that teachers and administrators need to see school structures from the Black students’ perspective (Harper & Harris, 2010; Howard et al., 2016). Once seen, dismantling structures that prioritize White hegemony can and should become part of a culturally responsive education.

Challenges to Dominant Ideology. In framing U.S. educational systems as inherently racist, as systems that “actively create failure” (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 211), CRT theorists and researchers have stressed the ways media and educational research have highlighted Black male student deficits rather than the failures of the systems designed to educate them (Piazza & Duncan, 2012). The term “achievement gap,” by focusing on differences between Black and White students’ achievement, constitutes a deficit narrative, the repetition of which has not promoted institutional change (Harper, 2014) but has stressed the failures – the percentage of Black students who do not achieve to “standard” expectations which are not race neutral (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). The more educators have focused on the “achievement gap,” the more they have spotlighted ways non-White students have failed within a White system rather
than the many ways non-White students have succeeded despite a system that was not designed for their success. Deficit-focused narratives perpetuate stereotypes and make college campuses threatening for Black male students (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Cuyjet, 1997; Harper, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000). By problematizing such deficit narratives, CRT has encouraged educators to look beyond Black students for causes of educational inequities. Instead of reinforcing and focusing on a deficit narrative, CRT has highlighted causes for achievement disparities that are outside the Black students’ control and are part of the intentional structure of the U.S. education system.

Thus, CRT has challenged the dominant ideology of Black male students as inherently “less than” to focus on the other significant actors in a Black male student’s educational experience. Centering the conversation about Black student success on educational systems of power has emphasized the ways that White teachers, who both through their White privilege and their institutional privilege hold a position of power in classrooms, do not know their Black students (Kirkland, 2013). Not knowing and not valuing the cultural and social capital that Black students bring to the classroom has led teachers to assume Black students have learning disabilities (Garo et al., 2018; Noguera, 2003) and that they and their families just do not care about their educations (Flennaugh, 2016; Harper, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2007; Warren et al., 2016). Such assumptions have led to a self-fulfilling cycle in which teachers’ assumptions mold students’ behaviors. Kirkland (2013) noted that one of the high school students in his case study hid his literacy from his teachers because it did not fit the teacher’s or school’s expectations of him. By examining the teachers’ attitudes, beliefs, and expectations, CRT theorists including Ladson-Billings (2006) and Noguera (2008) reframed the achievement gap as an “opportunity gap” or an “educational debt” created and reinforced by a racist system rather than by Black
students or Black culture’s assumed deficits. CRT theorists have sought to shift the narrative of Black male educational achievement away from student deficits and toward a critical examination of the educational system.

Challenging the deficit perspective has entailed replacing it with an asset-based perspective that highlights the forms of Black capital which have been largely ignored in White dominant educational systems. Tatum’s work with adolescent Black males (Tatum, 2008, 2014; Tatum & Gue, 2010, 2012) encouraged educators to recognize and incorporate Black cultural traditions of collaborative writing. Cultural assets like the wordplay of rap and hip hop (Kirkland, 2011a, 2011b; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009), call-and-response patterns of group interactions (Kirkland, 2011b), signifying (Lee, 2001), code-switching (Dobell, 2016; Kirkland, 2010; Moje, 2007; Moje et al., 2000; Richardson, 2016) and the intricacies of AAVE, BL, or AAL are “grounded in [Black students’] use of language, ways of reasoning, thinking about the world, and thinking about story” (Lee, 2001, p. 98). Highlighting these linguistic assets and the ways that educators devalue or silence them (Alim, 2005; Kirkland, 2011b, 2013; McLaren, 1999), has challenged deficit narratives of Black men as silent and verbally unskilled.

Recent studies of college men of color have also sought to counter deficit narratives by focusing on the cultural capital Black men bring to their education. Asset-based perspectives include studying the benefits of Black male college students’ peer support as well as mentor support (Brooms, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Clark & Brooms, 2018, Harper, 2009). Asset focused studies have focused on “what works” for Black males including in-group interactions and affiliations and memberships in Black fraternities and support networks, and spirituality (Howard et al., 2016; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Particularly important in countering deficit narratives have been studies that explored “insights gathered from those who somehow manage
to navigate their way to and through higher education, despite all that is stacked against them” (Harper, 2012). Such studies have included explorations of Black student interactions with other Black students, instructors, and staff at historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as well as the experiences of Black students who successfully navigate predominantly White institutions (Lamos, 2012; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Shorette & Palmer, 2015). By focusing on the ways that their sociocultural assets enhance Black students’ academic identity development and support their academic success (Flennaugh, 2016), the asset-based perspective has provided educators with an understanding of academic achievement based on Black students’ experiential knowledge.

The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge. “CRT draws explicitly on the lived experiences of People of Color by including such methods as storytelling, family histories, biographies, scenarios, parables, cuentos, testimonios, chronicles, and narratives” (Yosso, 2005, p. 74). Both in the studies that seek to hear marginalized voices and in classroom discourse, voice has been noted as an essential vehicle for recognizing the centrality of experience (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Using CRT, educational theorists and researchers have invited and elevated those voices as a central part of CRT practice, criticizing educators for methodological silencing of Black student voices (Harper, 2012; Hodge et al., 2008). In addition to highlighting the experiences of Black students both in PWIs and in HBCUs (Harper, 2012, 2014; Shorette & Palmer, 2015), the CRT framework has highlighted these experiences as valuable sources of knowledge on which to structure an equitable education system.

CRT-centered researchers have also focused on the practices through which Black voices have been marginalized in much the same way as their bodies (Kirkland, 2013). Silencing of Black voices is often so much a part of White habitus that it remains invisible to those who see
(and speak) through the dominant perspective. Economic, social, cultural, and symbolic capital are tied to race-based cultural systems that value White discourse. Such silencing has impacted education as well. Bourdieu et al. (1965) argued that educational institutions have limited access to capital through academic discourse; by the words and language structures they use, instructors have perpetuated the elite language of the academe and served as gatekeepers who maintain (White) exclusivity. hooks (1997) similarly noted the link between language and domination. In considering who has a voice, in society and the classroom, hooks exposed how culturally privileging White language/White voice leaves the Black student voiceless or, lacking a language of his/her own, forced to talk in “the oppressor’s language” (hooks, 1997, p. 169).

Those who have the power over language in any society have the power to determine (construct) truth. As a result, the silencing of Black voices reaffirms a self-perpetuating structure of White dominance. CRT has highlighted the ways that non-White voices are silenced and the ways that people of color learn to “tell themselves in a particular way (as redeemable and respectable) in order to have their voices heard” (Skeggs, 2004, p. 88). So, just as Black men have learned to police their bodies because they are policed, when Black voices have been silenced, ignored, and marginalized, Black students have chosen silence. Researchers and educational practitioners have used a CRT lens to expose such silencing and to propose methods to dismantle it (Solórzano et al., 2000; Tatum & Gue, 2010).

Using a CRT lens, theorists and researchers have also highlighted and validated students’ experience of microaggressions, recognizing their impact on students’ sense of belonging and student success (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000; Smith et al., 2006). As the term suggests, microaggressions are small and subtle – the kinds of hurts that, if not cumulative, we might have been taught to ignore on our elementary
school playgrounds. However, as forms of everyday suffering, microaggressions are normalized through White hegemony, and research has shown how such microaggressions impact students in and outside of the classroom (Harper, 2012; Pérez Huber & Solorzano, 2014; Solórzano et al., 2000; Strayhorn et al., 2015) resulting in feelings of “self-doubt and isolation” (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 12).

Educational researchers have encouraged gathering students’ counterstories to highlight their experiences. Visual materials including photographs that counter dominant narratives (Harper, 2015) and identity mapping (Flennaugh, 2016), have allowed researchers and their Black male subjects to transcend the dominant stories of Black males’ educational experiences. Elevating experiential knowledge in these ways, CRT has emphasized giving voice to the silenced and undermining the majoritarian view of Black male students, calling on educators to take constructive action rather than wringing their hands when they are “overwhelmed, confused, or even angry in response to issues of inequity and the social world or classroom” (Milner et al., 2013, p. 256).

Commitment to Social Justice. Whether the researchers have sought to expose racist structures or unveil stories of resilience and triumph, CRT’s commitment to social justice dictates that we must take action. Thus, CRT theorists and researchers have not only sought to describe or explain, but also to create change that will improve Black students’ sense of belonging and well-being (Brooms, 2018; Hackett & Lo, 2018; Harper, 2014; Strayhorn, 2014; Strayhorn et al., 2015). Often, studies have called for improvements in teacher education programs, (Milner et al., 2013). Recognizing the habitus from which White teachers view their classrooms and institutions, CRT theorists have recognized the real challenges White educators face in making such changes (Flynn, 2018), but they also demand that educators and educational
systems move beyond description and into a “praxis . . . when dialogue, reflection, and action take place between the oppressors and the oppressed in order to transform the world” (Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011, p. 21). In its call for world transformation, its emphasis on social justice and liberation, CRT speaks directly to educators who have observed and bemoaned the attrition and failure of their Black male students.

CRT’s social justice framework has asked educators, especially the White educators who have inherited the privilege of White hegemony, to acknowledge the centrality of race and racism in the U.S., to use their power and privilege to challenge majoritarian perspectives, and to value and learn from students’ experiences to move classrooms and institutions toward social justice. Educators must take their own journeys to understand that racism in the United States is more than overt actions of a few “ignorant and/or stupid” individuals or unintentional misunderstandings. As Ladson Billings (1998) clarified, “Thinking of race strictly as an ideological concept denies the reality of a racialized society and its impact on people in their everyday lives. On the other hand, thinking of race solely as an objective condition denies the problematic aspects of race” (p. 9). Understanding and acting on race, as Ladson-Billings reminds us, requires educators, especially White educators, to reject binary conceptions of race and racism to grapple with the intricate “knot of minority student failure” (Powell Pruitt, 2004, p. 235). White educators need to move beyond the ideological and objective to the empathetic and practical (Warren, 2015a) to understand the complexities of race and racism and the ways they are implicated in the perpetuation of White dominance.

Theory and empirical research from a CRT perspective highlight several calls to action for social justice. First, the data documenting educational inequities indicate “conventional reform is inadequate” (Gay, 2000, p.12). Educators have been studying and theorizing about
Blacks’ academic achievement for years, and yet, educational inequities remain. Except for small pockets of success, through a summer program, an individual teacher’s innovation, or a single, high-achieving experimental school (Watson & Smitherman, 1996), very little has changed or is changing for young Black men. American educators need to take this challenge seriously. It is not enough to recognize educational inequities for Black male students. Black men do succeed in the U.S. education system – the number of Black men who have four-year college degrees “is much higher than popular media suggest. It is also greater than the number of Black men in prison” (Moore et al., 2018, p. 3). Educators need to understand what works for those students and what differentiates those students from the unsuccessful.

Second, culture matters. Teachers, students, and schools are impacted by culture whether it is the dominant White culture of American institutions, the hip-hop culture of some Black males, or the “Amen Corner” of African-American churches. The majority of educators in the American school system are White and female, and the economic and social power in America remains predominantly White. Without lowering standards or passing students through school compassionately, the American educational system must become aware of its White bias and find ways to value and use Black students’ backgrounds and cultures to “bridge” them to success. The call for “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay 2000) needs to go beyond the inclusion of one or two readings from authors of color. Teachers at all levels need the training to move beyond “color blindness” and “color-muteness” (Michael, 2015) and superficial efforts at inclusion, no matter how well-intentioned. This bridge will require that White female teachers become aware, not only of the impact of Black culture on their Black male students, but of the impact of Whiteness of themselves, their classrooms, and their Black students.
This study, by focusing on White female instructors of developmental literacy, addressed these calls to action and current gaps in CRT-driven research. By focusing on White instructors’ instructional decision making, this study shifted focus away from what Black male students do or do not do to consider instead what the White instructors do or do not do to prepare for instruction in their multicultural classrooms and the Black male students in them. Discussion of the instructors’ thinking around text selection highlighted the ways they did and did not consider race in texts they assigned. Exploration of instructors’ planning for text-based class activities and assessments highlighted the extent to which White instructors valued and brought into the classroom the experiential knowledge of their Black students. Likewise, analysis of White instructors’ activities and assignments related to texts revealed the extent to which they were aware of and sought to address the power differentials undergirded by centuries of segregation and White dominance in education.

Although the empirical studies included in this discussion of CRT have demonstrated the ways educational researchers have employed the tenets of CRT, almost none of the studies have focused on community college students and fewer still have considered how White community college instructors’ attitudes and assumptions influenced the education Black male community college students experience. Many studies that explored educational inequities for Black male students focused on the K-12 system (Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Duncan, 2002a; Flennaugh 2016; Greer et al., 2018; Harper, 2015; Rhoden, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008; Swanson et al., 2003). Other researchers have conducted analyses of educational inequities for Black male students in predominantly White four-year colleges and universities (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Bridges, 2011; Brooms, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Gosset et al., 1998; Jackson & Moore, 2006; Rodgers & Summers, 2008). Studies focused on historically Black colleges and universities
(HBCUs) tended to highlight the benefits students received from an asset-based culture (Lamos, 2012; Shorette & Palmer, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2015). Such research in K-12 settings and four-year university settings provides a foundation on which to build additional research. Although conclusions about experiences specific to four-year institutions like fraternity life (Harper, 2014) or campus living (Jackson & Moore, 2006) are not readily transferable to a community college setting, the impact of teacher perceptions and marginalization revealed in K-12 and four-year university settings can inform educators at community colleges as well.

However, the preceding review of the literature demonstrates a gap in the research that I sought to address in this study. Studies focused on community colleges have included studies of Black students’ experiences but very little study of the contributions of faculty members to those experiences. Weiss’s (1985) study of the educational experiences of Black students included exploration of faculty perspectives and culture in one community college. Wood and Hilton (2012) studied the intersections of spirituality and academic success for Black community college students. Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) Wood and Palmer (2013) specifically analyzed the goals of Black male community college students, and Wood et al. (2016) interviewed Black male community college students to explore the impact of part time and full-time jobs on their college success. These studies of Black males in community colleges addressed economic structures and deficit perspectives that impacted Black male community college students and provided some challenge to the dominant ideology of racism. However, the scarcity of CRT-focused research in community colleges and about developmental courses is especially concerning because the inequitable structures that CRT exposes have led to an over-representation of Black male students in community colleges and developmental courses. Despite the many studies exploring educational inequities for Black
male students, inequities persist. This study, by focusing on how White female community college instructors engaged race in their instructional decision making for developmental literacy students addressed Harper and Harris’s (2010) call for more research at the community college level as well as Strayhorn’s (2008) call for more research on teacher attitudes and expectations.

Critical race theory has helped educational researchers shift the focus from what Black male students should or should not do to a more intentional focus on the effects of White dominant cultures and structures on Black male students’ educational experience and success rates. Studies that exposed the deficit narratives of White educators emphasized the significant role that educators’ behaviors played in Black students’ success (Ladson-Billings, 2006). Thus, in considering inequitable educational outcomes for Black males, research should extend to the ways that classroom educators’ actions and inactions promote or discourage Black male academic engagement and achievement. Because White female educators are the typical case for the majority of students in the U.S., research that explores their impact on Black students needs to consider the impact of both race and gender on those actions and inactions.

The predominantly White teaching force has been exposed to culturally responsive and multicultural teaching strategies with which to address educational inequities through preservice coursework (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Ukpokodu, 2003; Vescio et al., 2009; Warren, 2018), and ongoing “multicultural” and “diversity” training at secondary and postsecondary levels (Larke, 2013; Thomas, 2020). Despite individual commitments to equity and institutional efforts to train educators in culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies, racial inequities in educational outcomes persist, especially for Black male students. Current studies that have focused on White female teachers of Black students (Michael, 2015; Moore et al., 2018; Warren, 2015a, 2015b) described a White female educator population concerned about and committed to
student success but lacking critical knowledge to educate their students equitably. The educators these researchers described were generally aware of persistent educational inequities for young Black males. They stated their beliefs that their young Black male students could succeed, but they struggled to step out of their White habitus to facilitate that success (Michael, 2015; Moore et al., 2018). Many educators still view the underachievement of Black males as a “predictable, albeit unfortunate, outcome of a reasonably fair system” (Duncan, 2002a, p. 134); as a result, when White female teachers observe signs of disengagement – physical distancing, lack of preparation, and non-participation – they are lost, frustrated, and confused (Michael, 2015; Moore et al., 2018). Further, despite the commonality of diversity and multicultural training, White female teachers’ fears of their Black male students reflect the U.S. historical and cultural fear of Black otherness (Harper, 2015). Thus, although educational institutions may provide ongoing training and make efforts to build cultural awareness in the U.S. educational system, studies of White teachers have demonstrated that teaching and reaching Black male students presents challenges beyond what multicultural training or preservice courses have provided.

I selected critical race theory as one leg of this study’s theoretical framework because its emphasis on the fundamental nature of race and racism provided a lens through which to view inequitable outcomes for Black male students in the U.S. education system. Because CRT focuses on the systems that create and perpetuate racial inequities, a CRT lens supported the design of this study. Studying White female instructors in order to understand and address educational inequities for Black male students challenges dominant ideologies and deficit perspectives and advances a social justice imperative. In developing interview and focus group questions and in analyzing the data I collected, I employed a CRT lens to maintain focus on the White systems and assumptions that impacted developmental literacy instruction.
I did not want to talk about Whiteness in this study. Although I now believe that combining the lenses of Whiteness theory and critical race theory provides a more accurate understanding of White female instructors’ engagement with race in their instructional planning, I resisted Whiteness. In fact, when I began, I consciously situated this study within the dual frameworks of critical race theory and intersectionality, believing that I could disregard Whiteness theory. In this, I embodied everything theorists say about the White privilege to ignore Whiteness. As I write today, I falter in search of a coherent explanation for my sense that I could avoid, should avoid Whiteness in a study of White women engaging race. Perhaps I felt that Whiteness was the “flavor of the month,” popularized by Robin DiAngelo’s (2018) *White Fragility*. Perhaps I felt that Whiteness theory could be submerged under the larger framework of critical race theory. Perhaps I worried that including Whiteness would again privilege White perspectives over those of non-White CRT theorists I had come to respect. Perhaps I worried, as I do today, that by discussing patterns of White thought and behavior I might lead White readers might feel essentialized themselves. Whatever the reasoning, the instructors in my study set me straight from their very first interviews as their responses in our conversations consistently elevated patterns of thought that were only partially addressed through CRT and intersectionality. As a White woman well-practiced in not seeing Whiteness, I had to sit with the nagging sense that I was missing something important for some time before I admitted that, whether I wanted to discuss it or not, Whiteness was a part of the instructors’ world view and meaning making. Adding Whiteness to my theoretical framework not only helped to reveal my
positionality but also provided essential context for understanding the study participants’
engagement with race.

In the current divisiveness of the U.S. social and political milieu, attention to Whiteness
on “the left” has erupted in claims of “cancel culture” and fears of “so called anti-racist programs
that urge children to obsess about the color of their skin” (Weiss, 2021) on “the right.”
Comments like these prompt me to clarify that, as a theoretical framework for this study,
Whiteness theory is not an attempt to cancel White culture even if such a feat were possible.
Instead, Whiteness theory points out that, as White people, we struggle to see our own culture
because it is the water we swim in (Apple, 2004; Carter & Helms, 1990; Fine, 2004; Hurtado &
Stewart, 2004; Marvesti & McKinney, 2007). Obscured by our habitus, Whiteness can cause
harm and social injustice because what we fail to notice falls into the category of “normal” and
what we notice is by default “abnormal.” As Cochran-Smith (2003) explained, “How we are
positioned in terms of race and power vis-à-vis others has a great deal to do with how we see,
what we see or want to see, and what we are able not to see” (p. 99). Because of its dominance in
the U.S. and around the globe, White culture confers power on those who play by its rules, and it
casts as “other” those who do not. As a result, in pursuit of social, economic, and educational
equity, the invisibility of White culture creates a stumbling block for students and teachers. Thus,
Whiteness theory is about noticing White culture to increase social justice. It is based on a
misperception I hear my White students express, one I have felt myself, that "we don't have a
culture" as other ethnic groups do.

Culture Matters. Naturally, we are aware of our family traditions. The way we cook and
eat dinner, the way we say “thank you,” the way we greet those we love, the way we dress on
special occasions. These are part of our family cultures, but not necessarily part of a larger
culture as these behaviors vary from family to family. Additionally, some White people I know strongly identify with being Greek or Italian, or Jewish, but many of us do not, reflecting instead the mythos of the American melting pot. In fact, I remember my mother saying that we are “typical Americans” because our family tree has roots in so many countries. If we were going to celebrate our ethnic heritage, we’d have to celebrate Russian and German and Irish and Scotch and British and Norwegian cultures. My mother’s sentiment reflects an essential and difficult truth about Whiteness. We have erased from our consciousness the historical choices that made us “White,” but we have allowed ourselves to accept as “typical” and “American” a family tree of White European cultures without acknowledging the way our sense of “normal” and “typical” classifies non-White as “other.” Whiteness theory asserts that thinking we have no culture or that our culture is “just American” highlights our discomfort with recognizing skin color as an essential dividing line in the United States.

Whiteness theorists, like CRT theorists, emphasize the importance of historical shifts in attitudes toward race and racism in the United States (Gallagher, 2007; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998). Roediger (1991) tracked the ways that White and Black were constructed after the Civil War to maintain management’s control of White and Black labor. Similarly, Bonilla-Silva (2012, 2014, 2015) and others document more recent shifts in racial culture in the United States. Before the civil rights movement, American economic and social structures expressed racism overtly. Laws and mores that allowed for “separate but equal” codified and normalized racism. However, as American cultural norms shifted to accommodate less overt racism in the wake of the civil rights movement, White Americans began to push their awareness of structural racism underground. As DiAngelo (2018) explained, rather than openly accepting and promoting the social structures that maintained segregation, White people began to see racism as an individual
evil – an overt act by bad individuals. In this way, Whiteness theory argues, White folks could protect the economic and social power that they had traditionally held without guilt (Fine, 2004).

After the civil rights movement, for White folks to identify themselves or others by skin color began to be equated with overt racism, thus promoting a color-blind ideology (Bonilla-Silva 2002, 2014). As a result of this color-blindness, White people were encouraged to understand White identity as an innocent part of our ethnicity. But both Whiteness and Blackness are cultural constructs that subsume ethnic identities under an umbrella of skin color. Thus, people of ethnic identities like German, Scotch, British, Celtic, or Basque gather under a White umbrella. Just as people who descended from the Ibo, Ashanti, and the Yoruba nations are gathered under a black umbrella (Pinar, 1993). However, as Sleeter (1993) noted, White people have the option to identify with various elements of their culture and ethnicity or to separate themselves from them. Thus, although many White people practice at least some traditions of food or behavior from their ethnicity, for the most part, if we see ourselves as part of a larger culture, we see ourselves as just "American" rather than White.

As Americans, we celebrate holidays. At Thanksgiving, my family cooks a massive meal with turkey and sometimes ham, mashed potatoes, stuffing, bread, pie, and a vegetable. At Easter or Christmas, I am aware of the double duty of these seasons as both celebrations of Christian festivals and as non-religious cultural events. The Christmas tree nearly buried in gifts. The chocolate-filled, foil-wrapped eggs, Easter shoes, and Easter dresses; the big as Santa Claus bunnies; children mowing down other children to get to the trinket-filled plastic egg. For many White Americans, if we think about these things as part of our culture, we see them as American culture, not “White culture.” We may even be aware of the appropriation of these celebrations
from earlier Goddess festivals and traditions, but we would be unlikely to make an observation of Beltane or the solstice as public as an Easter egg hunt, in part because it’s not “normal.”

Cultural norms are in the books, movies, and songs that portray and drive them. Books and movies impact our thinking and even our fashion, whether it’s *Harry Potter*, *Black Panther*, or *Bridgerton*. Whiteness theory reminds us that when those movies and books are about White people, we often do not think of them as artifacts of White culture. As White people, we don’t say, “Oh, this is a book about a White woman who lives in a house with other White women and eventually falls in love with a White man.” We don’t say, “Oh, that’s how White people do their hair?” But if those movies and books are about Black people, we do recognize that they are about Black people, and when the characters in the books or movies do things or say things or behave differently than White people do, we often see that as representative of Black culture. I remember a scene from *How to Get Away with Murder* when Viola Davis is getting ready for bed. She takes off all of her makeup and hair (her *hair*) … and it had never occurred to me that her hair was a wig. I learned something about Black hair and beauty expectations from that scene. My Black friends often dish on Black women who wear “bad wigs,” and I can’t even tell they have wigs on! Along the same lines, I think about all I have learned about Black experiences from *Sula* and *Beloved* and *Jazz*. Similarly, when I read books by Latinas, I recognize elements of Hispanic culture in the foods, the big family gatherings, the Spanglish, and the clothing and jewelry. I have learned about Black and Hispanic culture when I read those books and watched those movies.

The risk of essentializing. For many White folks, the previous paragraph treads on dangerous racial ground. Part of Whiteness theory recognizes that even the naming of race – to say “that’s Black culture” or “that’s Hispanic culture” feels racist for many White people
Even as I wrote those descriptions, I was thinking, “How do I say this so that I am not suggesting that all Latinos have large families and use Spanglish?” Many White folks have been taught that “to have a racial viewpoint is to be biased” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 30) and that “it is racist to acknowledge race” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 57). In words if not in practice, many of us have been carefully taught a colorblind ideology -- that we should see every human being as an individual human being devoid of ethnic or racial identifiers. Such an ideology supports the U.S. cultural emphasis on equal opportunity and individual effort and has encouraged many White people to see behaviors and choices as individual behaviors and choices disconnected from systemic factors that perpetuate inequities. This is the White cultural value of individualism (Apple, 2004; Carter & Helms, 1990; DiAngelo, 2018) applied to cleanse White people of their racist cultural history despite the othering that constructed Whiteness and Blackness. This emphasis on seeing individuals instead of groups is the explicit and implicit curriculum reinforced in schools and homes. Such individualism is not wrong. When I have a glass of wine on Wednesday night, I might be following my tradition, but I am not demonstrating that White culture is all about drinking. When a Latino in my class excels at math but doesn’t love writing, he’s not representing Latinos as a bunch of illiterates. My Black student who stars on the women’s basketball team is not demonstrating that Black folks are good athletes. We absolutely should avoid those kinds of generalizations, and we should recognize that each person we meet is an individual with his/her/their behaviors and values and choices.

Despite their unique individual interests, motivations, and aptitudes, each of us and every person we meet is also impacted by culture. Whiteness theory asks that White people give as much attention to the power of White culture as we do to the power of individual choice. Whiteness theory is not about individuals; it is about culture. Whiteness theory does not discount
individual choice and initiative, but it does ask that we recognize both-and. I am both an individual with my own behaviors, values, and choices and a White person whose values, behaviors, and choices have been impacted by and often exemplify White culture. Seeing our fellow human beings as “just people” without race is a) not possible and b) not helpful (Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Rodríguez, 1998; Roman, 1993). Even if we think we should be, most human beings are not color blind. We do notice hair color and skin color and eye color. Although we have been taught to think that goodness means not seeing these physical traits, seeing them and grouping people according to them is natural and something we can only pretend not to do (Bonilla-Silva, 2012, 2015; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Gay, 2000; Jay & Jones, 2005; Marvesti & McKinney, 2007; Sleeter, 1993; Thompson, 1998). As DiAngelo (2018) explained, “because of our society’s emphasis on individuality, many of us are unskilled at reflecting on group memberships” (p. 30). Certainly, race is not the only determinant of our identity, but our race is one significant element of culture, and our cultures are part of our identities. In taking a colorblind ideology, -well-intentioned White folks may imply that they value the individual by not noticing race. But when we try to avoid seeing race, we neglect to see the whole person.

Identity is not divisible. I cannot set down my Whiteness to be a teacher or set down my femaleness to run a meeting. As a woman, I continue to work to bring my whole self to my work and my personal life and to push against the expectation that to be successful I need to think more like a man or care less than a woman. That struggle emphasizes that our identities are shaped both by our individual choices and by our cultures, and our whole selves reflect that intersection. Likewise, people of color cannot set down their racial and ethnic cultures, nor should they. A realtor’s Black clients have experienced life as Black people, and seeing them as
“just humans” doesn’t let that realtor see them as whole people – as human beings who both celebrate holidays with their families and know that their children will be differently affected by school district policies than White or Asian children will. Race has had a significant impact on how Black people have lived their lives. They cannot ignore it, and Whiteness theory emphasizes that White folks should not do so either.

But a Whiteness theory lens does not focus on recognizing and honoring the multicultural richness of the United States. Whiteness theory asks that White people start to see the water in which we swim -- to see our own culture and its power. It asks that we struggle with “a foundational premise: the definition of Whiteness as the norm or standard for human and people of color as a deviation from that norm” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 43). Thus, as White folks, we may not notice when Maria Garcia speaks English because that’s “normal,” but we would notice if Alison Douglas spoke fluent Spanish because it’s not. We don’t call out White actors, authors, or musicians, we don’t announce that characters in TV and film are White or that our politicians are White, but we do when they are not White. That distinction matters because when values are unspoken, taken for granted, accepted as “the norm,” then anything that does not comply with them is literally abnormal (DiAngelo, 2018). Whiteness theory (Thompson, 1998) demands that we quit pretending not to see color because

Polite pretending not to notice students’ color makes no sense unless being of different colors is somehow shameful. Colorblindness, in other words, is parasitic upon racism: it is only in a racist society that pretending not to notice color could be construed as a particularly virtuous act. In a society that is both culturally diverse and racist, colorblindness is a willed ignorance of color that, although well intended, insists on assimilating the experience of color to that of Whites. (p. 524)

Thus, Whiteness theory is about asking White people to recognize the White culture and its supremacy – “the assumed superiority of people defined and perceived as White and the
practices based on this assumption” (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 46). In one way, those who react against Whiteness as a theoretical lens for progressive change are correct; by recognizing White culture, we do demote it. Instead of being the only way, White culture becomes one way to establish meaning and value in life.

But, in addition, by recognizing White culture, we begin to recognize how not seeing it devalues non-White cultures by casting non-Whites as abnormal. I remember driving through rural New Mexico years ago and seeing many homes with broken-down cars on cement blocks in their front yards. My cultural values would not allow for a car on cement blocks in the front yard. Because I could not understand how it was okay to have that car there, I could make judgments about it and the people who lived there. I could think, “They don’t care about property values,” or “They are just slovenly.” But those judgments don’t take into account other possible truths about a culture that tolerates such a lawn ornament. Maybe a culture that values thrift over appearances permits a family to keep the car there while saving for the new engine to repair it. Maybe a culture that values mechanical skill and independence allows that car to sit there while a parent or older sibling teaches a younger one how to fix it. Maybe a culture that values both thrift and mechanical skill values the “dead” car as an organ donor. Maybe the scenes I witnessed in these front yards were not about race at all, but about economic class. At the time, I had not even begun to question my White middle-class perspective or to consider that my White middle-class aesthetic might be both culturally specious and economically naïve.

My lack of awareness arose from an unexamined experience of White culture that research suggests is common for many White educators (King, 1991; Lawrence & Tatum, 2004; McIntyre, 2002; Powell-Pruitt, 2004; Rosenberg, 2004; Sleeter, 1993, 2001). As a White middle-class student, I experienced school as a place where I was challenged but also given the
assurance that my hard work would lead to opportunities to follow whatever paths I chose. This is the meritocracy, and it ignores structural impediments that obstruct those paths, especially for non-White and low-income students. When I read novels in and out of school, the authors and characters were almost always White. In my textbooks, most of the images were of White people unless we were studying slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, or the Trail of Tears. The White culture was dominant and normal. Our family was not rich, but I had always had access to books, music, and intellectual conversation that gave me cultural capital in a White culture. I had parents who trusted the education system and believed I could succeed in it. These are important privileges of White culture. All my teachers until graduate school were White. All of my high school classmates were White. With very few exceptions (my Black baby doll, Bill Cosby, Julia, and Sanford and Sons), I went through my entire childhood seeing only White people. By the randomness of birth, I was born to White parents, and that meant that most of my life experiences fell within the norm in the U.S. That is White culture.

Guilt and other uncomfortable reactions to Whiteness. Individual White Americans living in 2021 did not create White culture and its privileges. Individually, we didn’t ask for things to be this way. Things are this way because of historical events over which we, as individuals, had no control (Rodriguez, 1998; Roediger, 1993; Roman, 1993). However, for many White people, discussion of race and racism evoke great discomfort. For instance, Roman (1993) explored “White defensiveness” which has led White folks to claim that they, too, have been victims of racism and marginalization. Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) and DiAngelo (2018) have also noted the guilt and anger White people tend to demonstrate when confronted with evidence of structural racism, their racist perspectives or behaviors, or evidence of their White privilege. Discussions of Whiteness can also leave many racially conscious White people feeling
essentialized themselves, their individual identities and antiracist attitudes subsumed under the umbrella of White privilege.

Studies of White preservice teachers’ experiences and reactions to discussions of race and racism have also highlighted the emotional distress and identity crises that arise when coursework makes Whiteness visible (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Fine, 2004; King; 1991; McIntyre, 2002; Powell Pruitt, 2004). Ahlquist (1991), in a study of preservice teachers in an educational foundations course, noted that White students engaged in many self-protective behaviors when presented with questions of race and power. They insisted that teachers could and should present material objectively, that individuals could not be held accountable for racism or for changing it, and that the success of individual people of color provided evidence of a post-racial society. Ahlquist (1991) also noted that binary thinking that equated “goodness” and “not racist” contributed to her students’ difficulty in understanding their power and privilege. Recognizing the emotional toll that such conversations exact on his White students, Flynn (2018) noted that White people struggled to understand racism because their moral perspective (racism is bad) did not provide them with a critical lens from which to view structural racism and their privilege. In fact, in conversations about race, Flynn (2018) reinforced Steele’s (2000) explanation that White people experience stereotype threat: “They fear being wrong or saying the wrong thing lest they are indicted as a racist” (Flynn, 2018, p. 36). Such studies demonstrate a continuum of cognitive and emotional responses to racial stress and underline the need for White educators to learn more about systems of oppression.

Despite such emotional responses to the challenges of both the individual and cultural nature of racism, Whiteness theory does not ask White people to apologize for the facts of their White experience, and it does not ask White people to abandon their White culture. It does not
ask us to feel guilty. As Kincheloe and Steinberg (1998) stated, “A critical White identity that renounces its Whiteness, feels guilty about it, or seeks merely to court favor among non-Whites is ineffective in the struggle for justice, democracy, and self-efficacy” (p. 12). Apologies and guilt do nothing to promote equity, and Whiteness theory, like critical race theory, ultimately seeks to promote social justice (Cochran-Smith, 2003; DiAngelo, 2018; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1995, 1998, 2005; Marvesti & McKinney, 2007). Instead of guilt and apologies, Whiteness theory asks both White and non-White people to recognize the privilege that has contributed to the relative ease with which White people can walk through their lives.

White female educators and Whiteness. Because the U.S. remains racially and economically segregated, research indicates that White female teachers are unlikely to have had extended experiences with Black folks before beginning their teaching (Ahlquist, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Fine, 2004; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; King, 1991; Lawrence & Tatum, 2004). They are also unlikely to be aware of or to recognize the White cultural structures that negatively impact Black students’ educational progress. In their collaborative action research study of preservice teachers, Aaronsohn et al. (1995) showed that their mostly White female participants believed that their experiences and values were “normal” and their role was to bring their students into that White norm. Students who did not demonstrate White norms were outside the norm; they were other. This sort of “othering” has been shown to create pedagogical impediments by distancing teachers from their Black students. In listening to the stories that White female teachers told about their students in informal conversations out of the classroom, Yoon (2016) demonstrated that teachers’ narratives perpetuated cultural and intellectual distance from students and families, despite their talk of equity, affirming Spindler and Spindler’s (1994) assertion that “Teachers carry into the classroom their personal cultural background. They
perceive students, all of whom are cultural agents, with inevitable prejudice and preconception” (1994, p. xii). Studies of K-12 educators have also shown that White teachers often hold a monolithic view of Black males as dangerous and resistant to education and that often White teachers tend to see Black students’ behaviors as outside the norm and therefore in need of remediation. Based on their quantitative study of 136 middle school teachers’ expectations for student aggression and academic success based on the walking styles of students in a video, Neal et al. (2003) noted that “teachers are highly likely to mistake cultural differences for cognitive or behavioral disabilities” (p. 55).

Cultural differences between White teachers and their multicultural students have been shown to contribute to classroom environments that impact students’ behavior and academic success (Delpit, 1986; Okagaki, 2001). Boykin (1983) claimed that Black (Afrocultural) home cultures often clashed with White dominant (mainstream) school cultures, creating an environment in which “the most salient aspects of these children’s lives are neither valued nor relevant to the academic arena” (Allen & Boykin, 1992, p. 587). Boykin (1983) and Allen and Boykin (1992) contrasted mainstream educational culture, which called for individual work and promoted competition, to the Afrocultural values of communalism and harmony which emphasized interconnectedness over individual privilege. Similarly, Boykin (1983) and Allen and Boykin (1992) posited that the contrast between mainstream educational “good behaviors” such as silence, self-control, and maintenance of personal space contrasted with Afrocultural behaviors of orality, expressive individualism, verve, and movement. Ladson-Billings (1992), in her qualitative study of teachers recognized for excellence by Black parents, argued for teachers to incorporate the nine dimensions of Afrocultural expression identified by Boykin (1983): spirituality, harmony, movement, verve, affect orality, communalism, expressive individualism,
and social time perspective. Likewise, when Rouland et al. (2014) compared mainstream and Afrocultural styles in classrooms with Black students, their findings appeared to support Ladson-Billings’ recommendations. Their quantitative study found that Afrocultural dimensions were “positively related to teacher-reported social skills and negatively related to teacher-reported behavior problems” (p. 197); incorporation of Afrocultural dimensions seemed to benefit the classroom environment, but these dimensions and behaviors are not consistent with the typical White middle-class background of most teachers in the U.S.

Research has correlated White teachers’ lack of interaction with Black people and Black cultures (Higgins & Moule, 2009; Landsman, 2018; Sleeter, 2001; Warren, 2015a, 2015b) with a lack of confidence in their ability to understand and reach their Black male students or to incorporate elements of Black culture comfortably. In many cases, Afrocultural styles, including movement and communalism, are consistent with “good teaching” practice espoused in teacher education programs (Ladson-Billings, 1995). However, research has shown that, in developing their teaching skills, new and preservice K-12 teachers have been hesitant to engage students in empowering practices that may be noisy or appear disorganized (Higgins & Moule, 2009). Rouland et al. (2014) noted that classrooms with the lowest population of Black and low-income students were most likely to incorporate Afrocultural styles including acceptance and encouragement of verve, movement, and communalism. Classes with high percentages of Black students were more likely to follow mainstream class cultures that value individualism and self-control over communalism and verve. The results highlighted by Rouland et al. seem to reflect Anyon’s (1980) findings that schools were more likely to provide empowering environments in schools and classes whose students already possessed power under their race and social class.
Despite research that has demonstrated the harm imposed on students by the clash of Afrocultural and mainstream educational styles (Allen & Boykin, 1992; Boykin, 1983), Black males who are outspoken or display Black movement patterns are disproportionately disciplined and either expected to conform to mainstream culture or are tracked away from academic opportunities available to students who conform. Gregory et al.’s (2010) synthesis of research on patterns of school discipline revealed consistently disproportionate referrals for discipline for Black male students. Gregory et al. (2010) also noted that disciplinary tactics like suspensions and expulsions not only harmed students by reducing their time in class but also reduced the students’ sense of connection and belonging to the school. Tatum (2009) documented that the “usual paths set out for African American males” (p. 44) in the school system include remedial education programs, tutoring programs, and less difficult texts.

Although multicultural training has been promoted as a potential remedy for differences in perceptions and experiences between White teachers and Black students, even those teachers receiving training in multicultural and culturally responsive pedagogies have struggled to overcome fears and biases. Well-intentioned White educators have demonstrated a desire to “save” Black male students (Warren, 2015a, 2018). The assumption that Black students need to be saved by White educators echoes an ongoing belief in White superiority and Black victimhood that has a negative impact on the educational experiences of Black students. Instead of employing patriarchal patterns of care, Utt and Tochluk (2020) highlighted the need for White teachers to recognize the impact of their racial identities on their teaching practices. Analysis of their own experiences as White educators in urban schools as well as interviews with White teachers who participated in anti-racist workshops, Utt and Tochluk recommended that White teachers focus on their racial identity development and understanding their Whiteness to develop
an anti-racist praxis. Cho and DeCastro-Ambrosetti’s (2005) survey of preservice teachers highlighted teachers’ fears of their inadequacy as teachers to non-White students. Michael’s (2015) yearlong inquiry project with White K-12 teachers demonstrated teachers’ fears of falling into the stereotype trap, of mishandling their multicultural classrooms, and of being perceived as racist and rejected by their non-White students. Such fears and uncertainties in teachers have been shown to impact students’ sense of belonging. Harper’s (2012) interviews with Black male high achieving college students revealed tension between White teachers and their Black students; the students felt that White teachers were uncomfortable engaging with more than 1-2 Black students at a time and feared being perceived as racist.

The invisibility of White culture means that the majority of U.S. educators are unlikely to see U.S. educational values as White (Ahlquist, 1991; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Kincheloe & Steinberg, 1998; King, 1991). Instead, research and theory have indicated that White educators are likely to see the rules and values of our educational system as “normal” or “natural” and fail to acknowledge such rules and values as conveying power (Apple, 2004; Bobo, 2011; Bourdieu, 1991; Burns, 2004; Cochran-Smith, 2003; Fine, 2004; Gallagher, 2007; Hurtado & Stewart, 2004; Rosenberg, 2004; Roediger, 1993; Walker-King, 2007). For instance, White educators are likely to see education through the lens of individualism (Bobo, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Burns, 2004; Carter & Helms, 1990; Jay & Jones, 2005; Skeggs, 2004), which stems from the White cultural mythology correlating hard work with earned and deserved benefits. As a result of White culture, they are likely to see competition as a normal and healthy part of the education system and to view competitive measures of achievement like class standing and grade point average as motivating and rewarding student success. In addition, because White culture has promoted a colorblind ideology, such competitive educational practice may seem perfectly fair
and logical. White educators are unlikely to view grades and other competitive “carrots” of education as White normative. As a White educator, I am likely to put more value and trust on individuals than groups. I may believe that everyone has the same opportunity to succeed that I had and that individual effort determines outcomes. Therefore, I may think that work completed independently (a test, an essay, etc.) is a better measure of a student’s achievement than work completed in collaboration with others. This means that as a teacher, I am likely to place a higher value on tests, quizzes, and essays that are completed independently than on those that are completed collaboratively. In fact, the education system does place its trust in assessments, like standardized tests, that are completed in a controlled environment where collaboration is forbidden. The educational system generally sees such educational standards as neutral measurements of what students should be able to do at each stage of their educational process, but if the White power structure of U.S. education systems fails to see race, then it also fails to see how these standards are not neutral.

Lee (1998) and others (Kirkland 2010, 2011a, 2011b; Tatum 2008; Tatum & Gue, 2010, 2012) called for greater awareness of the impact of Whiteness on teaching, learning, and student achievement. For White educators, recognizing and naming race is essential to seeing and teaching the whole student and to promoting equity. As DiAngelo (2018) explained, pretending not to notice race denies our Black male students’ reality and suggests that our Black students are “just like” us (p. 57). In this way, White educators who have generally found schools to be welcoming places where they could excel are likely to assume that their Black students experience school in similar ways and have the corresponding individual opportunities to excel. However, Whiteness theory directs us to recognize that individualism can only partly account for student success rates, and understanding and addressing educational inequities requires that
educators “take into account the ways that history, conceptions of race, ethnicity, language use, gender, and socioeconomic class weave inside and around individuals and groups” (Lee, 1998, p. 69).

Although I did not want to talk about Whiteness in this study, I recognized that without acknowledging it, I was avoiding my own and my participants’ cultural biases – engaging in Whiteness even as I attempted to avoid it. Whiteness is an unavoidable component of identity for the White female participants of this study, as it is for me as the researcher and author of the study. The choice to include Whiteness in the theoretical framework was part of my growth as a White female educator and researcher. As such, including Whiteness increased my awareness of my positionality and allowed me to see engagement with race as more than discussions of the issues and experiences of people of color. The lens of Whiteness demonstrated that White female developmental literacy educators engage race in their daily and often routine instructional practices because they are White.

**Intersectionality**

Just as White female literacy instructors engage race, often without consciously deciding to do so, they also engage gender and class. That is, they act, respond, or think from the position, experiences, and assumptions of their race, their gender, and their class, as do their students. Thus, addressing persistent educational inequities for Black male students requires us to recognize the both-and of teachers and students within the educational system. In the context of this study, such awareness of both-and demands a critical understanding of race, including Whiteness, as well as a deeper consideration of the intersectional dynamics of classrooms led by
White female educators, including the impact of lived experiences on White teachers’ attitudes about engaging race in the classroom (Carr & Klassen, 1997).

As is the case with CRT-focused research, very little research on community colleges has used an intersectional lens. However, studies of K-12 systems and four-year institutions have demonstrated that the intersectional nature of classrooms is relevant to the community college environment because all classrooms are relational sites in which students interact with other students and with the instructor. Race and gender impact interactions between individuals in the classroom as well as the class culture that develops from those interactions (Gonsalves, 2002; hooks, 1997; Kirkland, 2013; Lather, 1991). In turn, the interactions and culture that develop in a classroom involve overt and hidden power relations both structural and social. Fricker (2007) defined social power as “a practically socially situated capacity to control others’ actions, where this capacity may be exercised (actively or passively) by particular social agents, or alternatively, it may operate purely structurally” (p. 13). In a student-centered learning environment, educators often make concerted efforts to empower students through cooperative, collaborative, and interactive instruction, but in doing so, they try to maintain “a delicate balance between shared authority and ‘teacher power’” (Bryson & Bennet-Anyikwa, 2003, p. 134). In creating such balance, differing levels of power and privilege interact, and a “complex web of power and powerlessness result[s] from our class and race positions” (Weiler, 1991, p. 64). Threads of this web of power include both race and gender. Fricker (2007) explained the ways that gender operates both actively and passively. “Whether an operation of identity power is active or passive, it depends very directly on imaginative social co-ordination: both parties must share in the relevant collective conceptions of what it is to be a man and what it is to be a woman” (Fricker, 2007, p.15) and, likewise, what it is to be Black and what it is to be White. Thus, race
and gender are collective conceptions that impact power dynamics in the classroom. This study applied an intersectional lens to consider how intersecting threads of power may both influence and be influenced by the instructional decision making of White female developmental literacy instructors.

In the pages that follow, I describe intersectional theory as a framework by which to understand how the structural dynamics of multicultural community college classrooms may inform White female instructors’ instructional decision-making. First, I review the historical background of intersectionality including a discussion of studies and projects that have applied an intersectional lens. Then, I differentiate between intersectional analysis at microsocial and macrosocial levels. Finally, I justify the use of an intersectional lens to provide insight into the instructional decision making of White female instructors in community college literacy classrooms.

Defining Intersectionality. Intersectionality has been identified as a “concept, a paradigm, a heuristic device, a methodology [and] a theory” (Collins, 2015, p. 2), and feminists, race scholars, and researchers from a variety of disciplines have struggled to define it without limiting its usefulness in each arena. Although it gained the attention of academics as a lens for understanding legal positionality for Black women (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991), intersectional analyses had been applied long before Crenshaw’s influential work. Speaking at the Ohio Women’s Rights Convention in 1851, over 100 years before the 1970s movements for recognition of non-White women’s groups, abolitionist Sojourner Truth claimed her identity as both Black and female in a speech that is still referenced in intersectionality scholarship “because – by fundamentally challenging all ahistoric or essentialist notions of ‘woman’ – it neatly captures all the main elements of the debate on ‘intersectionality’” (Brash & Phoenix, 2004, p.
76). In the years that followed, both Black men and Black women called on social activists to recognize race, gender, and class as multiple axes of oppression (Brash & Phoenix, 2004; Cole, 2009; Collins & Bilge, 2016; Zerai, 2000, 2011). In the 1970s, women of color, including Black women, Chicanas, indigenous and Asian women, recognized that the discrimination they experienced resulted not only from their ethnicity but also from their gender. Of particular significance during this period was the statement written by the Combahee River Collective, which declared its members to be fighting oppression from multiple axes including race, gender, sexual orientation, and class (Brash & Phoenix, 2004; Collins & Bilge, 2016). The Combahee River Collective Statement identified the task of its members as “the development of integrated analysis and practice based upon the fact that the major systems of oppression are interlocking” (Combahee River Collective, 1991, para. 1). Thus, as the so-called second wave feminists fought for equal legal and social rights, women of color actively sought to expand the women’s movement to recognize intersecting lines of privilege and oppression and voiced their frustration with civil rights and women’s rights movements that failed to recognize and address the intersections they experienced (Collins & Bilge, 2016).

During the late 1980s, intersectional analysis moved into critiques of social institutions including schools and the courts. Weiler (1991) emphasized that educators and educational researchers needed to be aware of “interrelationship” even as they consider the impact of gender: “In grounding ourselves and the objects of our research in gender, we must not lose sight of the complex web of power and powerlessness resulting from our class and race positions as well” (p. 64). As Beal did before her (Beal, 1970/2008), Weiler (1991) not only addressed the oppression of race and gender; she also emphasized the ways that class impacted students’ experiences of school and encouraged feminist educators to be conscious of subjectivity for themselves and
their students. Because women are objectified in male dominant society and are human beings with the ability to act and critique, “women exist in a peculiar tension of both being subjects and being denied as subjects” (Weiler, 1991, p. 58). During the same time, Crenshaw’s (1989) “Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex” referenced the “multidimensionality of Black women’s experiences” (p. 139) as “intersectionality.”

Although Crenshaw’s analysis did not create intersectionality, she is credited with coining the term and bringing it into academic dialogue. Additionally, her work and its impact demonstrated an important shift in the intersectionality timeline, marking its growing acceptance as a form of critical inquiry and praxis (Collins & Bilge, 2016). Like Weiler’s, Crenshaw’s work emphasized relationality and encouraged social systems like the courts to be aware of the patterns of tension and multiplication between interacting entities. She noted, for instance, that at the same time that White women had to fight for the right to work outside the home, the structural racism of the U.S. economy generally demanded that Black women do so. Whether working (or not) outside the home was a privilege or a burden was dependent on the intersection of the individual’s race, gender, and class. “Thus, Black women are burdened not only because they often have to take on responsibilities that are not traditionally feminine, but, moreover, their assumption of these roles is sometimes interpreted within the Black community as either Black women’s failure to live up to such norms or as another manifestation of racism’s scourge upon the Black community” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 156). Crenshaw called for racial analyses to include recognition of sexism and patriarchy and for feminism to include analysis of race. In her call for intersectional analyses, Crenshaw (1989) reinforced a social justice imperative, noting that “placing those who currently are marginalized in the center is the most effective way to resist efforts to compartmentalize experiences and undermine potential collective action” (p. 167).
Following Crenshaw’s publications in 1989 and 1991, intersectional analysis has evolved. Carbado (2013) argued that intersectionality’s initial application in studies of Black women did not restrict intersectional analysis to that one population. Rather than limiting intersectional analyses to the multiple oppressions experienced by Black women, current researchers and theorists have encouraged an “intersectional way of thinking about the problem of sameness and difference and its relation to power” (Cho et al., 2013, p. 795). As a result, intersectional studies have included analysis of privilege as well as oppression. Yousefi (2017) noted as a guiding principle of intersectionality that privilege and oppression are not mutually exclusive while Garry (2012) stated that “oppression and privilege . . . do not act independently of each other in our individual lives or in our social structures. Instead, each kind of oppression or privilege is shaped by and works through the others” (p. 496). Therefore, the convergence of both privileges and oppressions creates social relations, identity, limitations, or shared interests whether in society at large or in classrooms. An important expansion of intersectional research is the rejection of “grand narratives” and the importance of acknowledging individual experiences of intersectionality. As a result of this expansion, researchers have applied an intersectional lens to examine the experiences of gay men of color (Hutchinson, 2001), European migration systems (Yuval-Davis et al., 2005), and gatherings of people (Puar, 2011). Intersectionality has been identified as a consideration in the development of leadership models (Cho et al., 2013), public policy (Yousefi, 2017), and health systems and marketing (Hankivsky, 2013).

Microsocial and Macrosocial Intersectional Analysis. Within this diversity of intersectional research, an intersectional lens has been applied to both microsocial and macrosocial structures – to both individual identities and institutional structures (Bilge, 2010). Through a microsocial lens, one might examine how Chicana culture, gender, U.S. citizenship,
immigration, and sexuality impacted Gloria Anzaldúa’s identity and her texts. An educator might use microsocial analysis of this sort to help students access and connect to Anzaldúa’s work. Additionally, an educator might use microsocial analysis to make the “thick interests” (Garry, 2012, p. 510) of her individual students visible. For instance, a professor using intersectional analysis might recognize that a specific White female student carries White and upper-class privilege which intersects with otherness arising from LGBTQ status and a learning disability. Similarly, a Black male student athlete carries the intersecting privileges of masculinity and ableness, but in light of the racist history and structures in the U.S., his privileges are complicated by intersections with Blackness. Microsocial intersectional analysis emphasizes that intersecting privileges and oppressions cannot be addressed singly. A Latina cannot set aside her gender to address the oppression of her race, and a White female cannot remove the influence of generations of patriarchy while recognizing her White privilege. Applying a microsocial analysis of intersections in the community college developmental literacy classroom allowed me to consider how individual participants experienced and planned instruction around the intersections of power, privilege, and oppression that result from their race, class, gender, and institutional role in a multicultural classroom.

However, macrosocial intersections are also present in multicultural classrooms. Intersectional analysis on the macrosocial level has allowed researchers and practitioners to make visible the intertwining threads of privilege and oppression that constitute political and social systems (Bilge, 2010). Collins and Bilge (2016) used macrosocial analysis to examine the intersectional interests and oppressions in the FIFA soccer organization. Although a soccer tournament may be celebrated as a game in which teams and players engage their skills and talents with an equal chance to take home the trophy, underlying the assumptions of the game are
cultural and historical patterns that limit who can play and who can win. Similarly, the privileges and oppressions in a U.S. multicultural classroom can be illuminated using intersectional analysis. Like the “fair play” of a soccer game, the Western myth of individualism and competitiveness (Gregory et al., 2010; Harper, 2012) has led to assumptions of fair play in the classroom, and these ideas intersect in the multicultural classroom with varying levels of oppression and privilege based on race, class, gender, ability, etc. Delpit’s (1995) discussion of the levels of authority in a classroom demonstrated the macrosocial influence of White and Black cultural norms for authority and obedience in classroom culture. Similarly, macrosocial intersectional analysis of the community college developmental classroom includes the assumptions and expectations (and accompanying power structures) of postsecondary literacy and developmental education, as well as the structures of racism, classism, and sexism that pervade the classroom environment.

From both the microsocial and the macrosocial levels, intersectionality has provided an understanding of the social complexity of human existence and, true to its social justice focus, has allowed academics “to understand and to care about what it takes to be ‘part of the solution’” (Garry, 2012, p. 495). This study applied intersectional analysis as a lens through which to understand how White female literacy instructors in one community college considered race in their instructional decision-making processes. By focusing on ways that White female literacy instructors considered race in their choices of texts, their discussions and activities around text, and the text-based writing they assign, this study sheds light on the subtle ways that attitudes about race and gender may be impacting instructional praxis and, as a result, the success of Black male students in community colleges. In the analysis of collected data, I considered both microsocial and macrosocial lenses. On a microsocial level, the study explored both how the
instructors in the study experience intersecting privilege and oppression and if they plan for those intersections in their students’ classroom experiences. On a macrosocial level, the study will consider how the intersections of privilege and oppression in the U.S. educational system impact the classroom environments that these instructors strive to create through their instructional decision making.

Intersections in Community College Literacy Classrooms. Although community colleges are the primary access point for higher education for most Black and Latinx students (Cuyjet, 2015; Wood et al., 2015), few studies have focused on inequities for Black male students specifically in community colleges. However, my theoretical framework of critical race theory, Whiteness, intersectionality together validates the focus of this study on developmental literacy classes in a community college.

Cultural and historical narratives have framed community colleges in the United States as democratizing institutions intended to provide underprepared students with second chances and marginalized students with additional access (Fonte, 2011; Rose, 2012; Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015; Sheldon & Durdella, 2009). Such narratives have historical and practical merit; community colleges offer students the opportunity to earn transferable college credits as well as industry-recognized training and credentials at a fraction of the cost of four-year universities. Because they are open-access institutions, they provide academically underprepared students the opportunity to catch up with more academically prepared peers (Schudde & Goldrick-Rab, 2015). However, without discounting the value and necessity of such open access institutions, critical race theory calls us to recognize that they also are part of the system that limits education options for many Black male students and that have contributed to academic and/or economic
necessity resulting in a disproportionate number of Black male students beginning their postsecondary educations in community colleges.

Like community colleges themselves, developmental courses historically arose from an effort to expand educational access to higher education. As Boylan and White (1986/2014) noted, developmental courses were established for those who either had not attained or were prevented from attaining the necessary academic background to succeed in college. For Black students, lack of college preparation was in large part the result of choices made for them by the institution of slavery and the subsequent racism of the post-Civil War U.S., resulting in a cycle of social, educational, and economic injustice. In addition, economic and educational inequities have impacted Black males in specifically damaging ways as social constructions of dangerous or ineducable Black men have led to undereducation of Black men, which has led to underemployment, limited housing opportunities, and substandard educational opportunities which allow a racist system to reaffirm stereotyped social constructions. This cycle means that Black male developmental literacy students are repeatedly burdened by the structurally inequitable education system. Intersectional analysis then, recognizes that Black male students’ enrollment in the community college developmental literacy classroom represents an intersection of gender, race, and class.

At the same time, the narrative of community colleges as second chance institutions and of developmental courses as opportunities to “catch up” casts developmental students generally as underprepared others in need of saving and community college developmental literacy instructors as uniquely situated to break the instructional patterns that have created barriers for students of color (Kirkland 2013). Here, we need to again embrace both-and. Teaching is a serving profession. Many threads pull individuals into the teaching profession including a
passion for the subject matter, enjoyment of the classroom environment, and appreciation for the hours and extended summer vacations (Kryiacou et al., 1999), but the desire to give back, to help, and to be a “change agent” are not insignificant motivators (Mobra & Hamlin, 2020). In fact, an essential element of culturally responsive teaching is caring about students. We want our teachers to care about their subject matter as well as their students. At the same time, the teachers’ desires to help and to create change can be problematic from both a racialized and gendered perspective. Kendi (2016) traced the mythology of White educators as saviors of Black folk from Prince Henri in the 15th century through Abraham Lincoln’s 1864 speech in which Blacks were imaged as sheep needing to be saved and protected by their White shepherds. Likewise, the Tuskegee model of industrial education was framed as a cure for criminality (Kendi, 2016). Allen and Jewell (2002) noted that William Lloyd Garrison also believed that Blacks needed Whites to help them develop – to be more like their White middle-class role models. The White (often female) missionaries who traveled to the reconstruction South to educate the freedmen were also cognizant of their roles as saviors (Allen & Jewell, 2002). However, scholars have also recognized the often-gendered nature of an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 2003) and the parallels between cultural expectations of mothering and teaching (Grumet, 1988; Noddings, 1984, 2003). From an intersectional perspective, if White female literacy instructors see themselves as giving students a second chance, as saving or rescuing them, or as opening doors of opportunity, they are embodying the intersection between this historical White savior mythology and the culture of female educators as nurturers.

An intersectional analysis of a developmental literacy classroom also recognizes that power is mutually constructed through race, gender, class, ethnicity, disability, and other factors. On a microsocial level, White female instructors hold institutional authority (Hockings, 2009;
Miller & Zuengler, 2011) and White privilege, but also the otherness of female gender in a male
dominant society (Lather, 1991). Likewise, Black male students may represent intersections of
male privilege and race oppression. Collins and Bilge (2016) identify four domains of power:
interpersonal, disciplinary, cultural, and structural. On a macrosocial level, this study used
intersectional analysis to investigate how (and if) study participants understood power
constituted through intersections of these domains and how they planned for these power
differentials in their instructional decision making. Interpersonal considerations include how
instructors plan for and address levels of power in their instruction. Disciplinary considerations
include the patterns of classroom activity that the study participants used to control students,
including seating charts, attendance policies, and late work policies, and speaking patterns.
Cultural considerations include the repetitive nature of events in a classroom and the habitual
power relations they may reinforce but also the influence of dominant cultural expectations for
language use. Structural considerations include the power structures assumed by the teacher and
student roles, including epistemological perspectives as well as the expectation that teachers
maintain “control” of their classrooms.

In educational contexts, researchers have explicitly applied intersectionality to explore
the challenges of teaching intersectionality (Naples, 2009), the impact of family structure on
Black students’ educational achievement (Battle et al., 2005), and the biases Black men
experience in public affairs classrooms (Johnson & Rivera, 2015). Such diverse studies and
applications of intersectional analysis have supported Garry’s (2012) understanding that
“intersectionality applies to everyone” (p. 499). However, despite the array of studies applying
an intersectional lens in and outside of educational contexts, none have explicitly acknowledged
the macrosocial and microsocial intersectionality of multicultural community college classrooms
led by White female educators. By applying an intersectional lens in the study’s design and the analysis of collected data, this study addresses that gap in the research.

Thus, in designing this study and in analyzing the data I collected, I have been guided and informed by a theoretical framework that included critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality. As White educators with advanced degrees, the study participants hold race and class privilege. As educators, they have benefited from and sustained an educational system that has failed Black male students. At the same time, they have invested their time and effort to reduce educational inequities through developmental literacy instruction. These are systemic realities, not personal indictments. Simultaneously, as women in a (still) patriarchal society, they are likely to have experienced the pressure to conform to gendered expectations of femininity and the pressure to impose control on their classes and over their culturally dominant male students. By allowing for exploration of their positionality in relation to their Black male students, CRT, Whiteness, and intersectionality thus worked together to provide insight into the participants’ engagement with race in their instructional decision-making.

The White Female Educator: Culture, Praxis and Instructional Decision Making

In this study, I examined the praxis and instructional decision-making of developmental literacy instructors to understand the persistence of inequitable educational outcomes for Black male students. Examination of such praxis required recognition that, in addition to the intersections discussed above, the developmental literacy classroom is also a site of contested literacy skills – of reluctant readers or reluctant writers, of students who feel they cannot read or write or who have been told they cannot read and write, of students who, one way or another, have failed to meet high school or college standards of literacy achievement. The developmental
literacy classroom is a site of hazy definitions and outcomes – students often do not understand why they need a reading class, since they can read all the words on the page, and students often do not understand why they need a writing class to pursue their chosen degrees. It is a site of possibilities – the last great chance for the lights to come on for underserved students, a semester to redo all that was done and not done for the previous twelve years. Students placed in developmental education courses are “among the most precariously positioned students in higher education,” and research has shown that these students demonstrate a “perceived lack of control and agency” (Paulson & Theado, 2015, p. 2). Low success rates for students in developmental education have led to additional focus on classroom instruction, especially pedagogies intended to increase student agency.

Therefore, in addressing literacy roadblocks their students face, instructors’ pedagogical choices matter. Tatum and Gue (2012) define agency as “the strategic making and remaking of selves within structures of power. Agency is a way of positioning oneself so as to allow for new ways of being, new identities” (p. 129). The question of agency in developmental education asks to what extent developmental instructors empower students to define themselves and validate their literacy within the educational setting. Throughout this study, I sought to understand how instructors engaged race to empower students’ development of such literacy.

Validating Students’ Interactions with Texts

To read and write is to interact with texts in thoughtful and meaningful ways, to make meaning. The precarious position of our developmental students requires intentional pedagogies that provide students with authentic opportunities to make meaning. Underprepared students, according to Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986), did not see themselves as having the authority to
make meaning in their reading and writing. However, Bartholomae and Petrosky (1986) argued that integrating reading and writing rather than teaching isolated literacy skills empowered students to develop as authentic participants in academic textual transactions. Practitioners and researchers who have engaged students in ways that allowed them that authority have documented increased motivation and achievement (Gay, 2000; Goen-Salter, 2008; Hern, 2011).

By promoting students’ authentic engagement with texts, instructors’ pedagogical practices can validate students’ textual interactions. For instance, Rosenblatt’s (1994) transactional theory of reading provided for textual meaning-making that incorporated students’ frames of reference and schema. Rosenblatt argued that reading is a unique transaction (conversation or joint creation) between the reader and the text to create meaning. This is not to say that all readings of a text are equally accurate. Weaver (2002) demonstrated that readers and writers (as well as teachers and students) brought to their reading of a text a unique set of “baggage” – a schema – that informed, limited, and/or expanded the meaning each could make of a given text. Weaver stressed that “since our schemas develop as we interact with the external world, we may often lack appropriate schemas for understanding what we hear or read” (2002, p. 16). Black male students in developmental literacy courses have schemas for language use and literacy; however, they may lack the schema to interact with and interpret academic text (and context) from a White, middle class perspective. Thus, an important query for developmental educators is the extent to which their text selection and instructional practice around texts allow students to apply schema which differ from the dominant academic culture and to leverage their experiential knowledge in interactions with texts (Gay, 2000).
Centering the Students’ Experience

Awareness of the connection between student success and student agency, college instructors have been encouraged to embrace learner-centered and active learning pedagogies (Benware & Deci, 2016; Mangum, 2017; Simpson & Nist, 2013; Stahl & Armstrong, 2018). Following “feminist and critical pedagogy, cognitive and educational psychology, and constructivist theory” (Weimer, 2002, p. 12), the movement toward a more learner-centered classroom seeks to increase student motivation and success by shifting the balance of power in the classroom. "In contrast to ‘passive learning’ methods where the responsibility of instruction falls on the teacher, active learning is a student-centered inductive learning process. It engages students by requiring them to do meaningful activities and think about what they are doing” (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2011, p. 54). Learner-centered pedagogies are founded on the assumption that when students gain control over their learning, their attitudes improve, their motivation increases, and they demonstrate improvements in reading, writing, thinking, and in their ability to remember what they have learned (Smith & Cardaciotto, 2011).

However, efforts to give such agency to students are not without significant challenges. Michael (2007) documented instructors’ perceived barriers for implementing learner-centered teaching, including concerns about power in the classroom:

If students are encouraged to ask questions, the likelihood that the teacher will not know the answer increases. It also means that the simple linear model of the classroom - in which the teacher delivers information and the students receive it - becomes a highly branched model in which discussion can go anywhere. (p. 45)

Such unpredictability may lead instructors at all levels to weigh questions of control in the classroom against concerns about covering necessary content. If students take a discussion of a text in a direction that I had not planned for, are the day’s learning objectives met? If the
students’ writing evolves beyond the parameters of the rubric, does he fail? What if the class selects texts that are not clearly academic, or with which I am unfamiliar, or that focus on content with which I am uncomfortable? Truly learner-centered pedagogy requires instructors to develop a level of confidence in dealing with ambiguity and a level of humility in allowing the class discussion to move beyond their expertise.

Additionally, engaging in learner-centered pedagogies requires a level of honesty and trustworthiness. As Spigelman (2001) demonstrated, some educators suspect that efforts to distribute power in classrooms are more pretense than empowerment since, in the end, teachers retain the ability to assign grades and grant attention to some students or deny it to others. Because students, too, recognize that the power truly resides in the teacher’s hands, “they may actively resist less oppressive instructional methods” (Spigelman, 2001, p. 28). The risk of losing students’ trust through insincerely centering students becomes especially critical when viewed from a CRT lens. The structural racism of the U.S. educational system has historically denied Black students access to learning while superficial innovations such as the Tuskegee Institute and school desegregation have failed to engender substantive changes. As a result, developmental literacy instructors’ efforts to empower students need to incorporate recognition of students’ assets and experiential knowledge but also acknowledge the historical and experiential basis of distrust that may accompany efforts to redistribute power. If instructors profess a learner-centered approach but really maintain all decision-making power, students will see through the pretense.
Academic Language, Standards, and the Discourse of Power

An additional reality check for developmental literacy instructors claiming to practice student-centered pedagogies is their role as both facilitators and gatekeepers of “college readiness.” In her exploration of social justice pedagogy, Applebaum (2010) reminded educators, “It is crucial to address the institutional logics and everyday practices of denials and habits of evasion that serve to sustain unjust systems, both at an individual level and at an institutional one” (p. 139). As previously noted, students enrolled in developmental literacy courses are generally those who have failed to demonstrate readiness for the literacy demands of college coursework through their high school GPA, standardized test scores, placement exam scores, or a combination of these. Community colleges provide these courses as second chance opportunities for students to achieve those standards and proceed toward their postsecondary goals.

Developmental literacy courses, then, purport to fill the gap between students’ current literacy skills and those needed to be successful in college coursework. Thus, both in placement and purpose, developmental literacy courses are designed to increase students’ access to college coursework by demonstrating achievement of often loosely defined and unreliably measured standards of literacy skill (Liu & Read, 2020; Willis, 2008; Wood, 1988).

In their dual role as facilitators and gatekeepers of academic literacy, developmental instructors may struggle to balance on the precipice of language standards, what Inoue (2019) called “the cage of White language supremacy.” Over twenty years before Inoue’s address to the Conference on College Composition and Communication, Delpit (1995) argued that literacy instruction was not neutral and that to facilitate marginalized students’ academic success, educators must acknowledge and unambiguously teach the rules of the discourses of power.
Delpit’s insistence that teachers train Black students in the discourse of power, including the “grammar, form, style, and so forth” (p. 161), is reflected in Coates’s (2015) reminiscences of the way Black parents in his youth physically punished their children. In a country where Eric Garner could be choked to death for selling untaxed cigarettes, Coates explained that parents harshly punished their children for any infractions so that they would learn the discipline they would need to survive – “Either I can beat him, or the police” (p. 16). Similarly, Delpit’s call for explicitly teaching the dominant discourse demonstrated awareness that Black students would be policed in their language, and that “Those who wish to gain access to the goods and status connected to a dominant discourse must … learn the ‘rules’ required for admission into a particular dominant discourse” (p. 154). Delpit also reflected the experience of generations of Black students for whom overcoming the structures that kept them marginalized meant not only learning the rules but also performing them with excellence that might not be expected of their White classmates.

However, Delpit also called on teachers to “acknowledge and validate students’ home language without using it to limit students’ potential” (p. 165). Thus, Delpit promoted a both-and position for literacy instructors – validating any “non-standard” home languages while making students aware of and capable of leveraging “standard” English, the language of power. Unfortunately, despite Delpit’s promotion of both students’ home languages and the discourse of power, Lawton and de Kleine (2020) observed that instructors’ willingness and ability to validate all Englishes “often manifests in a ‘standard/nonstandard’ dichotomy … in which ‘nonstandard’ Englishes … are … measured against a ‘standard’ that educators feel obligated to uphold” (p. 198). In their survey of community college literacy instructors, Lawton and de Kleine noted that “one of the most prevalent themes in the responses included references to ‘standard’ English as
‘academic’ English… [which] presumes a single, unified form of language used for academic discourse” (p. 204). However, as Lawton and de Kleine explained, although individual instructors claimed to know and teach to academic/standard English, no consistent and common definition emerged from survey respondents’ answers. In designing and delivering developmental literacy instruction, then, Lawton and de Kleine, like Delpit, recognized that literacy instructors walk a careful line. They seek to leverage and celebrate the Englishes their students speak while preparing them to read, write, and speak in the discourse of power, in the case of developmental literacy instructors, granting or denying students access to college level courses based on an ambiguous and ill-defined standard.

On the other hand, Inoue (2019) rejected that balancing act and chastised White literacy teachers for perpetuating the “cage of White language supremacy” by deferring to academic/standard English in their classrooms. Instead, Inoue (2019) insisted that Part of being a woke writing teacher is … a continual articulating of paradoxes in my judgment that complicate how I make judgments, how I read and make meaning of the symbols my students give me and that I give back to them, how White language supremacy places limits and pressures on me, despite my efforts to counter such things, just as they do my students. (p. 360)

Rather than asking teachers to accept and teach to the dominance of White language supremacy, Inoue demanded that White literacy instructors not only recognize the intersections of power and privilege that White language supremacy gives them in the classroom but also recognize the harm they inflict on students by perpetuating that supremacy in the ways they evaluate their students’ language. Wherever they place themselves on a continuum between providing access to the discourse of power or reinforcing the cage of White language supremacy, the position developmental literacy instructors adopt concerning the racial structures of “academic language” throws a healthy skepticism over claims of student-centered language instruction. Applebaum
(2010) stressed that social justice pedagogy required that educators recognize the overt and covert role of discourse in social power. “Since power is located in the norms and conventions that regulate discourse, this means that having subject status depends on complying with and participating in dominant norms and conventions … Norms are both enabling and constraining” (Applebaum, 2010, p. 59). If instructors present themselves and their teaching as ‘learner-centered,’ but fail to problematize the illusion of an accepted standard of academic language that informs their teaching, they perpetuate the invisible Whiteness of the system which limits Black student access and success.

Race and Teacher Identity

Thus, instructors’ awareness of and ideology about race matters. Researchers who have studied the intersectional experiences, attitudes, and perceptions of teachers both in K-12 schools and in four-year universities have demonstrated that the intersectional identities of female educators affect their perceptions of themselves as teachers.

In a qualitative study comparing White and Black instructors’ awareness of the impact of their race on their students, Harlow (2003) emphasized the intersections in instructors’ identities in terms of race, gender, and institutional role. Harlow categorized efforts to negotiate students’ confirmation of or resistance to instructors’ identities as part of the “emotional labor” of teaching (p. 349). Harlow (2003) additionally noted that White female instructors highlighted the impact of their gender on students’ perception of them but were less aware of the impact of their race on students’ perceptions. Harlow’s explanation that “White instructors had hardly considered how their racial status might shape” students’ reactions to them (p. 354) is consistent with the invisibility of Whiteness. Additionally, it highlights the social and structural power (Fricker,
that White teachers carry under their unacknowledged privilege. However, if White teachers fail to acknowledge their Whiteness and its impact on their students, they may misunderstand the challenges they face in trying to reach non-White students. “The idea is … that prejudice will tend surreptitiously to inflate or deflate the credibility afforded the speaker, and sometimes this will be sufficient to cross the threshold for beliefs or acceptance so that the hearer’s prejudice causes him to miss out on a piece of knowledge” (Fricker, 2010, p. 20). In this way, research and theory suggest that White female teachers’ lack of awareness of their Whiteness negatively impacts their ability to fulfill their roles with their non-White students. Harlow concluded that “instructors’ classroom performances are in part an effort to reinforce, through students, an identity as a good, knowledgeable professor” (p. 360). Such emphasis on the performative nature of teaching as well as teachers’ concern about identity emphasized the microsocial intersections present in the act of teaching.

Teacher Identity Leads to Instructional Choices

Because one’s intersectional identity affects her knowledge and perceptions of the world, it also affects teachers’ instructional practices. Warren (2015a) noted that “any divergence in social and cultural points of view between teachers and students… can create perceptual differences… [which] may have significant implications for … the types of instructional decisions they make” (p. 155). Warren’s (2015b) study of four White female preservice teachers demonstrated the conflicts created by the intersection of race and gender when well-intentioned White female teachers struggled to merge their empathy for students of color with their roles as classroom teachers. Warren noted that perceptual differences between White teachers and students of color “could have adverse consequences on teachers’ decision making regarding how
to build relationships with students, discipline alternatives, curriculum development, and negotiating the range of other professional tasks for which the teacher is responsible” (p. 574). Warren’s analysis demonstrated that the microsocial intersection of race and gender for the White female teacher resulted in potentially harmful consequences for the racialized and classed experiences of the students of color and their parents. Warren called for additional research on teacher perspectives and the application of empathy in the classroom.

Warren (2015a) also echoed other researchers’ concern that White teachers’ empathy and good intentions are not sufficient to prepare them for effective teaching in multicultural contexts. Reviews of teacher education programs and professional development opportunities have emphasized the impact of teachers’ beliefs and biases on the culture of the classroom and the need for additional training to address the deficit mindsets and insecurities that teachers bring to the intersectional settings of their classrooms (Cochran-Smith, 1995; Ford & Whiting, 2010; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995, 1998, 1999, 2006; Smith-Maddox & Solórzano, 2002; Ukpokudo, 2003). Both Henfield and Washington’s (2012) focus group interviews of White middle school teachers and Michael’s (2015) action research of K-12 White teachers revealed White teachers’ hesitancy to discuss race and racism with their students underscored by fears of being perceived as racist. Greer et al. (2018) in their quantitative study of the perceptions of Black male high school emphasized the importance of teachers holding an equity mindset and of teachers’ willingness and ability to know, engage, and build relationships with their Black male students. Overall, studies focused on teachers in multicultural classrooms have emphasized the impact of teachers’ attitudes and beliefs in developing classroom practices that positively impact student success without putting themselves at risk of negative perceptions of others.
In addition to its impact on teacher identity and students’ perceptions, studies focused on White teachers have also highlighted the role of Whiteness in teachers’ identity and praxis (Boucher, 2016; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Michael 2015) as well as the impact on students of White teachers’ negative perceptions and low expectations (Casteel, 1998; Greer et al., 2018; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Strayhorn, 2008). Strayhorn’s (2008) quantitative study of Black male eighth graders emphasized the macro and microsocial intersection of race, class, and gender in students’ perceptions of teachers’ expectations. Despite White teachers’ efforts to demonstrate cultural competence, Strayhorn raised concerns about teachers’ problematic inattentiveness to the structural factors impacting their Black make students’ achievement. Strayhorn’s conclusions reflect Pinar’s (1993) analysis that “We are … what we do not know. If what we know about ourselves – our culture, our national identity—is deformed by absences, denials, and incompleteness, then our identity – both as individual and as Americans – is fragmented” (p. 61). Strayhorn demonstrated that what teachers do not know and do not acknowledge about race and racism negatively affects Black student achievement.

Researchers and theorists focused on teachers in multicultural classrooms have emphasized that teachers need to position themselves well beyond the celebration of diversity. Bruch & Marback (2002) recommended that teachers find ways not just to accept students’ language and culture but to engage and validate it in classroom activities and discussions and the curriculum. Research has shown that a curriculum that implicitly or explicitly encourages assimilation into the White dominant culture, accompanied by instructors’ low expectations for student success has led to student disengagement and weak relationships between students and teachers (Banks, 1993; Watson et al. 2002).
Researchers have also noted the exclusion of Black literature, history, and culture in the texts used throughout the education system. Cochran-Smith (1995) noted that in the K-12 systems, Black students were rarely able to find themselves in the curriculum. Banks (1993) noted that textbooks were influenced by publishers who avoided the inclusion of controversial materials in texts, making the incorporation of appropriate and myriad non-White texts more challenging, especially in K-12 settings where teachers had little control of text selection. Even the sample texts on standardized tests were shown to be White centered (Lee, 1998). At the postsecondary level, Gallien (2005) noted that colleges and universities have been especially slow to make changes to the “college core curriculum. . . [in which] African American students rarely hear about their own history, culture, or traditions” (p. 8). This lack of significant representation of Black people and of Black males has reinforced the impression that academic success is inconsistent with Black masculinity (Cuyjet, 1997; Howard, et al., 2016; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Orrock & Clark, 2015).

However, in her review of postsecondary reading texts, Williams (2013) emphasized that representation itself was not sufficient to elevate Black students’ experiences in developmental courses. Williams (2013) noted that five major developmental reading texts available at the time of her study demonstrated a positive but insufficient trend in developmental reading textbooks. Although the texts Williams reviewed provided representation of African American experiences, many provided only “cursory” treatment of race and racism that explored past racial conflicts but failed to explore ongoing racial inequities. Williams recommended text selections that provided a “comprehensive” treatment of race and gave students both a historical context for their
experiences of powerlessness and inequity as well as an exploration of “the potential for eradicating these problems” (p. 60). Williams specifically called on developmental literacy instructors to select course readings with a critical eye for not only representation but for the texts’ ability to validate Black students’ experience of race and racism but also to engage them in envisioning a brighter future.

Williams (2013) also encouraged developmental literacy instructors to consider how pedagogical practices about course readings could promote Black students’ critical engagement in developmental literacy courses. Along these lines, other research has suggested that teachers who validated students’ language and culture have taken steps to offset the erasure of Black lives in the curriculum. By connecting students’ lived experiences to their current learning – tapping into students’ “funds of knowledge” (Guthrie et al, 2013; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Lee, 2001; Mollet al., 1992; Tatum, 2008, 2014; Tatus & Gue, 2010) researchers and theorists have shown that teachers can create a “third space” (Gutiérrez, 2008) to bridge between students’ home cultures and the White dominant culture of schooling (Hackett & Lo, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1992; Lazar, 2013; Moje, 2007; Orrock & Clark, 2015). Gay (2000) emphasized that “making explicit connections between instructional resources used in the classrooms and lived experiences of students outside of school improves the mastery of academic skills as well as … interest, motivation, and time-on-task” (p. 118).

Thus, an inclusive curriculum will incorporate texts and activities that allow students to see themselves represented in ways that transcend the single grand narrative of the enslaved, poor, and dangerous Black man. To invite students’ engagement, research has emphasized pedagogical practices, including texts and classroom activities, with relevance to students’ social
and cultural realities (Clark & Brooms, 2018; Gay, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 2007; Howard, 2003; Howard & Terry, 2011). However, research has shown that simply incorporating representative literature (a novel by Tony Morrison or a poem by Langston Hughes) or referencing rap or hip hop to entice students’ engagement (Campbell, 2007) is not sufficient to create critical engagement that allows Black students to see themselves as valued members of the academic space. In fact, simply adding such texts to literacy course readings reflects a “Kool-Aid approach” as if we can simply add diverse texts to the “water” of curricula that “reinforce normative assumptions which bolster Whiteness and White supremacy” (Stewart, 2017). Instead, Bonner and Bailey (2006) recommend that educators incorporate texts and “infuse their presentations of the curriculum with cultural perspectives. … Identifying the accomplishments of African Americans in the sciences, history, politics, and mathematics” (p. 32). Unfortunately, recommendations such as these assume a level of cultural competence that White female instructors may not consistently possess. Research has suggested that when incorporating non-White texts into their classes, teachers lack the background and the confidence to explain their instructional strategies to students, to engage students in critical analysis of the texts, or to encourage students to use such texts to critically examine their communities for power relations and to work for social change (Barrera, 1992; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995).

Selecting texts with an eye for equity encompasses more than including a minority-authored article in the semester’s readings. Equitable text selection also includes problematizing the idea of “text.” In the 21st century, students’ lives are increasingly impacted by non-print texts. The power of media forms like video to change knowledge and what is perceived as truth has been starkly demonstrated in current times through the June 2020 killings of George Floyd in
Minneapolis and Rayshard Brooks in Atlanta. Interpretations of and reactions to the videos of these shootings fueled national conversations about policing in the United States. Videos of the protests that followed these killings and of the local, state, and national government efforts to control the protests are powerful texts that have impacted and informed Americans’ understanding of social justice. For students living and attending college during these times, video created knowledge and reality in ways that an academic text is unlikely to rival.

Although some instructors may still read the world from the black and White pages that land in a plastic-wrapped roll on their doorstep each morning, more and more instructors’ and students’ knowledge of the world has been informed by tweets, tiks, snaps, texts, DMs, and “internet experts.” With each tweet and retweet, students are engaged in literacy – making meaning both as receivers and creators of texts. In their lengthy exchanges of texts, snaps, and tweets, students’ transactions with texts have accelerated the reader-response process in ways Rosenblatt (1978) may never have imagined in her examination of the transactional nature of reading. In fact, Swenson et al. (2006) argued that the interactions between reader, writer, and text made available through digital technologies increase opportunities for authentic transactions with texts. However, literacy instruction has often been limited by conceptions of text as print or print-like so that print texts are given precedence despite New Literacies studies (Gee, 1996, 2000; Street, 2003)) which have demonstrated that “academic texts” are just one of many text forms with which people interact. Price-Dennis and Carrion (2017) stated that literacy is never “general or self-contained” (p. 412), that teaching literacy does not mean teaching a certain type of texts, and that literacy is not an academic skill that is taught in isolation of the social and technological forces of students’ lives.
For literacy educators, acknowledging multiple literacies means recognizing the sociocultural factors that influence students’ and teachers’ epistemologies – their understanding of knowledge and what “counts” as knowledge. And this, according to Heller (2012), is a question of either domination or empowerment:

Institutionalization renders the concept of literacy available for the production of legitimate citizens, and for the definition of acceptable and authoritative discourse, both in the active sense of proving for the deep socialization of those who will belong to the definers and selectors, and in the negative sense of providing means for identifying those people and practice which require policing, and techniques of marginalization and control. (p. 55)

Students’ facility with non-academic texts can be an asset and an area of expertise in which they may rival their instructors (Leu et al., 2005). In choosing texts for inclusion in the literacy classroom, instructors may choose to privilege academic texts or to celebrate the cultural capital and literacy that students bring to the classroom through their ability to read their worlds in texts, tweets, or videos.

Theorists like Gee (2000) have voiced concern over educators’ failure to understand the connections between students’ language use and their ways of being. When instructors police students’ cell phone use and decry their interest in video gaming, they may be assuming deficits where assets exist. A cell phone can be a dictionary or a translator for a language learner, giving her equitable access to the knowledge in the classroom. A gamers’ ability to process a video screen and his ability to problem solve and to develop multiple options for his characters are, Gee (2008) argued, learning experiences that have value for their future learning as well as their career prospects (Leu et al. 2017). In selecting texts and in the ways they discuss students’ literacies, many researchers and theorists have advocated for the recognition of multiliteracies rather than the privileging of academic literacy. (Au, 2001; Gee, 2000; Leu et al 2005, 2017;
New London Group, 2000; Price-Dennis & Carrion, 2017). Delpit insisted that students must be encouraged to recognize their own expertise as language users and creators even as they are taught the language and codes of power.

To increase Black students’ engagement, curriculum and pedagogy must also stem from well-informed educators who feel confident in their ability to teach and engage Black students (Henfield & Washington, 2012). However, research has shown such curricular and pedagogical practices to be especially challenging for White female teachers. Like the editors and publishers whose decisions effectively create much of the K-12 curriculum, research has shown that White female teachers tend to avoid controversial topics (Schmidt et al., 2007; Chadwick, 2016; Hall & Piazza, 2008). White female teachers revealed that fear of making mistakes in talking about race limited their willingness to engage race in their selection of texts and their preparation of class activities (Michael, 2015; Moore et al., 2018). Non-controversial material in textbooks and teachers’ avoidance of controversial content or class discussions has led to the White-washing of non-White texts. For instance, even when working with a text that centers race, literacy teachers are likely to focus on universal experiences within the text or to sterilize the text through academic analysis of rhetoric. Barrera (1992) stated that because reading and writing are always filtered through a person’s perspective, when a teacher lacks a “personal perspective . . . sensitive to cultural diversity, then the interpretation of diverse literatures will be less than culturally sensitive” (p. 238).

Planning for Student Behaviors

Even incorporating non-White texts and employing appropriate pedagogical strategies can only take White educators and their Black male students so far if the educators have not also
Dekpit, 199 addressed their own biases. Doing so calls for instructors to be aware of Whiteness and application of both intersectional and CRT lenses. Leonardo (2002) suggested an alternative third space – “a third space for neo-abolitionist Whites as neither enemy nor ally but a concrete subject of struggle” (p. 46). To this end, researchers and theorists have recognized that White female teachers must recognize their culturally and structurally constructed fear of Black men (Landsman, 2018) and the ways that their Whiteness and the Whiteness of the U.S. educational system has excluded Black male students.

In the K-12 system, Black male students are disproportionately tracked into low level classes and special education. This tracking continues in the developmental education classes that are the subject of this study (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005). Such tracking has led to an underestimation of Black students’ academic abilities, which White teachers have communicated verbally and non-verbally to their Black male students (Hall et al., 2010; Harper & Davis, 2012). Even classroom codes of conduct have been shown to demonstrate White-centered points of view. Expectations that students remain silent until called on to speak excludes “call and response” cultural patterns (Delpit, 1995; hooks, 1997) and the many expectations for docile bodies in classrooms exclude the “vervistic” (Gregory et al. 2010; Karmen et al., 2014; Lee, 1998) energy, physical interaction, and collaboration often associated with Black culture (Gregory et al., 2010; Karmen et al., 2014; Lee, 1998). Researchers have shown that the White dominant structure in the U.S. generally and U.S. education systems specifically have engendered fears and culture clashes (Karmen et al., 2014) which contributed to an environment in which “The typical Black boy in a K-12 educational setting is taught almost exclusively by White women who combine an insufficient anticipation for his academic achievement with high expectations for disruptive behavior, intellectual stupidity, and a dispassion for learning that will
ultimately culminate with high school dropout” (Harper, 2009, pp. 697–698). When these expectations and culture clashes follow students to college, the inequity that results contributes to the ongoing cycle of poor academic achievement, poverty, and racialized outcomes for Black men. Gallien (2005) noted that the lack of pedagogical training for most postsecondary educators, leads to a classroom environment that works against Black male student success, regardless of instructors’ good intentions.

Summary of Chapter 2

In this chapter, I have situated educational inequities for Black male students within their historical and cultural contexts and have demonstrated how theoretical and empirical literature has explored those factors through critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality. I have shown how interconnections between critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality will provide a critical lens from which this study is designed and through which I will interpret collected data. Because educational inequities have been shown to stem from historical, structural, and cultural forces on a macro level beyond the control of the individual White female educator, this study cannot aim to “solve” educational inequities in the U.S. education system. However, on a microsocial level, a better understanding of ways individual White female educators engage race in their instructional decision making will provide crucial insights from which to address inequities on a local scale.

Many studies discussed in this chapter have explored educational inequities for Black male students in the K-12 system (Boucher, 2016; Bruch & Marbeck, 2002; Dixon & Rousseau, 2005; Duncan, 2002a, 2002b; Flennaugh 2016; Greer et al., 2018; Lazar 2013; Popp et al., 2011, Rhoden, 2017; Strayhorn, 2008). Others have focused on predominantly White four-year
colleges and universities (Armstrong & Jennings, 2018; Bridges, 2011; Brooms, 2018; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Harper, 2015; Hodge et al., 2008; Gosset et al., 1998; Harlow, 2003; Rogers & Summers, 2008; Smith et al., 2006). Others have focused on historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs; Lamos, 2012; Shorette & Palmer, 2015; Strayhorn et al., 2015).

Although very few researchers focused on educational inequities have located their research at the community college level, several studies provide a foundation on which this study builds. Weiss (1985) studied the experiences of Black students by examining language use, faculty perspectives, and culture in one community college. Wood and Hilton (2012) studied the intersections of spirituality and academic success for Black community college students. Using data from the Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (BPS) Wood and Palmer (2013) analyzed the goals of Black male community college students, and Wood et al. (2016) interviewed Black male community college students to explore the impact of part time and full-time jobs on their college success. Focusing on the intersections of race and gender, Harper and Harris (2010) compared the experiences of four racially different men in community college, all of whom experienced conflicts related to gender expression during their college experience. Studies such have these have emphasized the considerable role that the community college plays in the postsecondary journeys of Black male students and have discussed the ways that Black male students have experienced the community college environment.

These few studies, however, reveal gaps in the research which are inconsistent with the social justice imperative demanded by ongoing educational, economic, and social inequities for Black males. Because the community college is the point of entry for postsecondary education as well as the gateway to advanced degrees for many Black men, a better understanding of the community college culture in which they study is essential to remedying the educational
injustices Black men experience. Given the percentages of Black students who begin their postsecondary journeys in community colleges, Harper and Harris (2010) specifically called for more studies in community colleges. An additional gap in the research derives from the positionality of the researchers. Community colleges’ primary mission of teaching differentiates community college faculty from faculty at research-focused Carnegie Classification institutions. Most literacy research is conducted by researchers at Carnegie R1 and R2 universities -- by researchers whose professional roles include a significant emphasis on research. Although some community college instructors do publish research, such work is in addition to and not an expectation of their teaching responsibilities. It is not surprising then, that educational research has not focused on community colleges or been conducted by researchers who teach in community colleges. Studies of Black students in four-year universities, therefore, not only exclude the voices of community college students, but they also exclude the voices of community college instructors. These voices are essential for understanding and remedying educational inequities for Black male students. As a community college professor with over 20 years experience teaching developmental literacy, through this study, I had the opportunity not only to begin filling this gap in the research but to better understand the perspective of White female community college instructors. My positionality as an insider provided a unique level of access and insight which was enhanced by the collaborative methodology of the study. Thus, this reciprocal ethnographic case study arose from a need to overturn historical focus on what Black male students should or could do to succeed in a White dominant educational system and instead focus on the White women whose level of engagement with race impacts the texts students read and the experiences students have with those texts. In Chapter 3, I will provide the rationale for
the study’s methodology, identify participants and recruitment strategies, and outline the data collection methods used.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Through this study, I sought insight into the issue of educational inequities for Black male students by better understanding the ways that White female developmental literacy instructors in one community college engaged race in their instructional planning. In Chapter 1, I provided an overview of the study. In Chapter 2, I provided a review of the research and theory with which I aligned the study. The critical perspective shaped by CRT, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality impacted my design of the study. My decision to focus the study on White female instructors rather than on Black male students originated from the fact that the majority of the educators in the U.S. are White and female coupled with the dearth of studies that focus on this common factor in the educational experiences of Black male students. The centrality of race and racism in U.S. culture impacts both students and teachers. However, as the individuals with the White privilege and institutional authority in the classroom, the White female instructors have significant opportunities to disrupt patterns of oppression and establish more equitable educational opportunities for Black male students (Patton, 2016). Such disruption requires greater awareness of instructional praxis within the framework of the racialized and gendered culture of the U.S. education system. To that end, in this study, I focused on this overarching question and three subquestions:

How do White female developmental literacy instructors engage race in their instructional decision-making processes?
1. How do White female literacy instructors consider race in selecting texts for their literacy courses?

2. How do White female literacy instructors consider race in developing and planning classroom learning activities based on texts?

3. How do White female literacy instructors consider race in developing and planning text-based assessments?

In Chapter 3, I describe the study’s research methodology and discuss the following: (a) researcher positionality (b) rationale for research design, (c) setting, (d) recruitment and participation, (e) data collection, (f) reciprocal ethnographic process (g data analysis, (h) ethical concerns, (i) trustworthiness, and (j) assumptions and delimitations of the study. The chapter concludes with a summary of the study’s methodology.

Researcher Positionality

The focus of this study on White female developmental literacy instructors developed in large part from my own experiences as an educator. As a White, female developmental literacy professor myself, I acknowledge the pressure and guilt that my colleagues and I experience when our Black male students’ educational experiences reinforce national data trends. I recognize that differences in academic attainment stem from cultural and economic disparities over which individual students and individual educators have little control. However, embracing the critical researcher’s commitment to social justice, I assert that as educators, we must not abdicate our responsibility to teach the individual students in our classrooms. With full awareness of the structural inequities that impact all of education, I maintain that each educator needs to look to
her classroom practices to understand why retention, success, and completion differ for Black male students.

My positionality was important to the feasibility of this study because my participants and I shared background as developmental literacy instructors in community colleges. Our experiences as developmental literacy instructors created a common ground from which we could build a trust relationship, which allowed me to create a safe environment for interviews and focus groups, privileging mutual care for our students. Having already established this trust relationship, I was able to “model . . . interviews after a conversation between . . . trusting parties rather than on a formal question-and-answer session between a researcher and respondent[s]” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 39). This led to a culture of shared meaning-making and authorship that supported the social justice imperative of the study.

Qualitative Research Brings Meaning and Context

The studies reviewed in the previous chapter demonstrated that quantitative research including survey analysis (Cuyjet, 1997; Roscigno, 1998; Rosigno & Ainsworth-Darnell, 1999; Strayhorn, 2008, 2014, 2019; Strayhorn et al., 2018), statistical data on education outcomes (McDaniel et al., 2016), and polling data (Toldson & Owens, 2010) can expose and has exposed racialized educational inequities as well as students’ and educators’ attitudes and perceptions of race. However, in this study, qualitative research provided me the tools to further explore the meaning and context of such statistics. By exploring the perspectives and insights of the instructors positioned to combat those inequities through literacy education, qualitative research methods, including interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, provided an opportunity to study participants’ meaning-making and decision making in the context of the educational
inequities quantitative research has consistently revealed. I embarked on this study not from a desire to re-document ongoing educational inequities for Black male students nor from a desire to lay blame at the feet of either well-intentioned and dedicated instructors or the Black male students who suffer most from these inequities. Instead, my goal has been to provide White female educators with insights into their teaching practice, insights that I hope can lead us to more ideologically coherent instruction and substantive change for Black male students’ educational experiences. To achieve this goal, a qualitative research design was essential since I needed to examine the reasoning, attitudes, and beliefs behind my participants’ instructional planning.

Thus, I collected qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and relevant instructional documents to gain a deep and complex understanding (Creswell, 2007) of the processes by which five White female developmental literacy instructors planned literacy instruction for the developmental literacy courses they taught. In addition, through the conversations with and between these instructors, the qualitative research process provided me and my participants an opportunity to understand the meaning they ascribed to their instructional decisions and the objectives behind those decisions as well as the sociocultural context in which they made those decisions (Clair, 2003; Maxwell, 1996; Merriam, 1988). While investigating the instructors’ decisions about texts, writing assignments, and class activities, my participants and I explored how their awareness of and attitudes towards the intersections of race and gender in the classroom influenced their instructional decisions. Despite positivist theories and the waxing and waning of fervor for scripted instruction that suggest otherwise, teaching is a complex process that is influenced by educational theory filtered through the experiences, attitudes, and beliefs of the individual instructors. A qualitative research design allowed me to account for those
complexities by developing interpretations inductively in “a constant process of calibration between . . . the conceptual framework, [my] developing hypotheses, and the collection of … data” (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1997, p. 43). In this way, I sought to develop interpretations, in collaboration with the study participants, that would help literacy educators examine the impact of their attitudes, experiences, and beliefs on their instructional decision making, always with the goal of improving the educational outcomes of the Black male students who have been most poorly served in the U.S. education system.

Qualitative research methods also provided an appropriate vehicle for the social justice perspective of this study. The literature has shown that qualitative research designs are particularly appropriate to critically examine the influence of structural and systemically raced and gendered oppressive practices (Atkinson, 2017; Clair, 2003; Harper et al., 2009; Parker, 2015; Parker & Lynn, 2002). Therefore, the study’s three-legged theoretical framework of critical race theory (Bell, 1995, Ladson-Billings, 1998), Whiteness theory (Carter & Helms, 1990; Cochran-Smith, 2003; DiAngelo, 2018; Fine, 2004), and intersectionality (Bilge, 2010; Collins, 2015; Crenshaw, 1989, 1991) was well-suited to a qualitative design that provided the opportunity for deep and critical analysis. By exploring the ways White female developmental literacy instructors engaged race in their instructional decision-making, I considered the essential nature of teachers’ meaning making on the educational process (Erickson, 1986). Because of its qualitative design, this study did not produce generalizable results but allowed for a deep understanding of the points of view of the particular instructors at the particular research site. I offer these deep understandings as an opportunity for “the development of new theories about causes and other influences on the patterns” (Erickson, 1986, p. 121) of educational inequities in postsecondary developmental literacy classes.
Reciprocal Ethnographic Case Study Methodology

My decision to use reciprocal ethnographic case study methodology derived from the study’s focus on the sociocultural factors of race and gender. This methodology allowed me and my participants to “engage in dialogue and discussion openly about the subject matter [we were] each …thinking about, recognizing and embracing the opportunity to take [our] conversation beyond [our] current perceptions” (Lawless, 2000, p. 201). Because I was aware that conversations about race could produce feelings of guilt and defensiveness, I sought, in reciprocal ethnography, a way to decrease the power differential between me and my participants to allow for a relatively open discussion of race, gender, and developmental literacy instruction. Ethnography has been described as both a set of techniques for data collection and an approach to reporting data (Merriam, 1988; Wolcott, 1990). I employed data collection methods appropriate to ethnographic research (Lawless, 2000; Purcell-Gates, 2011) including interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. Also from an ethnographic standpoint, in data collection, analysis, and reporting, I examined and interpreted the sociocultural context (Merriam, 1988; Wolcott, 1990) in which White female developmental literacy instructors planned for literacy instruction. A cultural interpretation was especially important because I sought to understand the influence of cultural forces (race and gender) on a particular group of postsecondary educators and their instructional decision-making.

Case Study – Specific Setting and Purpose

Because the study focused on one setting to examine practice and suggest solutions or generate hypotheses, my study conformed with expectations for case study methodology
The study was also consistent with Stake’s (2000) instrumental purpose – to gain insight into an issue -- specifically into persistent educational inequities for Black males in community college literacy classes. Merriam (1988) documented four characteristics of qualitative case studies: “particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive” (p. 11). First, by focusing on a single, specific site and on participants in that site, creating a very narrowly bounded case, this study met the particularistic character of a case study. The specific setting of the research, including the demographics and academic culture of the institution, constitute important elements of the culture in which and for which the study’s participants planned instruction. In addition, the criteria by which potential study participants were recruited (gender, race, and courses taught) further specified the particular parameters of the study. Second, the methodology included “thick description” (Merriam, 1988, p. 11) to document the participants’ attitudes, beliefs, and challenges as they discussed their instructional decision-making processes through the lenses of race and gender. Throughout the study, I have provided extensive excerpts from interviews and focus groups to provide the rich description characteristics of a case study. Thus, the study met the “descriptive” characteristic of a case study. Third, although educational inequities for Black males have been studied through a wide range of methods and approaches, the inequities persist. Barone (2011) noted that case study research was particularly appropriate for literacy research when researchers are “dissatisfied with the limited answers they receive by studying percentages or stanines” (p. 7). Thus, this study addressed the “heuristic” characteristic of a case study by providing a way of rethinking educational inequities, not by blaming White female instructors or Black male students, but by elucidating the ways that race and gender intersect as instructors plan for teaching literacy. Finally, as I listened to the study participants, as I transcribed and coded interviews and focus groups, and as I reviewed documents provided by
the participants, I looked for ways to make meaning from the data rather than looking for confirmation of a priori theories and assumptions. As Braun and Clarke (2012) noted, inductive processes of analysis lead to a close match between the data collected and the meaning made of that data in study reporting. Following inductive processes for such close analysis, I construct meaning from the data collected, thus meeting the “inductive” characteristic of case study research.

**Ethnography – Focus on Culture**

In my analysis of the data collected, I sought a better understanding of how the culture writ large – the context of race and gender in the U.S. generally and the education system more specifically – but also writ small – the context of a developmental literacy program at one community college – impacted my participants’ instructional decision making. This focus on culture large and small accounts for the ethnographic nature of the study. Ethnographic research, according to Purcell-Gates (2011), is “distinguishable within the category of qualitative research in that it is rooted in culture” (p. 135). Consistent with ethnographic practice, I focused on interpreting empirical data collected from an authentic (rather than experimental) context and narrowly studied one small group in one specific setting (Hammersley, 2005). Through the facilitation of the participants’ individual and group discussions of their educational decision-making processes, my goal was to uncover ways that the intersectional identities of White, female, and developmental literacy professor both impacted and were impacted by the educational culture in which these instructors taught students limited by educational inequities. Thus, I listened to the voices of White female instructors to document and analyze the cultural context (Purcell-Gates, 2011; Merriam, 1988) through which they understood their reality as
educators within a condition of racial educational inequities. In asking, “How do White female developmental literacy instructors engage race in their instructional decision making?” I asked myself and my participants questions appropriate to ethnographic research such as, “What is happening? What does it look like? How does it work?” (Purcell-Gates, 2011, p. 137). The relationships created through ethnographic case study research (Clair, 2003; Merriam, 1988) also allowed me to address participants’ discomfort in talking about race (DiAngelo, 2018; Flynn, 2018; Helms, 1990) by reducing the power differential between myself and the instructors who participated in the study.

**Reciprocal Ethnography – Balancing Researcher’s and Participants’ Voices**

Although qualitative approaches allow researchers to get close to study participants and reduce power differentials between research and study participants (Creswell, 2000, 2007; DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), some qualitative researchers and theorists have expressed their dissatisfaction with the power relationships that still emerge between researcher and subject. These concerns focus on the power of the researcher in relaying study participants’ points of view to an academic audience (Charmaz, 2007; Kvale, 2006; Lassiter, 2001; Rappaport, 2008). A historical challenge to qualitative research is that, in the process of interviewing, observing, and documenting the “participant perspective,” researchers can never achieve an entirely objective stance, and, as a result, they run the risk of imposing their perspectives on the study (Eisner, 1992; Kvale, 2006; MacLure, 2013; Mullen, 2000). Attempts to reduce the researchers’ bias and maintain the validity or credibility of qualitative research have included guidelines for researchers to develop rapport with their interview participants, to remain as objective as possible, to transparently reveal and reflect on their positionality and bias,
to triangulate research with thick, rich data from multiple sources, and to conduct member checks by which the study participants confirm the accuracy of transcribed data (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Kvale, 2006; Miles et al., 2014). Even with such qualitative validity checks in place, however, feminist researchers and anthropologists have objected to the dual persona that qualitative researchers must take to hold a natural conversation -- attempting to develop the interviewees’ trust while remaining objective and asking but not answering questions (Charmaz, 2007; Lassiter, 2000; Lather, 1991; Lawless, 1991, 1992, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Sitzia, 1999).

Some researchers and anthropologists have also voiced concerns over the effort to “represent” the research participants through ethnographic writing since any representation by the researcher runs the risk of appropriation or colonization (Lassiter, 2000, 2001; Rappaport, 2008).

In response to such concerns, researchers have practiced an alternative ethnographic methodology, in the literature sometimes interchangeably referred to as “reciprocal” or “collaborative” ethnography, which has sought to reduce the “error of reinforcing the status of the researcher as the more authoritative speaker” (Lassiter, 2000; Lawless, 1992, p. 80). Although individual processes have varied, reciprocal ethnographers have collected data through interviews, focus groups, observation, and document analysis, much as any ethnographer would do, and have then transcribed and coded their data to identify themes and possible next steps in the project. However, reciprocal ethnographers have taken up liberatory theorists’ concerns over subjectivity and objectivity by restructuring the researcher-subject relationship (Friere, 2000; Lather, 1991; Weiler, 1991) and framing the study participants as collaborators or informants (Lassiter, 2000; Rappaport, 2008; Rouverol, 2003). Working with their informants or collaborators, reciprocal and collaborative ethnographers have shifted the production of ethnography from an academic representation of the “subjects’” voices through the single voice
of the researcher to a multivocal work that represents the dialogue between collaborators (Lather 1991; Lassiter, 2000; Lawless, 1991, 1992, 2000; Oakley, 1981; Sitzia, 1999). The reciprocity referred to in this methodology is not an incentivized give and take (participants are not rewarded for the information they give the researcher). Instead, reciprocity refers to the shared ownership of the data and its interpretation.

Such reciprocity distinguishes reciprocal ethnography from other qualitative research approaches. For instance, traditionally, qualitative researchers have recommended triangulation of data through multiple data sources and corroborating repeated themes across several data sources to increase the credibility of their interpretations (Creswell, 2007, 2012; Maxwell, 1996). In reciprocal ethnographic research, however, reciprocity has included participants’ suggestion of additional data sources (Lawless, 2019) which provided not only corroboration of themes but also added insight and complexity to the emerging meaning. Likewise, traditional qualitative researchers conduct member checking by sharing their interpretations with study participants to verify fairness and accuracy (Creswell, 2007, 2012; Lather, 1991; Merriam, 1998). Reciprocal ethnographers, on the other hand, have taken an additional step beyond member checking: meeting with the study participants individually and/or in focus groups to share the transcripts and their preliminary interpretations and to ask for the participants’ interpretations of their transcripts and the researcher’s analysis. As they have done with the initial interviews and observations, researchers have then transcribed and analyzed these interpretation sessions as well and provided documentation of the negotiations and differences of interpretation in the final ethnographic product. This process has allowed the researchers and their study participants to learn from each other and to share authority for the research and interpretation (Lassiter, 2000; Lawless, 1991, 1992, 2019; Rappaport, 2008; Sitzia, 1999; Underberg, 2006). To be reciprocal,
Lawless insisted that the researcher takes the interpretive dialogue “past the scholar’s interpretations, back to the people involved, and into the published work so that the dialogue is actually visible for the reading audience” (Lawless, 2019, p. 86). In this way, the resulting multivocal ethnography represents not only what the researcher understood or what the participants understood but the collective understanding that resulted from their shared interpretations of data.

In addition, although qualitative researchers have traditionally grounded their research in theoretical frameworks, such frameworks have generally remained the perspective of the researcher. In reciprocal ethnography, however, rather than holding back information from the study’s collaborators to maintain objectivity, researchers have asked as well as answered questions, and even provided collaborators with research about the kinds of information the study was producing. For example, in gathering the life stories of women in the ministry, Lawless (1991) “presented to them some of the current thinking about women’s and men’s life stories and autobiographies and sought their responses to their own stories and the scholarly opinions about women’s stories” (p. 40). By sharing their interpretations and their theoretical frameworks, and by inviting their study participants into collaboration on the study, reciprocal ethnographers have sought to equalize power and provide opportunities for all involved in the research to learn from the experience and each other. Including the dialogue of interpretation and negotiation in the final product, reciprocal ethnographers have sought to equalize the voices of researcher and participants, assuring that both the “self” and “other” are represented, and prioritizing the relationships and dialogue over the academic discipline (Lassiter, 2000).
I chose to apply the ideology and methodology of reciprocal ethnographic case study for this study because it is consistent with the research questions I was asking. Equally important, because it helped to uncover “the ways in which larger forces, both ideological and material, place limits and conditions on our actions” (Weiler, 1991, p. 62) reciprocal ethnographic case study was consistent with the theoretical stances of CRT, Whiteness, and intersectionality. In this study, my participants and I shared the positionality of White, female developmental literacy instructors, and as a result, we shared at least some of the experiences of forces that “limit and condition our actions” including our Whiteness in a structurally racist culture. Within that shared experience, I chose to stand alongside (rather than in judgment of) my participants as much as possible. Thus, by incorporating dialogic interpretation of the interview and focus group transcripts, my use of reciprocal ethnographic methodology reduced the power differential between me and my participants, allowing me to develop rapport with them and reducing the “error of reinforcing the status of the researcher as the more authoritative speaker” (Lawless, 1992, p. 80).

Setting

River Bend Community College (RBCC) is a pseudonym for a community college located in the suburbs of a large Midwestern city. The data below provides an overview of the study’s setting in terms of demographics and student success rates. An explanation of the developmental literacy program at RBCC is also included as an important element of the context of this study. Beyond descriptive statistics, this data presents significant background for the study’s social justice imperative.
RBCC’s district population (total 437,282 in 2019) is predominantly White (61.1%) with a significant non-White population (Table 2). The college district is comprised of four K-12 Community Unit school districts representing a wide range of demographics from affluent, majority White suburban, to low income, majority non-White urban, and rural, majority White populations. The majority of RBCC’s students matriculate from one of these four districts although the college also has a significant non-traditional age (22 years and older) student population whose K-12 experiences may have been from outside the district, state, or country. According to the Enrollment, Graduation, and Transfer data for RBCC’s 2019 cohort, RBCC’s total enrollment was 14,984 with 4276 full time students (at least 12 credit hours) and 10,708 part time students (fewer than 12 credit hours). Male students accounted for 46% of the total enrollment, and female students accounted for 54%, but a greater percentage of male students (52%) enrolled full time compared to female students (48%).

RBCC’s student demographics generally reflect the community’s makeup. RBCC has been designated a “Hispanic Serving Institution” with the largest percentage (42%) of its students identifying as Hispanic/Latinx. The next largest percentage of students (40%) identify as White, 8% identify as Asian, and 5% identify as Black or African American (Table 3). In 2019, the majority of students (54%) were “traditional college age students” (under 22 years of age) which accounted for 80% of the full-time students and 44% of the part time students. Pell Grant recipients (a rough approximation of socio-economic status) accounted for 21% of all enrolled students, and 36% of the student population identified as “first generation of their family to attend college” (note that 22% did not respond to this question). The higher representation of
students of color at RBCC compared to the general population of the region is consistent with research correlating race with economic and educational inequities and leading to students of color beginning their post-secondary educations in community colleges (Community College Resource Center, CCRC; 2020).

Table 2
River Bend Community College District and College Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Region Total</th>
<th>Region %</th>
<th>College Enrollment</th>
<th>College %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>219,809</td>
<td>50.3</td>
<td>6,980</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>217,473</td>
<td>49.7</td>
<td>8,974</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>16,205</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan</td>
<td>375</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Native</td>
<td>33,352</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>1,071</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>112,254</td>
<td>25.7</td>
<td>6,291</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Islander</td>
<td>267,369</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>6,053</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6,472</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose not to respond/unknown</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Adapted from River Bend Community College (2019).
Table 3

RBCC Faculty Demographics Compared to Student Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Faculty</th>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>Number</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>208</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>6,980</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>266</td>
<td>58</td>
<td>8,974</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American/Black</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>732</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American Indian/Alaskan Native</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>&lt; 1</td>
<td>125</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>1,071</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic/Latinx</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6,291</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>26</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>364</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>6,053</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>1,196</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Two or more races</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td></td>
<td>6,472</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Choose not to respond/unknown</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>700</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: RBCC C1 Report, 2020

Likewise, the racial diversity of RBCC’s faculty population is consistent with research indicating that U.S. educators are primarily White and female (American Association of Community Colleges, AACC; 2018; NCES, 2020a). According to the RBCC Human Resources department, in 2020, 58% of RBCC’s 536 faculty members identified as female, and 77% identified as White. Although the majority of students at RBCC are students of color, the majority of faculty are White. As a result, Black students who have most likely moved through their K-12 experiences with few if any teachers whose experiences of race coincide with theirs are likely to find similar mismatches when they matriculate to RBCC.
College Readiness and Student Success Data

Although community colleges are open access institutions, college level courses at most community colleges require students to demonstrate their readiness to complete work in reading, writing, and/or math, depending on the discipline of the course (CCRC, 2020). Such developmental courses “have been present on college and university campuses in one form or another since the very beginnings of American higher education” (Boylan & White, 1987/2014, p. 5). However, RBCC did not require students to demonstrate “college readiness” before enrolling in certain college level courses until 2006. Before that time, RBCC’s developmental courses were often recommendations but not requirements for enrollment in many college level courses. However, RBCC found that students who demonstrated a need for developmental reading and writing but did not enroll in requisite developmental courses were generally not successful in transfer-level courses that required college level reading and writing. As a result, RBCC instituted a policy of “minimum competencies” in 2006 to increase student success in college level courses. Over the past 14 years, RBCC’s minimum competency standards have evolved to include multiple measures and to reflect state expectations for uniform expectations across community colleges. In 2020, students wishing to enroll in gateway sources like English composition, psychology, sociology, and biology must demonstrate “college readiness” in reading and writing either by achieving a high school GPA of 3.0 or higher, by meeting the designated standardized test scores, or by meeting designated scores on reading and writing placement tests (Figure 1). RBCC uses the McCann College Success reading test and an in-house on-demand writing assessment for students who do not meet other college readiness measures shown in Figure 1. Although some research indicates that students who complete developmental
courses both nationally and at RBCC are more successful in subsequent college level courses and therefore more likely to complete their postsecondary goals (Jaggers & Stacey, 2014; RBCC internal data), Jaggers and Stacey (2014) also indicate that developmental courses can have negative or no effect on students’ subsequent college success. Additionally,

Research suggests that the impact of remediation may vary depending on student demographics….For instance, assignment to remediation tended to have significant and large negative impacts on …female students, on students who were younger than 25, and on Black students. (p. 4)

Figure 1. RBCC options for demonstrating reading and writing college readiness.
Thus, college readiness standards, based largely on standardized testing and GPA, also serve a gatekeeping function that disproportionately impacts Black male students. The “college readiness” rates of RBCC students are reflective of NAEP data, with Latinx and Black students demonstrating lower rates of literacy readiness than the student population as a whole (Figure 2). Although readiness rates for Latinx students are significantly lower than the overall college readiness rates, the readiness rates for Black students demonstrate crucial disparities which are compounded when readiness rates for Black students are disaggregated by gender (Figure 3).

Figure 2. Percentage of 2019 high school graduates testing “college ready” in reading and writing at River Bend Community College.

Figure 3. Percentage of Black 2019 high school graduates testing “college ready” for reading and writing.
Also consistent with national data, Black male high school graduates demonstrate higher developmental need than Black females and male students overall. Additionally, Table 4 shows inequitable success rates in developmental literacy courses as well as overall course success rates with Black students demonstrating the lowest course success rate (70%) of any demographic at RBCC according to the 2019 Underrepresented Groups Report (FY2018). Achievement data demonstrate that ongoing educational inequities require more attention.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Overall course success rate</th>
<th>Overall withdrawal rate %</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Developmental literacy course success rate</th>
<th>Developmental literacy withdrawal rate %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All students</td>
<td>57,677</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>811</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Not Pell eligible students</td>
<td>33,299</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>337</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Pell eligible students</td>
<td>24,378</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>474</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Latinx/Hispanic students</td>
<td>23,010</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>475</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Pell Eligible Hispanic/Latinx students</td>
<td>11,210</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>184</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pell Eligible Hispanic/Latinx students</td>
<td>11,800</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>291</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Black students</td>
<td>2,618</td>
<td>59</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not Pell eligible Black students</td>
<td>736</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pell Eligible Black RBCC students</td>
<td>1,882</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Developmental Literacy Courses at RBCC

At RBCC, a process of multiple measures determines if students are required to complete developmental literacy courses (see Figures 4 and 5), and students’ scores on the reading and writing placement tests determine which developmental courses are required. RBCC offers one stand-alone developmental reading course, one corequisite model developmental writing course, and one integrated reading and writing course. The stand-alone developmental reading course, titled Advanced Academic Reading and Inquiry (RDG 91) is a one-semester course that is intended to “develop students to successfully read complex academic texts. RBCC recommends students to take this course if their placement scores require only one reading course or if they are also eligible for the corequisite writing course. RBCC English faculty implemented the corequisite writing course following the Community College of Baltimore County Accelerated Learning Program (ALP model). Students enrolled in the ALP course concurrently enroll in the college-level English Composition (ENG 101) course taught by the same instructor. Up to 10 of the 20 students in selected ENG 101 classes are concurrently enrolled in the coupled ALP section. These students attend the ALP class sessions immediately following the ENG 101 class sessions. The ALP section provides supplementary instruction needed to help students succeed in the ENG 101 course. Although the practices of individual instructors vary, texts and assignments for ALP students are primarily based on the texts and assignments from the ENG101 course. At RBCC, students can enroll in both the ALP and RDG 91 if their reading and writing placement scores determine that they need some development in both areas. If students’ placement test scores indicate lower skill levels than those required for enrollment in ALP and/or RDG 91, students enroll in the IRW course (LTC 099). The IRW course is RBCC’s newest developmental
literacy course and was designed to increase student success and accelerate students’ transition to college level coursework. LTC 099 is a five-credit course that provides students the opportunity to develop reading and writing competence and demonstrate college readiness within one semester. For all developmental literacy courses, students must pass with a C or better to transition to college level courses.

Figure 4. College readiness reading measures (RBCC Reading and Writing Placement Guide, 2020)
Recruitment and Participants

In this study, the bounded system, or case, was one midwestern community college. Erickson (1986) indicated that because teachers and students in U.S. public schools are “the people who hold and share the meaning-perspectives that are of interest [and] are those who are themselves overlooked as relatively powerless members of society” (p. 124), they are the especially appropriate participants for qualitative research. Merriam (1988) indicated that an essential determination in selecting case study methodology was the ability to define a bounded system. Because the purpose of ethnography is to develop insight into a culture sharing group (Merriam, 1988; Purcell-Gates, 2011), the participants for this study were from one Midwestern suburban community college using criterion, non-probability sampling (Merriam, 1988).
Recruitment

Through emails and personal conversations, I recruited six potential participants for the study and secured the participation of five. To fit within the bounded case, three essential criteria were necessary for inclusion: a) participants were White; b) participants were female; and c) participants taught either RDG 91 or LTC 99 developmental literacy at RBCC. Because of the close alignment of the ALP texts and assignments to the ENG 101 texts and assignments, I did not include in my consideration instructors whose only developmental courses were ALP.

White female developmental literacy instructors meet the typical case selection strategy (Merriam, 1988). Of the 48 English faculty members at the community college, 30 (62.5%) are female, and the six instructors of RDG. 91 or LTC. 99 courses are White and female. I recruited these six instructors for the study with the goal of 100% participation. Only one of the six members of the bounded case was unable to participate. I did not incentivize participation in the study, but I encouraged participants’ engagement by sharing our common concern for student success of students and the impact that this study could have on our understanding of one factor in that success. I excluded from the study both men and non-White females whose insights might be valuable in a different study but who do not fit the bounded system of this study.

Researchers in collaborative and reciprocal ethnography have employed various terms to identify those from whom they collect data in their research. Terms like “subjects” reinforce the power differential that collaborative and reciprocal ethnographies seek to reduce, so researchers have instead used terms like “participants,” “informants,” or “collaborators.” I have made two specific choices in referring to the five educators who worked with me on this study. I refer to them as “participants” when describing the study design and methodology, but when referring to
their pedagogy and their instructional decision making, I refer to them as “instructors.” At RBCC, educator titles such as “instructor” and “professor” are designations within the labor contract and are based on levels of education and years of teaching experience. As a result, one educator may be an “Instructor” while another “Assistant Professor I” or “Professor II.” As a result, technically, in the context of this institution, I did not feel I could accurately identify all the participants as “professors.” Since “instructor” is the first title on the salary scale at RBCC, referring to all participants as “instructors” maintained anonymity and avoided the complexities of title designations in this institution.

The Participants

The five participants brought to this study a range of teaching experiences and perspectives that enriched both the data the study generated and our conversations about the data. Table 5 provides an overview of the relevant background for each participant.

Table 5

Study Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Generation College Student</th>
<th>Years Teaching</th>
<th>Status at RBCC</th>
<th>Developmental Courses Taught at RBCC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clare</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elisabet</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>Full-time tenured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jean</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>Full-time tenured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margo</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Full-time tenured</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Adjunct</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I was fortunate in the study to have participation from both adjunct and full-time instructors because the differences in their positions created different points of view important to understanding the culture in which they teach. Two of the five participants, Clare and Wanda, were adjuncts at RBCC at the time of the study, and Jean, Elisabet, and Margo were full time instructors. At RBCC, full-time instructors are required to teach at least 30 credits over the regular academic calendar (excluding summers), generally divided into two 15-credit semesters. Except for the five-credit LTC 99 course, all courses in the English department are three credit classes. Adjunct (part-time) instructors are allowed to teach between eight and ten credits per semester and are paid on a per-credit basis. Both adjunct and full-time instructors are required to hold office hours, and adjunct faculty are welcomed, but not required to participate on college committees. Some college committee positions are paid positions for adjunct professors. I include these details about workloads and expectations for adjunct instructors because, although RBCC’s adjuncts are part of the bargaining unit and, as a result, have some benefits not accorded to adjuncts in other colleges, the adjunct role remains a low-paid position which often results in these instructors working several jobs or working at several institutions. The time management and stress associated with the adjunct role arose frequently in our conversations.

The instructors’ range of experiences also provided for rich data collection. The five participants had taught at RBCC for an average of 13 years, and all had experiences teaching outside of RBCC either as adjuncts at other postsecondary institutions or in K-12 settings. In addition to their experiences teaching at RBCC, the participants drew on teaching experiences from graduate assistantships and preservice K-12 assignments in discussing the experiences and theories that informed their instructional decision making. All five had taught either the LTC 99 course or the ALP course, but also taught college composition courses and/or literature courses.
at RBCC or other institutions. These other teaching experiences were germane to the information they shared and to elements of their pedagogy. As experienced instructors of developmental as well as college-level courses, the participants shared a frame of reference for students’ academic trajectory through the English program at RBCC and held a common understanding of the intended alignment of course objectives and outcomes. In their academic backgrounds, all five participants had earned a Master's degree in English, reading, or a related field, but also held various levels of expertise in social work, physical sciences, world languages, and gender studies.

The participants’ areas of interest and expertise provided unique insights and perspectives. In addition to the formal academic background that qualified them to teach developmental literacy courses, all five had also completed additional coursework in postsecondary reading and thus held a common knowledge base from which to engage with each other and with me in discussing their instructional decision making. Finally, the participants held a range of expertise in multicultural awareness and sensitivity. All had attended several multicultural awareness and “diversity” workshops through RBCC, but all had also pursued cultural competence through their reading and professional conferences and workshops. Because they held a common background in diversity and multicultural awareness, they were able to reflect and discuss their engagement with race in some depth.

These five instructors’ perspectives and insights form the majority of the data I collected. Both their unique individual experiences as well as their shared experiences as developmental literacy instructors in one community college provided rich data from which we developed an understanding of their engagement with race in their instructional planning.
Data Collection

Because ethnographic and case study research stipulate multiple sources to determine patterns and themes across the individuals of the bounded system (Creswell, 2007, 2012; Merriam, 1998), I used three data collection methods—individual interviews followed by focus groups and collection of relevant documents—as well as reciprocal processes, to triangulate information on how these instructors engaged race in their decisions about texts and text construction in their classes. Triangulation helped to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the data by providing both corroborating and conflicting data points that could be further explored through the reciprocal ethnographic interviews and focus groups and throughout the analysis process (Merriam, 1988; Miles et al., 2014). Additionally, following reciprocal ethnographic methodology, each cycle of interviews, focus groups, and document analysis deepened the groups’ meaning making. Initial semistructured interviews provided the data from which I drew initial codes, which I explored further through focus groups and document analysis. Subsequent semistructured interviews and focus groups provided the instructors with opportunities to reflect on and respond to my interpretations of the data and to provide their interpretations as well. In recruitment materials, I outlined a series of 2-3 interviews and 2-3 focus groups, intending to continue the process until no additional information was forthcoming. In fact, after two individual interviews and two focus groups, both the participants and I felt that they had little more to add about their engagement with race in their instructional decision making, and I felt I had sufficient data from which to determine the study’s findings.
Following reciprocal ethnography methodology, I began the study by conducting individual interviews with each participant. Due to the COVID 19 pandemic, my participants and I met virtually through Zoom for all interviews and focus groups. I had planned for individual semi-structured interviews of 45-60 minutes, but in fact, most interviews ranged from 60-90 minutes. In some cases, I met with individuals on two separate occasions to complete one interview, either to allow for further discussion or to accommodate unexpected internet connectivity issues. I recorded both audio and video through the Zoom platform and recorded audio only on a separate device using Otter.ai.

For the interviews, I used a semi-structured approach that would encourage participants to share their experiences and expertise in an open dialogue, to act “more as participants in meaning making than…conduit[s] from which information is retrieved” (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006, p. 314). I developed interview protocols for both first and second interviews (see Appendix A), but following a semi-structured design, I was free to explore each participant’s unique experiences by following unique threads of our individual conversations. Observing these instructors in their classrooms might have allowed me to interpret or infer the values and beliefs that drove the instructors’ decision-making, but the individual interviews allowed for direct exploration of the instructors’ meaning-making which observation alone could not capture or could distort (Weiss, 1994). Interviews provided an opportunity to understand what could not be observed and to collect data about how individuals saw and made meaning of the events in their environment (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Merriam, 1988); therefore, I asked the instructors to explain the kinds of decisions they made about instruction in developmental
literacy classes and to consider the ideological basis of those decisions. (See Appendix A for interview protocol).

As White women, I anticipated that the participants would bring their own White middle-class female habitus to their instructional decision making. In fact, understanding the influence of that habitus was integral to the design and theoretical framework of the study. Therefore, I had shared with the participants during the recruitment process that the focus of the study was educational inequities for Black male students and they had signed consent forms that disclosed the purpose of the study. However, being aware of the stages of relationship-building in an interview process (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), I followed Harlow’s (2003) recommendation in beginning each interview with questions that drew on areas of their lives or their teaching that were relatively conflict-free. Specifically, aware that conversations about race can trigger strong emotions for White folks (DiAngelo, 2018; Flynn, 2018; Helms, 1990), I did not begin any session specifically asking about race. Instead, through questions designed to evoke participants’ backgrounds and teacher narratives (Brock et al., 2006; Elsworth, 1989; Griffin, 2013; Zembylas, 2000), I sought to establish an interview partnership (Weiss, 1994) and a basis for understanding the ideology and pedagogical practice on which their instructional decisions were based.

Through this process, the participants and I jointly constructed meaning (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Lawless, 1991; Sitzia, 1999; Vogt et al., 2012). We benefited from common ground as postsecondary educators, and our conversations were often peppered with tangential conversations about the joys and struggles of teaching remotely\(^1\) and shifting campus policies as

\(^1\) Although RBCC does not normally offer developmental literacy courses either online, during this study, all RBCC classes were taught remotely due to COVID-19.
we all adjusted to life in a pandemic. Although I approached each interview session with a sequential list of questions in an interview guide, I anticipated and intentionally allowed for such tangents, and I did not try to adhere rigidly to those interview guides (Kvale, 2004; Merriam, 1988). I allowed each participants’ answers to drive much of the conversation and added follow-up questions which often resulted in one instructor following an idea or train of thought that did not arise in any other instructor’s interview. In practice, for instance, this semi-structured format meant that Margo’s first interview explored her career change to teaching and the influence of her previous experience on her teaching whereas Jean’s first interview explored less about her decision to become a teacher and more about her transformational learning experience as a study abroad student. As each interview progressed, I often found myself referring back to the interview guide, checking off questions I hadn’t asked but that had been answered in the context of a different question and circling back to questions that had been asked but not answered because of a tangential conversation. In this way, too, the interviews often took on a conversational pattern that invited the instructors to talk freely and honestly. During the interviews, I also reminded the instructors that I was asking difficult questions that didn’t have “right or wrong” answers. I sought to reassure them that I was more interested in their reasoning than in their defense of educational theory or policy.

Focus Groups: Conversations About Practice

After I analyzed the individual interviews (see below), following Lawless’s reciprocal ethnography process, I provided each participant with a transcript of her interview, as well as a list of codes or questions, and asked her to read and consider her transcript in light of those initial codes or the focus group preview questions. Although traditional qualitative researchers
encourage asking participants to verify the accuracy of the researcher’s account, they discourage providing participants with transcripts or raw data (Creswell, 2007). However, in conducting reciprocal ethnography, Lawless (2019) provided her participants with transcripts of their interviews and used focus groups as an opportunity for a “sharing and building knowledge based on dialogic and shared/examined/reexamined knowledge” (p. 100). For this purpose, after each interview cycle, and following my transcription and analysis of those interviews, I invited the instructors to meet as a focus group.

I had initially anticipated 45–60-minute focus groups. In actual practice, we met for two focus groups of 90-120 minutes each. Like the individual interviews, the focus groups were held on the Zoom platform through which I both audio and video recorded. I also created an additional backup audio file. For the first focus group, I was able to gather all five instructors at the same session. However, conflicting teaching schedules and family obligations led to two separate meetings for the second focus group. Clare, Jean, and Wanda came together in one focus group, and Elisabet and Margo met in the other. Conversation among participants was more constrained in the first focus group, in which all five instructors participated together, than in the second focus group in which participants were in two smaller groups. The difference in levels of interaction between the first and second focus groups may be attributable to group size, but it may also have been the result of the instructors’ increased familiarity with each other and with the study’s process.

Because the participants were all White women teaching developmental literacy courses in one community college, they shared characteristics relevant to the purpose of the study, and this shared background facilitated the development of shared meaning within the group (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Following the process of reciprocal ethnography explained...
by Lawless (2019), the focus groups also followed a semi-structured process (see Appendices B and C for focus group protocols), building on questions, common themes, and contradictions from the interview transcripts. As with the individual interviews, I approached each focus group with a sequential list of questions, starting with questions that did not focus explicitly on race. However, during the second focus group, I also invited the instructors to take ownership of the conversation and let me know which questions or codes were especially interesting or worthy of exploration for them.

Through the examination of their instructional decision-making processes as documented in individual interview transcripts, the focus groups provided the participants the opportunity to collaborate in drawing connections between the codes and questions I had identified from the individual interviews (Henk et al., 2011) and their own experiences. It was not unusual, for instance, for one of the instructors to follow up with another for clarification or to connect her own experiences to another instructor’s experience. As Vogt et al. (2012) indicated, focus groups “can . . . be good for stimulating brainstorming. People help one another to come up with ideas. Groups can actually learn in discussions, and the researcher can chart the process of learning” (p. 42). In the case of this study, the instructors did not do much brainstorming, but they did engage in productive teacher talk and asked each other questions about assignments or activities that others found effective. Wanda’s reflection on the process was representative of comments from several others. “Anytime that I get to talk about teaching with other teachers, I feel like I benefit…. It’s oddly reassuring that some of my colleagues struggle with the same things that I do in regards to doing right by the students.” The focus group, therefore, provided an opportunity for the study participants to collectively reflect on the ways their experiences and instructional processes were similar to and different from their fellow White female colleagues’ experiences.
and processes. The focus groups also provided opportunities for the participants to theorize as a group on the role race played in those experiences and processes. Thus, the data collection process of interviews followed by focus groups was not just informational but also pragmatic (Dressman & McCarthey, 2011).

In keeping with CRT’s social justice imperative, the focus group process was particularly important because the focus groups provided an opportunity for essential dialogue between participants about the ways that they did (or did not) engage race in their instructional planning. As a result of the data collection and analysis processes, the study participants and I explored the positionality of White female literacy instructors and thought critically about how their instructional decision-making addressed or did not address inequitable educational outcomes. Elisabet revealed that “participating in the project […] made me recognize […] where I can […] improve my interactions with students. […]. Most importantly, […] it made me realize how much I do not know about race and how to help students from other racial backgrounds.” By facilitating talk among the participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), the focus group also allowed them to engage in critical dialogue about educational inequities. Their shared essential characteristics of gender, race, and professional roles, provided a basis for shared experiences (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006), which allowed them to work toward a shared understanding of opportunities and options available to them in managing the intersections of race and gender within their classrooms. The instructors’ occasional silences or expressions of frustration or doubt during the focus groups exposed the complexity of such intersections (Windsong, 2016),

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2 In reporting participants’ speech, I have transcribed verbatim, including participants’ pauses and repetitions. Throughout, I use … to indicate a pause in a participants’ speech and […] to indicate where I have deleted wording from the transcription.
and the semi-structured design of the focus group allowed the participants to explore and recognize those complexities. In the second focus group, as I pressed the instructors to really examine their word choices, we began to develop an understanding of both the individual and structural levels of meaning in their choices (Strauss, 1990). The purpose of these conversations and understanding was not to determine a single solution to educational inequities or to point out individual faults, but to begin to imagine how, as educators with class, gender, and race positionalities, they could play different roles in creating equitable opportunities for the RBCC students. These critical discussions were the social justice imperative of the study.

While I made an effort to establish a comfortable conversation style with each instructor and with the entire group, the lens of my theoretical framework kept me ever conscious of the need to go beyond superficial discussions of teaching practice to understand the instructors’ engagement with race. As a result, throughout the interview and focus group process, I asked questions and followed up on them to probe for the instructors’ experiences, to move them beyond the tendency to say the “right thing” that they had learned in their reading or professional developmental (Connelly & Pelzer, 2016, p. 52). For example, I often asked the participants to tell me about an experience in their own lives or with a student to show me the points or beliefs they were explaining – urging them to provide specific examples that would anchor their generalized statements of instructional practice. Frequently in interviews and focus groups, or follow up emails with participants, I would draw the instructors back to previous questions in the same or earlier interviews to seek more depth or check for changes in their thinking. Such recycling was especially important for questions instructors had struggled to answer. For instance, I suggested they look back at their interview transcripts and compare what they said in the first interview to the second. In the first interview, for example, Jean had indicated that a
particular Black male student was resistant to public feedback but was “never rude.” In a second interview, Jean referred to a Black male student who was withdrawn and resistant to participate in collaborative work. In a follow up email with Jean, I questioned if the Black male students she referred were the same and asked her to clarify the difference in her perceptions of these two interactions. Similar follow up questions occurred during interviews and focus groups as I sought to deepen my participants’ exploration and my understanding of their engagement with race. Additionally, at the end of every interview and focus group (and sometimes during both), I paused to review my understanding of what had been said – “So what I am hearing you say is _______ Is that accurate?” – and to invite the instructors to add to or amend my understanding as needed. In this probing, I sought to better understand the intersection of instructors’ pedagogical beliefs and their and engagement with race and not to impose a preconceived meaning on them. As part of this probing and clarification process during interviews and focus groups, I also watched for instructors’ mention of documents and materials they used in their teaching. Thus, my memos, coding, and developing analysis provided ideas and understandings which I shared with the participants during the focus groups. This process of taking analysis back to the participants provided the opportunity “for further elaborations of categories and refinements of theoretical constructs” (Cheyney, 2008, p. 256) and increased my confidence that I was accurately understanding and representing the instructors’ praxis. By taking my interpretations and questions back to the study participants, I promoted the reciprocal nature of data collection and interpretation.
Asking the participants to share lesson materials and assignments they had used or created also helped me to gather deeper and richer data. When the instructors mentioned documents and materials used in their teaching and relevant to their engagement with race, I asked them to share these documents. At RBCC, instructors are evaluated regularly, and those observations include an evaluative review of course syllabi and lesson materials. Thus, RBCC has a culture of asking for class documents within an evaluative framework. To avoid initiating an assessment context in the study, I did not ask for documents before the first interview with each participant and instead requested materials based on information that arose organically during the interview and focus group process.

These documents included portions of syllabi, rubrics, and instructional materials such as visual aids and activity instructions the instructors gave to the students. For instance, Clare mentioned an “ally statement” and a “student code of conduct” in her syllabus as examples of ways that she promoted cultural competence and safety in her classroom, so I requested that she share those statements with me. Similarly, Jean referred to discussion posts that she used to “talk about race when we discuss the reading,” and I asked her to share the discussion prompts that she used to guide students in those posts. Sometimes, I would request copies of these documents during the interview or focus group, but often I first recognized the potential value of such documents after transcription and initial analysis. In either case, I sent the particular participant an email reminding her of the topic(s) that had prompted the mention of specific documents and requested in writing that she share those documents with me. Although I was not concerned about collecting documents from one instructor and not another, in the course of data collection,
With the focus group and interview data, the documents I asked for and received from all five instructors provided for triangulation of ideas across datasets. The instructors’ teaching materials, which had been carefully developed and revised over time (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) provided useful artifacts of how the instructors’ pedagogical beliefs were made concrete in the classroom.

In the design of the study, I had intended to share these documents with the participants and ask them to reflect on them as a group; however, in actual practice, I chose not to do so. Although the documents provided me with triangulation of ideas (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Creswell, 2007, 2012; Maxwell, 1996; Vogt et al., 2012) that had we had begun to explore through interviews and focus groups, on closer examination, I determined that none would have substantively advanced the focus group discussion. In some cases, the documents themselves reflected the consistent stances of the whole group. For instance, the “student code of conduct” Clare referenced as an important part of assuring student safety and comfort did not differ substantially from the other instructors’ or the college’s student conduct policy. In other cases, the documents confirmed but did not add new information about previously discussed ideas and practices. Wanting to respect the time that these instructors were devoted to my study, especially during the unanticipated stress of the pandemic, my decision not to bring these documents into the focus groups was guided by a concern for using the focus group time as effectively as possible to deepen and extend discussion rather than to revisit understandings the instructors had already shared.
Reciprocal Ethnographic Process

In conducting this study, I followed Lawless’s model of reciprocal ethnography, seeking multiple data sources not only for corroboration of meaning in the data but also to deepen my understanding and the participants’ understanding of the data. Because reciprocal ethnography provides uniquely intersectional methods for data collection and analysis, I include here a brief explanation of the processes I used to include the study participants in the analysis process.

During our conversations in interviews and focus groups, I shared relevant tenets of critical race, Whiteness, and intersectionality theories to validate, question, or deepen the responses participants shared. For instance, during the second interview with Elisabet, I asked how race was represented in the texts she used. Her response included her interpretation that when she “use[d] things about… like Erik Erikson or Maslow, or right? Like the psychology type theory or, you know, sections from textbooks. So, with those, there's not really race or gender.” From my journey studying Whiteness, I was aware of the raced and gendered position of her statement, but she was not. Rather than document that statement as evidence of her Whiteness, I discussed with her the invisibility of Whiteness. The exchange shown below demonstrates how, by communicating to Elisabet a shared White tendency to not see race in a standard psychological theory, I was able to nudge her toward more critical thinking about race in her texts. Additionally, however, the dialogue helped me to uncover an openness to seeing that Whiteness, a capacity that she might not have had the opportunity to reveal if I had tried to take a more objective position in the interview.

Alison Douglas: Right. So, we say, “Well it’s psychology, it doesn’t have race….”

Elisabet: But it does,
AD: But it just happens to be White. Yeah. Okay.

E: Well, that’s like that’s the hard part it. Yes, everything has race and gender, right, because every author has something, but we go back to, when we talk about culture. I don’t know about you, but I am always like I don, I’m not Irish I’m not…right whatever….I don’t….Do I have a culture? I don’t know. But of course, you do it’s just a White middle-class culture.

AD: It’s just transparent because your culture is what you think of as normal.

E: Right, exactly.

AD: And that’s not meant for you to feel guilty about it.

E: No, it’s not and…right. And it’s…and I don’t…I don’t think I feel guilty about it. I just…it’s normalized, right?

In addition to communicating the theories that informed my study, throughout the recursive process of individual interviews and focus groups, I shared transcripts and my emerging interpretations of them with participants, both to avoid misinterpretation (Maxwell, 1996) and to extend the meaning-making process. After the first interview cycle, I emailed all participants a table of codes with exemplifying interview excerpts (Appendix D) along with their uncoded interview transcripts. The email included the following which invited the study participants to consider, question, and add to my findings and to participate in the analysis and interpretation process by marking relevant passages in their transcripts.

As you read your transcript, please note any comments or ideas that surprise you or that you would like to say more about. As I discussed in our first session, I am not asking you to correct your transcript but to think about what in it is interesting or curious or worth additional reflection. After you have reviewed your transcript, please open and review the “topics” list that I have also attached. I found many topics of interest woven throughout the conversations I had with the study’s five participants. The attached list identifies and explains five of those topics which I would like to explore more during our first focus group. I would like you to read the list and the explanations, and then review your transcript again, noting any instances in the conversation that appear to be relevant to the listed topics. Our focus group conversation will focus on your discussion of these topics both in the first interview and in other instances of your teaching experience.
Given the time constraints, the instructors were under as a result of remote instruction during COVID-19, I chose to provide them with some guidance for their review of transcripts but also to allow them to add or reject interpretations according to their understanding and analysis.

Adhering to this process, discussion of my interpretations of their interviews during the first focus group was informative, but I found that the participants were less likely to volunteer feedback or examples of findings and more likely to respond to direct questions about them. As a result, for the second focus group, I altered the process, sending “preview” questions for the focus group that included findings but also focused the instructors on the questions I had about those findings (see Appendix C for full focus group 2 protocol). These are sample Focus Group 2 preview questions for cultural competence:

I heard many instances of cultural competence. For instance,

1. Awareness of the race and opportunity gap
2. Selection of culturally responsive texts
3. Assignments that allow for student choice
4. Awareness of culture as a lens for seeing the world
5. Humility – You know that you don’t know everything

When you look at your transcripts, where do you see instances of cultural competence? What would you add or amend in my list?

   a. Where does your cultural competence come from? What experiences, training, or informal learning have helped you to develop your cultural competence? What steps do you take to “curate” your learning beyond your own racialized and gendered position?
Providing more direct guidance for instructors in this way yielded more feedback from the instructors, and they appeared to be more prepared to respond to my questions during the second focus group than they had been during the first. My efforts to scaffold and facilitate their interactions with the data allowed the instructors to represent themselves rather than being represented by my interpretations (Lassiter, 2001).

Conversations about race are likely to be uncomfortable for White folks (DiAngelo, 2018; Flynn, 2018; Helms, 1990). Participating in a study that explicitly sought to understand White female literacy instructors’ decision making to understand and address educational inequities for Black male students carried the potential for additional discomfort. Through these reciprocal ethnographic processes, I sought to balance the power in the study as much as possible. Providing the participants the opportunity to counter my interpretation of findings and to provide interpretations of their own also invited participants to engage in the critical work of examining their pedagogy through the lenses of CRT, Whiteness, and intersectionality.

Data Analysis

Given my theoretical framework and the social justice imperative inherent in that framework, my analysis in this study is unambiguously political. Analyzing collected data within the frameworks of critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality, I explored how engagement with race affected instructors’ decision making in developmental education instruction from a social justice lens. I was intensely interested in what these instructors knew and believed about race and racism and how their knowledge and beliefs were manifested in their teaching. Within qualitative research, approaches to analysis vary from inductive to deductive, semantic to latent, constructionist to critical realist (Braun & Clarke, 2019).
political and social justice framework of this study, my analysis was mainly inductive, building
categories and themes from the data, and constructionist, in seeking to understand how the reality
of developmental literacy instruction is created by the data. In my analysis, I examined both the
explicit (semantic analysis) content of the data as well as the concepts and assumptions (latent
analysis) that underlies the instructors’ explanations and instructional planning.

Because each interview and focus group built on those that had preceded it, my data
analysis process was ongoing and concurrent throughout the data collection process, a practice
that is common to many qualitative data analysis practices (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012;
DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006; Glaser, 1965; Miles et al., 2014; Strauss, 1990). The iterative
nature of the analysis was most evident in the many memos that punctuated the study. From the
first interview to the last focus group, the memos I wrote not only documented my thinking, but
also fostered the development of codes, directed my additional research, and clarified my
thinking about the data. My thinking also progressed through conversations with peers I enlisted
to balance the Whiteness of my perspectives. I describe my analysis process below, explaining
each phase from transcription through defining and naming themes; however, the linearity of
written text conceals the circular and interpretive nature of the process (Sandaña, 2013), so
Figure 6 provides important visualization of my analysis process.

My analysis process focused on “organic” coding and theme development (Clarke &
Braun, 2018). Throughout the analysis process, I made efforts to remain aware of my
positionality and subjectivity through memos, peer checking, and reciprocal processes. Through
memos, I was also able to document the ways that the study’s findings did not just emerge but
that the codes and themes I generated across my data sets were informed by my own background
knowledge and experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This analysis process was consistent with
my positionality in a reciprocal ethnographic study. In my analysis of data, I followed these six phases (Braun & Clarke, 2012):

1. Familiarizing self with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing potential themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing report

This process helped me to move my analysis beyond semantic description toward the creation of thick themes that could address the social justice imperative of the study.
Familiarizing Myself with the Data: Memos, Memos, Memos

In familiarizing myself with the data, I followed guidelines of qualitative researchers recommending memos or analytical notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Charmaz, 2007; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016; Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 1996; Saldaña, 2013) as a way to generate initial thinking about codes and themes, and begin defining and naming themes. Writing memos, whether they were long-hand notes on paper, typed bulleted lists, diagrams, or carefully crafted “thought pieces,” was the most significant and most often repeated phase of my analysis. This informal writing helped me to maintain my awareness of my positionality and to think through the ways it informed my analysis. As Figure 6 demonstrates, all phases of my analysis led back to memoing or moved forward based on memos I had written. Immediately following each interview, I drafted memos that documented my thinking about both the process of the interview and the information I collected. I continued to write memos throughout the transcription process as well, and I wrote memos after interactions with my dialogue partners. These memos both helped me track my thinking and prompted me to make connections between the data I was collecting and relevant research.

Sometimes, these memos were clearly articulated questions or observations that followed from my initial experience with interview data. Such memos created an audit trail of my thinking throughout the research process and allowed for crucial interaction with the data (Birks et al., 2008; Connelly & Peltzer, 2016). Writing and then re-reading memos helped me remain cognizant of where my thinking about the data had started and how it evolved throughout the study.
Initially, I organized and focused individual memos based on each instructor’s interview. So, after the first round of interviews, I had memos for each instructor. I found that these individual memos helped me to think through unique responses and characteristics of each instructor; however, toward the end of the first round of interviews, I realized that my thinking about the culture the instructors described was fragmented by memos focused on each individual. Therefore, I also began keeping “metamemos” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 48) especially focused on emerging themes. For instance, I began to notice, across the instructors’ responses, variations of “I don’t know” in answer to questions that investigated their deeper understanding of structural racism. After documenting this response (and discussing it with my dialogue partners as described below), I began a new metamemo exploring both the instructors’ “not knowing” and research about not knowing (see 3.14). This epistemic injustice metamemo evolved as an ongoing document in which I collected instructors’ comments relevant to a potential theme of epistemic injustice and also began to draw connections between their comments and theoretical literature about epistemic injustice. This was also a case in which the instructors’ comments led me to additional research. In my research prior to designing the study, the term “epistemic injustice” had not risen to the front of my consciousness, but in thinking through the instructors’ “I don’t know” responses, I returned to research and theory emphasizing that the study of literacy “is the barrier as well as the invitation to mainstream life” (Stuckey, 1991, p. 43). Thus, memoing drove additional explorations of the literature and, in this case, a renewed awareness of the role of Whiteness in epistemic injustice. This analytic memo and my thought processes around it also led me to add Whiteness to the theoretical framework of the study. As I continued the interviews and focus groups, I also began to connect ideas about epistemic injustice with a
sense of the ambiguity several of the instructors expressed regarding academic writing, and I recorded such reflections in this metamemo as shown in Figure 7.

Epistemic injustice – Applebaum, Fricker, Medina, etc. focuses on ways that dominant group members are willfully ignorant, or even willfully ignorant of their ignorance – of ways of knowing and frameworks of knowledge that are outside the dominant. Consider how this is relevant to participants – in what ways do they recognize what they don’t know? And what do they do about it?

At times, my metamemos also took the form of drawings or diagrams, and these visual representations helped me to see the connections between data points and organize my thinking (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Saldaña, 2013, p. 44). Again in reference to the issue of time constraints, during Jean’s first interview, which followed Clare’s, I sketched an image of a teacher in class, constrained by the walls of the classroom, by the rules and regulations posted on her classroom walls, by the perceptions of her colleagues, and the clock (Figure 8). I also used more formal diagrams as part of the memoing process, as shown in the diagram of “engagement” in Figure 9. In this diagram, I sought to make sense of the many ways that the instructors understood and described student engagement, a primary topic that emerged in all interviews and focus groups.
Figure 8. Sketched memo of instructor constraints.

Figure 9. Engagement memo.
Whether sketched or typed or handwritten, I found, as Saldaña (2013) suggested, that my “private and personal written musing before, during, and about the entire enterprise [was] a question-raising, puzzle-piecing, connection-making, strategy-building, problem-solving, answer-generating, rising-above-the-data heuristic” (p. 41) that helped me track the evolving insights of the project.

**Familiarizing Myself with the Data: Deep Listening Through Transcription**

Not only memos but also transcription became part of the “before, during, and about” characteristic of my data analysis and reinforced the advantage of completing the transcription process myself. I recorded the audio of each interview and focus group as a backup to the Zoom recordings using Otter.ai, which also created an automatic transcript. The Otter transcripts from the Zoom session, however, were less complete and coherent than similar transcriptions I had previously gotten using Otter for live interviews. Otter caught enough of the wording of interviews and focus groups to save me some time in transcribing, but the incompleteness and frequent errors forced me to manually transcribe the majority of the recordings. I transcribed the interviews and focus groups verbatim, including stops, starts, and pauses, but did not attempt to document inflections or other verbal nuances as I was not anticipating using discourse analysis that would depend on that level of detail.

While the tedious transcription process was made additionally frustrating by the occasional garbled speech or frozen screen, I did not choose to have the interviews and focus groups professionally transcribed because my transcription became a researching and analysis process in itself. During this process, the subjective choices (Tilley & Powick, 2002) that I made in transcription confirmed my decision not to use a transcription service. For instance, when the
instructors’ conversations followed tangents not related to the study (discussion of pets and family members who walked on camera, for instance), I was able to decide which and how much of those tangents should be transcribed. Similarly, as I transcribed, I was able to replay the audio and video recording to make logical sense of audio that was garbled. Determining the relevance of tangential conversations and inferring wording from garbled recordings are subjective decisions that ultimately affected data analysis, and those subjective decisions needed to be mine.

Most importantly, however, preparing my own transcriptions slowed down my review of the interviews and forced me to become familiar with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012) more thoroughly than I would have by simply reading a professionally prepared transcript. As I transcribed the interviews and focus groups, I made marginal notes in the document I was typing as well as handwritten field notes on separate paper directing me to further research needed or reminding myself to check connections to literature I had already reviewed. A marginal note in a transcript, for example, directed me to “check Delpit and Foucault? Discourse of power??” in response to Elisabet’s comment that students “need to learn to communicate orally with people.” These field notes documented the inductive nature of my data analysis. Rather than sifting the transcriptions for evidence of critical race theory or Whiteness, I returned to research literature based on the data collected in the interviews. Similarly, I jotted in field notes during transcription an interview, “I think, but check this, that representations of men of color in their texts tend to be the ‘downtrodden trope but women of color are shown to have power and voice.’” Thus, my field notes and transcription cycled me back through the study’s growing data set. This note later led me to review the texts the instructors mentioned using in their classes but also caused me to add questions to the subsequent focus group about how race was depicted in the texts they assigned
to students. Thus, because I was note-taking and thinking while transcribing, the transcription process was an important step in the data analysis process (Maxwell, 1996).

Additionally, consistent with Braun and Clarke’s (2012; Clarke & Braun, 2018) process of RTA, I listened to each interview recording and made notes to help me begin to “see the data as data” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 60). In this process, the Zoom video recordings provided the added benefit of allowing me to listen to the interviews and focus groups, transcribe them, and watch them again as well. Because the pandemic shifted the study to virtual interviews and focus groups, I did not have the benefit of seeing the instructors’ body language and gestures to the extent I would have in face to face meetings. In addition, the attention costs of managing a Zoom call as well as an interview sometimes meant that I was not looking at each instructor while she was speaking in real-time as I would have been in a face to face interview. As a result, the video recording of instructors’ facial expressions was important to me in understanding their meaning.

Thus, the iterative process of listening, watching, transcribing, and writing memos facilitated my initial analysis as well as the documentation of initial codes on which I built subsequent interview and focus group questions in search of confirmation or negative-case analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012; Merriam, 1988; Miles et al., 2014; Strauss, 1990; Wagner, 1968).

Familiarizing Myself with the Data: Close Reading

After transcribing and memoing, I printed and carefully read and reread each transcript. Re-reading memos I had written after the initial interviews gave me some insights that informed that close reading process. Figure 10 documents some of the initial insights drawn from the first-round interview memos. The column in which the written phrases occur indicates the
participant’s memo in which I first mentioned this idea. The ✓ mark indicates that the same idea appeared in a memo I wrote following another instructor’s interview.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Clare</th>
<th>Elisabet</th>
<th>Jean</th>
<th>Margo</th>
<th>Wanda</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making connections ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Feeling out of depth ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with non-White experiences</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Valuing help-seeking ✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowing students ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fiddling with ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>something during ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>interview</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Mothering/nurturing ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not being aware of ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Whiteness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Determining teacher ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>persona through title ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(Mrs., Professor, ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>etc.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Helping students ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Feeling constrained ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in leading discussion ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>about race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Recognizing ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students who are ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>only</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Seeing student ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>resistance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓ Shifting race ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>conversation ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(economics, ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>culture, ESL)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓</td>
<td>Recognizing ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>students’ ✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>life balance issues</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 10. Partial list of insights from first interview memos.
It is important to note that I did not create the chart shown in Figure 10 during or for the data analysis process. I created it for this dissertation document to explain the contribution of close reading and memo writing for my analysis process. My memos and this chart indicate that from the beginning, I was comparing and contrasting what I learned from each instructor to what I had learned from the previous instructors’ interviews as I read and reviewed the interview transcripts. Thus, the memos I had written informed my close reading which further informed my thinking about the data I was seeing and helped me to connect ideas in the data across interviews.

Before I began coding the interview transcripts, then, I had already begun to think about ideas that wove through the transcripts. When I printed and sat with each transcript, I simply read, sometimes stopping to correct errors in my transcription, and sometimes documenting in field notes other ideas and connections as they formed. Because the interviews were spread over several weeks and followed by additional days of transcription, taking the time to re-read all the transcripts in one setting helped me to become aware of the entire set of data to that point.

**Initial Coding: Writing and Refining**

After I had read through the entire data set, I began initial coding by re-reading each transcript and marking everything that might be of interest. In drafting initial codes, I was conscious of the research questions that drove my study (Clarke & Braun, 2018; Saldaña, 2013), but I did not limit my notes to information that directly answered those questions. Instead, I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2012) advice that while focusing on material relevant to the research questions, initial coding should include any data that is potentially relevant, allowing for numerous initial codes that may be clustered or collapsed during later analysis with further data. Although I was aware that ideas arising from only one instructor might be of some interest but
not necessarily indicative of a culture, I continued to list and document all ideas that seemed 
relevant or interesting, even if they only occurred in one transcript. I remained open to the 
possibility that what appeared to be a single concept voiced by one instructor could be connected 
to a larger concept voiced by many. In short, my mantra during this initial coding phase was 
“just write it down.”

After reading and coding all five first interview transcripts in this manner, I copied my 
handwritten list into a typed table (Table 6), and in that process began initial axial coding 
(Saldaña, 2013) by subsuming ideas that appeared to be related under larger codes. This was a 
complicated and time-consuming procedure that required frequent rereading of the previously 
marked transcripts as well as memos and field notes. For instance, both Elisabet and Clare 
narrated life experiences in which they had determined a need for greater professional 
boundaries – Elisabet with her co-workers and Clare with her students. In their transcripts, I had 
marked “boundaries” and had added “boundaries” to my list of initial codes. In the development 
of a more refined code list, however, I realized that the idea of “boundaries” was in some cases a 
gendered experience of limiting sexual advances or perceptions of such advances, and in other 
cases, a less overtly gendered experience of the instructors’ shielding themselves from toxic (but 
not necessarily sexually charged) work environments. As a result of this deeper analysis, I split 
the idea of “boundaries” and subsumed each part under the two larger and more commonly 
expressed codes of “fear/vulnerability” and “Sexual/bodily awareness.” In a similar case, in my 
initial unrefined list, I had documented “teacher influencing,” but during the process of 
reviewing my initial codes, that idea became part of two larger initial codes – “relationships/ 
connections” and “coaching/encouraging.” I realized that I had to make my coding more
descriptive to capture the nuanced ways that the instructors described teachers’ influence on students.

Table 6

Sample of Initial Coding Chart

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help Seeking</td>
<td>Teachers’ expectation that students seek help and clarification of tasks through questions and check-ins during class, after or before class, during office hours, or by email.</td>
<td>“She came to my office all the time.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Asking for help is super hard.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“She was always checking in, just to make sure she understood.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helping/Support</td>
<td>Teachers’ orientation that their role is to help students</td>
<td>“It’s…connecting students with the resources they need.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationships/Connections</td>
<td>Teachers place value on their relationships with students and their ability to facilitate relationships between students</td>
<td>“Those individual connections are really important to me.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I try to keep them really engaged with each other.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Having a common bond made it easier to understand where the students were coming from.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the process of refining my initial codes, I also recognized the need for simultaneous coding (Saldaña, 2013), acknowledging that one section of a transcript could “fit” well in more than one code. Using simultaneous coding, I worked to maintain my awareness of the many
points of view from which I could analyze an individual piece of data (Figure 11). Sometimes, these different points of view only developed after repeated reading and thinking about the interview data. For instance, Margo told a story about an early teaching experience in which she “was more of a hardnose on things like grammar and making sure they knew grammar.” From a semantic coding standpoint, Margo is talking about grammar – a topic that I eventually linked to epistemic injustice – but her word choice (“hardnose”) also reveals latent concerns about teachers’ power and what has value in literacy instruction. Additionally, from a more contextualized perspective, Margo’s self-critical relating of the time in her teaching life when she was a “hardnose” also demonstrates her awareness of her growth and development as an educator. Initially, I had coded Margo’s story about her early approach to grammar instruction as “instructor development/growth,” but subsequent readings and identification of other codes from other interviews led me to simultaneously code this story as also “academic literacy,” and “power.”

Figure 11. Sample of text with simultaneous coding.

The outcome of this refining process was a table for my reference in which I listed the initial code and included several representative samples from the transcripts for each code as well as brief definitions of each code. This process generated 28 initial codes (see Table 6 for a
sample of the initial coding chart. See Appendix D for full document. I did not try, at that point, to merge the refined codes into any sort of themes.

In keeping with the reciprocal ethnographic case study methodology, my next analytical step was to share transcripts and initial codes with the instructors and to schedule the focus groups. At that point, I chose to further group the initial code list through axial coding (Saldaña, 2013) from 28 initial codes to five codes (Table 7). I reduced the codes I shared with the instructors for three reasons. First, some codes on my initial code list were still quite tentative, and I had not yet seen linkages between them and my research questions or theoretical framework. On the other hand, I chose not to include other codes, like “conflict avoidance” because although it appeared to be relevant to both the instructors’ engagement with race and the theoretical framework of the study, I wanted to explore that idea in more depth individually before asking the instructors to discuss it with others in a focus group. Finally, I also chose to reduce the list I shared with the instructors to allow sufficient time to deeply explore, in a 90-minute focus group, what I determined were five codes most significant to my research questions.

I continued the process of initial coding, from inductive open coding through refinement of codes, through both rounds of interviews and focus groups. After the first focus group, I revisited the initial code list to make additions and refinements. Likewise, after the second round of interviews, I compared the notes and transcript codes from the two rounds of interviews, adjusting codes and definitions as needed. In some cases, this comparison resulted in more renaming and redefining. For instance, from the first round of interviews, I had identified a code of “control” which I defined as “Teachers’ efforts to manage the classroom and the behaviors/actions of individual students in the class.” From the second round of interviews, I
### Table 7
Refined and Abbreviated Axial Initial Codes for Focus Group 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Relationships/Connections  | Teachers place value on their relationships with students and their ability to facilitate relationships between students. Teachers see these relationships as related to success for students | “Those individual connections are really important to me.”  
“I try to keep them really engaged with each other”  
“Having a common bond made it easier to understand where the students were coming from.” |
| Engagement                 | Teachers’ understanding of what constitutes student commitment and dedication to their education and the course | “participating . . . doing what they’re supposed to be doing”  
“I try to provide . . . interesting topics. . . but engagement and motivation [are] such internal things”  
“If they’re just trying to get the grade . . . it’s not like they’re really generating interest in the subject . . .” |
| Help Seeking/Support       | Teachers, expectation that students seek help and clarification of tasks through questions and check ins” during class, after or before class, during office hours, or by email. AND Teachers’ orientation that their role is to help students | “She came to my office all the time”  
“Asking for help is super hard.”  
“She was always checking in, just to make sure she understood.”  
“It’s . . . connecting students with the resources they need . . .” |
| Mothering/Nurturing        | Teachers’ use of mothering attitudes & behaviors in working with students. Teachers’ awareness of the impact of their teaching on mothering and their mothering on teaching | “I am a nurturer.”  
“They see me as motherly”  
“Like I tell my own kids . . .” |
| Control                    | Teachers’ efforts to manage the classroom and the behaviors/actions of individual students in the class, including teachers’ efforts to enforce academic norms like attendance and due dates. | “My teaching was pretty rigid and prescribed . . . all planned out.”  
“I felt like the teacher was the all-knowing power”  
There is a “constant back and forth” with due dates.  
“I have had to loosen up” |
documented a related code of “power” with subcodes for power imposed or experienced in the classroom and power imposed on teacher’s instructional planning that was external to the classroom. Comparison of data over the whole data set resulted in subsuming “control” from the first interviews into the code of “in class power” and then reallocation of other “control” codes to either “homework/work ethic,” “respect” or “comfort/safety.”

Thus, with each subsequent interview or focus group transcription, I conducted additional analysis, clustering, adding to, and refining codes that indicated patterns in the data and documenting ideas or interpretations that were common across the data sets (Braun & Clarke, 2012). During periods of analysis, I paused frequently to create analytical memos (Miles et al., 2014) detailing my thinking about the categories and my coding process.

**Dialogue Partners: Do You See What I see?**

Throughout the data analysis processes, I worked with four dialogue partners: Arlene, a Black female professor of sociology; Miguel, a Chicano professor of psychology, Rigoberto, a Latinx college administrator and doctoral student; and Markus, a Black male doctoral student colleague. These four individuals met with me virtually on an as-needed basis to discuss the codes and potential themes I was developing as well as the “the assumptions I was making in coding the data and things I might have overlooked” (Braun & Clarke, 2019). I specifically requested the partnership of these four colleagues because their racial experiences were different from mine and could provide a counter to my potential biases as a White professor interpreting the Whiteness of other White instructors. I valued the insights provided by these dialogue partners to address questions of analysis and especially to provide additional points of view for experiences of Whiteness.
After I had created and refined my initial code list (see Appendix D) following the first round of interviews, I met virtually with Arlene. Although she was willing to review the actual transcripts, I instead asked her to review and share her responses to the refined code list. Because she was a fellow professor at RBCC, Arlene knew the participants personally. I was concerned that the personal nature of the first interview questions, coupled with Arlene’s familiarity with the developmental literacy instructors, could have resulted in the unintentional disclosure of confidential information. Despite these restrictions, the conversation about the initial code list helped me to strengthen my focus group questions. For instance, I had been drawn to the instructors’ many references to mothering and nurturing and their feeling of rejection when students did not seem to “like” or “connect with” them. Arlene identified this as a point of White privilege explaining that White women may be surprised or threatened if their motives and likability are questioned and not accepted unconditionally. This line of discussion was one of many cues that I needed to add Whiteness theory to my theoretical framework. Arlene was equally strong in her response to the instructors’ description of themselves as learner centered instructors and “facilitators.” An excerpt from a memo following this conversation with Arlene summarizes her responses (Figure 12). Like the instructors in this study, I had been encouraged by conference presenters and college administrators alike to shift to learner-centered teaching. Arlene’s rejection of the instructors’ avoidance of direct instruction provided me with an alternate lens from which to think about the assumptions behind their “facilitator” stance.
I had similarly helpful exchanges with Rigoberto and Miguel via email when I encountered sections of transcripts that I felt needed an outsider’s point of view. As a student of CRT himself, Miguel was particularly helpful, as Arlene was, in shining a light on the invisible normalcy of the White experience. One consistent challenge I had throughout the study was the instructors’ apparent deflection of questions that asked them to focus specifically on race. When I shared an example of this deflection with Miguel, he responded, “I’m not sure the response tells you much about how literacy is associated with race, but it sure tells you a lot about this [instructor’s] experience in schools.” This exchange with Miguel did not change my perception that the instructors were avoiding the race-focused question I had asked, but it deepened my analysis by helping me to see how the instructor’s responses reflected a White dominant experience. In a similar exchange, I shared with Rigoberto and Miguel my struggles to make clear sense of the idea of “help.” This semantic code appeared in the interview transcripts in two ways: One was the instructors’ sense that their job was to help developmental students. The other was their consistent conviction that the students who were successful in developmental literacy courses were the students who asked for help – students who asked questions in class, who
emailed professors for assistance, who came to office hours repeatedly, and who were constantly checking their understanding against the professors’ meaning. I shared these two instances of “help” with Rigoberto and Miguel in separate conversations, and both indicated that the assumption that help seeking was a natural behavior is an element of institutional racism – the participants were observing and expecting a behavior that seemed natural and logical to them as White women – to ask for help when they don’t understand. But they may not have recognized the social and institutional impediments to those behaviors for non-White students. My conversations with Rigoberto and Miguel continued informally throughout the study and provided me with a helpful point of view to contrast my own and to help me broaden my awareness of the Whiteness in these areas of the transcripts.

On the other hand, Markus provided a much different contrast to my perspective. In Markus’s case, I shared two entire transcripts, one that I had coded and one that I had not. I asked Markus to review the coded transcript and document where he agreed or disagreed with my analysis. My recent immersion in Whiteness theory (after several exchanges with Rigoberto and Miguel and after incorporating Whiteness into my theoretical framework) had increased my awareness of Whiteness. But it may also have created a confirmation and availability bias (Kahneman, 2011), given the number of times I had marked “Whiteness” on the transcript I shared with Markus. While Markus confirmed that the instructors’ hesitance to talk about race was like “walking on eggshells,” and that not knowing how to talk about race was “a form of denial,” his reading of the transcript also provided additional potential codes I had not considered. With my increased and recently refreshed awareness of Whiteness, I appeared to be too quick to see the instructors’ Whiteness and not as open as I could have been to their competence. Markus suggested, for instance, that the instructor’s recognition that they did not
know everything about race coupled with their willingness to admit that lack of knowledge was a sort of cultural competence and humility. Thus, from my conversations with Markus, I added two additional codes to my list – cultural competence and humility. Bringing these two codes into the last focus group (see Focus Group Preview Questions, Appendix E), really opened up the instructors’ conversation. Elisabet, in particular, identified with the concept of “humility,” and reflected that “You called it ‘humility,’ which I like. … Like, I don’t know what I don’t know. And so, I am starting to question more about what it is that I need to know more about.” From a social justice perspective, adding “humility” and “cultural competence” to the codes by which we analyzed and discussed the instructors’ engagement with race helped Elisabet to step into an increased awareness of her responsibility to learn more.

Searching, Reviewing, and Refining Themes

Consistent with expectations for qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Clarke & Braun, 2018; Merriam, 1988; Saldaña, 2013), my data analysis process was recursive and iterative, so throughout transcription, memoing, and ongoing coding, I was also searching for and reviewing codes and thinking about themes. Across the analysis process, my intent was two-pronged: to map out ideas and attitudes repeatedly identified by the instructors concerning their engagement with race and to explore key ideological and conceptual patterns in the data. In my search for themes, then, I was looking not just for topics (ie., “gender,” “selecting texts,” “engagement”) that surfaced in the data but for meaningful phrases or sentences that accurately told “the story about the ‘so what’ of the data” (Clarke & Braun, 2018, p. 109).

As I indicated above, in the progression from the first round of interviews to the first focus group to the second round of interviews, I continually revised my list of initial codes. After
the second round of interviews, I had again transferred ideas from memos and marginal transcript notes into a chart similar to the initial codes chart from the first round of interviews (see Appendix E). However, in this second coding list, I had begun to group similar codes under axial or umbrella headings. For instance, I had an axial code for “power” that was comprised of several more specific codes including “external power,” “classroom power,” “language of power,” and “resistance to power.” Moving my thinking from these topics to fully realized themes required additional memoing and analysis. Following the second round of interviews, I had begun to “identify…broad topics or issues around which codes cluster[ed]” (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). After examining these clusters of codes, I began to construct themes that embraced and meaningfully expressed the relevant clusters. The first step in this process was simply identifying the most salient findings. After some consideration, I had listed twelve possible topics:

- Engagement
- Connections
- Text selection
- Text creation
- Help seeking
- Whiteness
- Interest convergence
- Onlyness
- Academic vs. authentic writing
- Deflecting
- Constraints
- Power

The second step in this phase of searching for themes was mapping the themes to tell a unified story of the instructors’ engagement with race in their instructional planning. I began to play with wording and searched transcripts and memos for language that would effectively
express the themes. Thus, rather than simply “engagement,” I appropriated as a theme Wanda’s straightforward description of engagement -- “Doing what they’re supposed to be doing.”

Checking this phrase across all datasets, I felt confident that it created an effective umbrella for the instructors’ overall efforts to promote student engagement. Following a similar process, the name for the third theme “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ experiences” evolved. Initially, I had used Elisabet’s wording “Making them comfortable because learning is so social” to designate instructors’ efforts to create a safe and comfortable class environment. However, checking this phrase across all datasets helped me to recognize that instructors were concerned about comfort and safety for themselves as well as their students. As a result, the initial theme title was too focused on the learning process and not inclusive enough of the teaching process. Instead, the phrasing of “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ experiences” which also came from Elisabet’s transcripts, demonstrated her concern for her students’ discomfort, but also and equally important, her discomfort with their discomfort. Thus, “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ experiences” more accurately expressed the instructors’ tendency to promote safety by avoiding explicit conflicts to which they or their students might respond negatively. In drafting the wording of the themes, I used gerund phrases to “connote action” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 278). Similarly, rather than the single topic of “relationships” or “connections,” I realized that the semantic code of “connections” referred both to interpersonal and intertextual relationships, and therefore gave voice to a tentative theme “Developing productive relationships: Instructors promote student connections.” Review of such tentative themes required reconsideration of the entire data set to check for fit and to make sure I had not left out data that was relevant to my research questions or the purpose of my study.
Ethical Considerations

This study posed several ethical considerations. First, the study engaged White women to talk about the extent to which they engage race in their instructional planning. Because of their positions of privilege, these conversations likely caused some anxiety and discomfort for instructors who had not fully examined their positionality or their lack of knowledge about race. I sought to minimize my participants’ anxiety and discomfort by creating a safe and comfortable environment during the interviews and focus groups, by reminding the participants that they could choose not to answer questions that they were not comfortable with, and by assuring them throughout the study that the questions I asked were not easy and that we were on a journey together to understand more to improve educational opportunities for our students. The reciprocal ethnography practices I followed also gave the participants more ownership of the interpretation and analysis, and, I hope, a greater sense of comfort in disclosing their thinking.

Confidentiality was another important ethical consideration because the instructors shared personal information about the life experiences that had influenced their thinking about race and racism. I sought to minimize concerns for instructors’ confidentiality by providing each participant with an informed consent form detailing the potential risks and providing the option for her to withdraw from the study at any time. I kept all transcripts, notes, and documents in a locked file cabinet in my office and on a password protected computer to maintain participants’ confidentiality. Additionally, in all written documentation of the study, I used pseudonyms to refer to the participants and removed any personal identification.

Ethically, I was also aware of the interest convergence of this study for myself, as a White female studying educational inequities for Black male students (Harper et al., 2016;
Lamos, 2012; Sleeter, 2017). Although I am committed to the social justice focus of this study, it is also true that I benefit materially, socially, and academically from engaging in this study at this time. Earning an advanced degree through the completion of this study will increase my salary and professional standing. In addition, the current political climate, from the Black Lives Matter movement to the mainstream visibility of blatant White supremacy makes this study particularly relevant. On my campus and in my community, the focus of my dissertation could grant me levels of expertise and access that a different literacy-focused dissertation would not. This interest convergence is not something I can ameliorate but a reality of which I am aware and which I can balance with continued commitment to improve the teaching of developmental literacy and to redress the inequities that impact Black male students in community colleges. These ethical considerations were shared with both NIU and RBCC through their IRB processes.

Trustworthiness

Maxwell (1996) noted that the validity of results cannot be guaranteed by any single process or procedure. Rather, the validity of the study’s results depended on how well the results and interpretations of the study reflected the real experiences and decision-making processes of the study participants. Reciprocal ethnographic processes have helped to create a strong relationship between the study’s conclusions and the participants’ experiences and thought processes. In addition, multiple data sources not only deepened the understanding of the study’s themes but also reduced the risk that I drew conclusions too quickly or based on too little data (Creswell, 2007; Lather, 1991). Furthermore, the memos I wrote throughout the process of the study provided an audit trail of my evolving thinking and the developing thoughts of the participants. These memos also provided a record that I reviewed frequently as I analyzed the
data and made recommendations based on my findings. Likewise, my four dialogue partners provided insights and feedback that helped me to align my conclusions to real world experiences (Maxwell, 1996).

Assumptions and Delimitations

The theoretical framework of this study acknowledged and assumed the structural nature of racism in the U.S. and recognized the interest convergence that has led to modest gains for Black men in the U.S. I recognized that as a White woman and researcher, my interests in this study converged with the anti-racist interest in reducing educational inequities for Black male collegians. The choice to study White female developmental literacy instructors stemmed both from the convenience of access and from an assumption that White women will continue to dominate developmental literacy education and that without individual and structural changes, Black male students will continue to experience more developmental literacy placements than other demographic groups. My focus on White female literacy instructors assumed that although the structures of racism are inherent in U.S. culture, individual educators can impact individual students through increased awareness of the ways they do or do not engage with race in their instructional decision making.

Summary of Chapter 3

This chapter provided a detailed description of my study’s research methodology. I designed this ethnographic case study to gain a better understanding of the cultural context in which White female developmental literacy instructors engage with race in their instructional planning. The case was bounded by one community college as well as by race and gender,
creating a typical case for understanding the culture of developmental literacy instructors in one community college. I designed the study using a critical lens that encompassed critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality that impacted the questions I asked as well as the methodological and analysis process I chose. Through reciprocal ethnography I sought to reduce the hierarchical representation of study participants by inviting my participants to work alongside me to analyze, problematize, and conjecture about the impact of race on their instructional decision making. Finally, acknowledging my positionality and subjectivity as the researcher, I reviewed and analyzed the data sets from interviews, focus groups, and document analysis using a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) approach. In Chapter 4, I discussed the results of my analysis, and in Chapter 5, I explore recommendations and implications for postsecondary developmental literacy instruction.
CHAPTER 4
FINDINGS

In this study, I employed a critical lens that encompassed critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality to understand how five White female developmental literacy instructors in one midwestern community college engaged race in their instructional planning. Specifically, I asked how these instructors engaged race in selecting texts, in planning for text-based classroom learning activities, and in designing text-based written assessments. Using reflexive thematic analysis and reciprocal ethnographic processes, as discussed in Chapter 3, I developed themes across datasets collected from across all data sources including interviews, focus groups, and document analysis. In addition, using reciprocal ethnographic processes, I refined my analysis in collaboration with the study participants. As a result of this process, I ultimately determined that three overarching themes elucidated the ways these instructors engaged race in their instructional planning for developmental literacy instruction. In Chapter 4, I share this analysis, bringing together the instructors’ voices to highlight the philosophies and principles as well as the uncertainties and hesitations which shaped their instructional planning. Chapter 4 is organized according to three themes that address the research questions of this study.

Themes in Reflexive Thematic Analysis

As discussed in Chapter Three, in my data analysis, I followed the process for reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) advocated by Clarke and Braun (2019). I sought to create “fully realized themes” in phrases drawn from my analysis and from the participants’ own words
(Clarke & Braun, 2019; Connelly & Pelzer, 2016). As a result, in Chapters 4 and 5, instead of the word “findings,” I use the term “themes” to refer to the three overarching ideas I drew from the data. The three themes that best addressed my research questions were:

- Theme 1: Engagement: Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing
- Theme 2: Connectedness: Connecting Any Way You Can
- Theme 3: Comfort and Safety: Avoiding ‘Oh My God’ Experiences

Together, these three themes provide valuable insights into the thought processes and rationales that frame engagement with race in instructional decision making for the five White female instructors in this study. Throughout the chapter, I refer to the themes by the phrases drawn from participants’ words. I maintain title case capitalization and quotation marks when referring to the themes in the text of the chapter to clearly distinguish the names of the themes for readers’ ease.

Often, this section of a dissertation is organized according to the research questions that guided the study. I chose not to follow that organizational pattern because it would have resulted in unnecessary repetition in some cases and fragmented analysis in others. To clarify, the data I collected in the course of this study did provide answers to my queries regarding instructors’ engagement with race in their selection of texts as well as their design of activities and text-based assessments. However, the instructors only explicitly identified race as a factor in text selection. For instance, as I will discuss below, in several cases, the instructors engaged race in selecting texts in which students of color could see themselves or which elevated racial diversity or current racial issues. They engaged race in order to engage students and in order to help students make connections to course texts. Thus, in selecting a set of articles about protests following the killing of George Floyd, Clare sought to engage students by engaging race – centering a current and
racially-charged issue as the focus of a class unit. However, Clare’s explanation of class activities disregarded race as a factor.

You know, I pair them up for a lot of things, for giving each other feedback ... on each other's work, whatever they were working on [ ...], or put them into small groups of three to discuss a reading or to work with each other on some sort of group activity in class.

Clare’s description was indicative of all five instructors’ reflections in regard to their design of class activities. They tended to describe their design of class activities and assessments as general practices, not unique activities based on a specific text. They used jigsaws, collaborative groups, poster sessions, and discussion boards for class activities across a number of texts and topics. They assigned informal reflections and formal essays as assessments of texts across topics. None of the instructors explicitly recognized race as a factor in planning activities or assessments. Thus, organizing this section of the dissertation based on research questions alone would have resulted in many examples of their sense that texts carried the race engagement for the entire unit but would not have shed meaningful light on their engagement with race in their design of class activities or assessments.

At the same time, structuring this section on the three research subquestions would have obscured and fragmented exploration of the ways the instructors implicitly engaged race in their instructional planning. As I will demonstrate in this chapter, the design of their class activities and assessments demonstrated the ways the five instructors engaged their assumptions about race as well as the ways they engaged their Whiteness. Often, however, their assumptions about race and their engagement of Whiteness intersected. For instance, their avoidance of race talk impacted both their design of class activities and their design of text-based assessments, and bringing those instances under the umbrella of “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ experiences”
strengthened evidence for the theme describing the ways the instructors avoided uncomfortable conflicts. Thus, organizing this section of Chapter Four around the themes I drew from evidence related to all five instructors’ text selection, instructional planning, and development of text-based assessments provided the most meaningful explication of the ways these five instructors engaged race in their instructional planning. Therefore, in the sections and subsections below, I discuss the three overarching themes that most clearly address my questions regarding the ways these five instructors engaged race in their instructional planning.

Reciprocal Ethnographic Processes of Data Analysis

In addition to RTA, the three themes I discuss in this chapter are also the result of reciprocal ethnographic data analysis processes. As I began to analyze the study’s data from the combined lenses of CRT, Whiteness, and intersectionality, I adjusted my interview and focus group protocols based on my developing analysis, structuring the subsequent conversations around sharing my findings with the study participants and inviting their reactions and analysis. Thus, after the first round of interviews, I refined the questions for the first focus group to draw the participants’ attention to my findings from those interviews, and during the subsequent focus group, I sought either confirmation and development of those findings or rejection of the findings and negative case evidence. Likewise, in my analysis of the first focus group, I refined and clarified the findings, and those refined findings informed the second round of interviews and the second focus group.

Thus, based on the five instructors’ responses in the first focus group and my subsequent review of the data, I set aside some findings that were interesting but did not provide a meaningful explication of my research questions. I noted, for instance, that four of the instructors
often referred to themselves and the students in their class as a collective “we,” as in “We needed to get through that assignment.” Although this discourse pattern was interesting to me, my review of the data did not uncover any connection between this pattern and those four instructors’ engagement with race, so I did not elevate it for the participants’ consideration. On the other hand, I did focus the instructors’ attention on findings that I determined addressed my research questions. For example, I sought verification of my analysis from Jean. “If I said to you that making people feel comfortable and helping them relate to texts and each other seem to be your themes, would that feel right?” Her agreement that “Yes, those are definitely my themes,” confirmed what I was drawing from the data. Similar questions and answers from the other four instructors led me to explore the ways their instructional planning explicitly promoted comfort and connections during the second focus group.

As a result of my analysis, guided and informed by these RTA and reciprocal processes, I determined that all five White female developmental literacy instructors in this study demonstrated three priorities in their instructional planning; these are the three themes I drew from the data. Theme 1, “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing” highlights instructors’ focus on keeping students on-task to accomplish the course objectives. The instructors prioritized student engagement and understood engagement as requisite (but not sufficient in itself) for student success. But they also recognized that to engage in developmental literacy work, students needed to feel a sense of belonging and community. As a result, Theme 2, “Connecting Any Way You Can” revealed the ways the instructors selected texts, planned class activities, and designed text-based assessments to facilitate students’ connections with their classmates, their instructors, and the class texts. Finally, because they recognized and valued students’ active learning and their collaborative construction of meaning, the instructors sought to create a safe
and comfortable learning environment that would invite students to engage. Therefore, they expressed serious concerns about conflicts students experienced with them, with the texts, or with their classmates. The instructors’ reflections on their pedagogical practice also revealed that avoiding conflict protected them as well as their students. Thus, Theme 3, “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences” emphasized the strategies the instructors employed to create a safe classroom environment and to avoid confrontations and conflicts that would result in discomfort for them or their students.

Before I explain these three themes I drew from the research, a word about race is warranted. Because my research questions specifically asked how instructors engaged with race in their instructional planning, readers may question why race itself does not appear more prominently in the data I present, especially in the discussion of the first two themes of this chapter. In Chapter Four, I share the instructors’ explicit references to race within the discussion of each theme. I encourage readers to absorb the data presented in this chapter and to listen to both what the instructors said and what they did not say. In Chapter 5, I discuss both the instructors’ words and the instructors’ silences about race.

Theme 1: Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing

Theme 1 highlighted the instructors’ planning focused on keeping students on task in and outside of class. Throughout the study, the five instructors emphasized student engagement as a priority which drove both their expectations for student conduct and their pedagogical practice. In their instructional planning, they intentionally designed lessons and assignments that would encourage and facilitate such engagement. All five instructors described engagement in terms of
observable student behaviors as well as less concrete measures by which they attempted to infer if students were “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing.”

Engaged Students Manage Their Lives

The instructors as a whole conveyed that promoting student attendance and preparation for class was one significant element of keeping students on task. All five of the instructors looked for concrete evidence of student engagement including regular class attendance and timely completion of assignments. In general, the instructors’ expectations coincided with Wanda’s description of students “coming to class prepared, and … doing the readings ahead of time …. And, you know, keeping on top of their work.” All five instructors focused their instructional planning to foster student engagement given the complexity of students’ lives.

Although they recognized the importance of regular attendance and completion of homework, the instructors also recognized that their students’ lives were “complicated” and that students’ ability to prepare for and attend class was often negatively impacted by competing responsibilities. In her first interview, Elisabet explained that she was not sure how to motivate students to attend class and complete their work because students’ lack of preparation and attendance resulted from “just their lives. Like, they’re trying to balance so many different roles.” Agreeing with Elisabet, in the first focus group, Jean noted that management of the complexity of student lives required,

Not just, like, time management maybe as we generically think of it like getting your homework done, but managing their lives and managing all of the different facets of their lives and making sure they … that school isn't completely separate from everything else.
Jean’s and Elisabeth’s agreement about the competing roles their developmental students played reflected the significance all five instructors placed on students’ integration of school into their already full and complex lives. The instructors also generally described a majority of their students as “first generation” college students and recognized the added complexity first-generation students faced in integrating their college experiences into familial cultures that did not include the first-hand experience of college. Clare, Elisabet, and Wanda, as first-generation students themselves, empathized with the added complexity of being the first to go to college. Clare explained that in an “ally statement” she had recently added to her syllabus, “I identify myself as a first-generation college student.”

In large part, the instructors’ empathy for their students’ complex lives derived from intersections they drew between their own life experiences and their students’ experiences. In individual interviews and focus groups, Wanda, Elisabet, and Margo all related stories of their college careers complicated by the demands of jobs and family responsibilities. In these stories, they signaled their understanding and empathy for their students. As Margo explained, “even myself as a graduate student, I wasn’t always prepared for class. Things come up, right?” Similarly compassionate, Jean, as a mother herself, empathized with students struggling to manage “all of the different facets of their lives and giving them[elves] space to be a student, which…is really hard for developmental students because they have a lot in their lives” including children, jobs, and family responsibilities. Clare indicated that she could understand some of the struggles her students faced adjusting to college because she had faced those struggles herself.

However, in our focus group conversation about the complexity of students’ lives, Clare and Margo explored the nuanced “push and pull” of students’ busy lives. Clare explained that the
complex lives her students lived helped them to develop an important level of responsibility and maturity.

A lot of my… my students … in the ALP section had full time jobs, and were either parents or, you know, had a lot of responsibilities in their homes, and I think that -- while that can pose a challenge -- I think it also means that they have those responsibilities, and so they tend to be more responsible with their … their schooling as well.

Thus, Clare, who was working full-time at one institution and teaching part time at three others, saw the complexity of her students’ lives as a potential asset but also recognized the hardships first generation students faced in developmental classes. However, in contrast to Clare’s perception that life challenges led to a strong work ethic, Margo emphasized that the complexity of life often trumped students’ hard work.

AD: So, Margo, go back to [the suggestion that] if I work really hard, I can succeed. So, your students overwhelmingly say, “Yes.” Right? Why is that not a true statement?

M: Okay, so another book I have used in class is, is written by a Ph.D. professor, Welfare Brat. He was raised in horrible circumstances by a mother without … having babies with all these different men and drugs, and everything … kicked out of their home. […] And then, you know, [his sister] ends up going and getting a Ph.D., right? […] So why did she succeed and why didn’t the others … “succeed?” What is success? Right? […] So, I agree that we work hard and put ourselves in good circumstances, that’s much more likely. But what about the person who ends up in a car accident? What about the person who ends up with a divorce? What about the person who…? I mean there’s so many outside things that I think that…

These excerpts from the first focus group demonstrate the similarities and differences the participants discussed in the meaning-making process of reciprocal ethnography. although the instructors agreed that successful students managed to work hard and attend class despite the complexity of their lives, Margo and Clare perceived students’ level of control over life circumstances differently. While they did not ultimately agree on students’ level of control, all five instructors did agree on the self-fulfilling nature of student engagement: students who
attended their developmental literacy classes regularly and completed their work were apt to be more successful in those classes.

To encourage students’ attendance and completion of homework, the instructors planned for transparent connections between assigned homework and class activities. Margo even relabeled “homework” as “CAPS – classroom activity prep rather than homework, right? So, they have to be prepared to participate in class.” In reframing homework in this way, Margo tried to convey to students the value of engagement in and outside of class. She explained:

I really try to genuinely think about how to use whatever I assign outside of class in class. Because I don't think there's anything I assign that, if I don't use it or find a purpose for it right away, that they're going to do, right? … So, I really try to be very conscious of it. So, [I say,] “You need to have this done so that you can participate and be active in the class.”

Although the other four instructors concurred with Margo’s emphasis on the necessary relevance of out-of-class work, they also agreed that “getting students to do” the work outside of class was a challenge. As a whole, they agreed on the necessary relevance of homework by any name. Margo, Elisabet, and Wanda also expressed concern that students who did not complete homework were less able to participate in the subsequent class period and therefore marginalized and potentially less likely to engage as the class moved forward. In fact, Elisabet wondered if her pedagogical practices regarding homework actually encouraged students’ absence rather than class attendance.

So, I try very hard to make sure that everything is connected in a logical way, so that way, they see, "Oh, if I don't do the homework, I can't do anything in class." But sometimes … I wonder if then they don't come to class because they didn't do their homework and then they don't want to do the next class. So that's something I struggle with. Right? How do I make sure that they're all . . . engaged?
Thus, in their instructional planning and assignment design, all of the instructors promoted student attendance and completion of homework both as indicators of engagement and as precursors to ongoing engagement. However, they also noted the cumulative impact of absences and failure to complete homework on ongoing engagement for the individual students.

Margo, Jean, Elisabet, and Wanda also noted that individual students’ lack of preparation and inconsistent attendance had a negative effect on the progress of the entire class and therefore on the effectiveness of their instructional planning. Wanda explained that if students came to class unprepared,

> How do we move forward so that we can…not lose time, right? Not just, like, standstill, or do you give them the class time to do the work now and then, the kids that have done it, what do they do while they wait for these other students who have not done it…? So, I mean, it makes for a lot of like thinking on your feet and what are we going to do next so that we don't like waste the day because these people are not ready.

Despite their empathy for students’ time management and life balance challenges, all five instructors also felt frustration with the way that students’ lack of engagement in class preparation activities led to lack of engagement during class activities and perpetuated a cycle of disengagement and lack of success for many developmental literacy students.

**Engaged Students Participate Verbally and Cooperatively in Class**

In addition to student attendance and preparation, the instructors’ understanding of “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing” also required in-class participation demonstrated by verbal interactions and collaboration with their classmates and the instructor. As proponents of active learning strategies in their classrooms, the instructors expected students to actively learn in the classroom. They planned their in-class activities to promote students’ participation in
individual, small group, and whole class activities and identified both individual and cooperative behaviors as characteristics of in-class engagement.

All five instructors expected that an engaged learner could work independently during class. Jean, Elisabet, Margo, and Clare noted that they deliberately planned for differentiated instruction to meet students’ individual needs but that such differentiation required a considerable level of independent cooperation from the students. For instance, Clare described an engaged student as “an active learner” but also clarified that engaged students must be able to self-monitor to stay on task. “I have had students […] who were not successful, who […] when we're doing in classwork, or an activity, they're on YouTube […]. They're not engaged with the material.” These four instructors indicated that independent focus allowed students to complete some coursework during class and potentially reduce their workload outside of class. Additionally, students’ ability to maintain independent focus allowed for differentiated instruction, as Margo explained, “so that they can be working on their writing in the classroom, and I can be helping them with it.” Thus, these four instructors equated engagement, in part, with following instructions and maintaining the self-discipline to focus on the assignment when given time to work independently.

When class activities shifted from individual activities to large or small group activities, the five instructors expected students to engage verbally in cooperation with their classmates and the instructor. In their interviews, they all explained that they planned activities that depended on students’ relevant contributions to class discussion but also planned for monitoring and coaching during small and large group activities. The five instructors cited both the number of students contributing and even the duration of class discussions as evidence of the activity’s effectiveness to promote student engagement and therefore student learning. Jean explained that an effective
assignment was one in which “students are engaged and… they're talking, and it doesn't take one minute to have our conversation, like it actually takes time.” Jean’s explanation reflected the five instructors’ agreement that students’ verbal interaction and cooperation were part of their assessment of an activity’s effectiveness. Because they perceived students’ verbal interaction and cooperation as an essential part of effective instruction, all five instructors planned for class discussions that generated student to student interaction rather than a more teacher-initiated pattern. For instance, they agreed that they planned small group activities that encouraged cooperative learning – as Elisabet explained, “having them talk to each other and figure things out.” The emphasis the five instructors placed on conversation within small groups reflected their expectation that through collaboration, students could construct meaningful texts about texts.

The instructors all agreed with my analysis that cooperation and collaboration were important to their instructional planning. Wanda’s conversation with me about that theme was indicative of the reciprocal analysis I engaged in with the other four.

AD: What I'm understanding is like, okay, so as you're planning a lesson you've got some things you want them to learn, but there's lots of ways you can have them learn that. You know, you could lecture them, you could have them do it independently, you could do small groups, you could do the posters on the wall, you can have them draw pictures, you can have them write. And as you're choosing that activity, you're making some decisions not only about what you want them to learn but how you want them to learn it, and how you want them to behave. Is that correct? Like, I think, I think there's, there's a picture in our head of “This is the way these students are going to do this activity.” But you don't want them to do it that way. Is that right? So, for instance, one of the things that several of you have said is that you struggle with in small groups, especially virtually, is that they do parallel play.

W: Oh yeah,

AD: That’s right? Okay. So, I hear you all saying, “I don't want parallel play. I want collaboration.” So, so that kind of thing. As you’re thinking through those activities and planning them and thinking, "Okay, I don't want them to do this. I want them to do that." So that's my question; what are those as you're thinking about the lessons,
what are the things you want them to do, or the things you don't want them to do and how are you trying to plan for “Don't do this.”

W: I think like something in terms of like making sure that they're actually collaborating, I will oftentimes say, "You need to talk to people at your table," or "You need to talk to your partner." Um, and I'll be explicit in saying, "You should not be breaking this up into 'you do this,' and 'you do this' right? You need, you need to be talking about [the questions] and, you know, working on them." And I'll explain to them like, "That's part of the learning process. Like I want you talking about these things because that's how you're gonna get to a better answer."

In this except, Wanda clarified that connecting was not just about completing an assignment or having a good time in class, but also and perhaps most importantly about connecting as a means to an end – as a way to “get a better answer.” The other four instructors echoed this connection. Margo specified that for her, the purpose of connections between texts and students was to allow students to gain “Empathy. You know, you want them to learn to not just be thinking inside their own heads about how they feel about everything.”

Thus, effective engagement, as the five instructors described it, included both give and take. Consistent with their view of themselves as “facilitators” and “coaches,” the five instructors designed class activities that provided opportunities for formal and informal feedback from peers and the instructor. Therefore, in addition to planning for students’ voices in large and small group interactions, the five instructors expected that engaged students would listen to their classmates and the instructor both as participants in discussions and as recipients of feedback. During small and large group work, students could receive feedback on their developing reading skill and writing skills. As a result, engaged listening suggested not just hearing but also heeding or responding to what others had said. Clare noted that “successful students tend to be those that are more engaged, … wanting that feedback,” but students who were not able to accept feedback struggled to remain engaged. As they monitored small groups or engaged students in large group
activities, all five instructors described ways that they questioned, redirected, and “coached” their students’ development of literacy skills. Clare, Jean, and Margo tended to see students who were unable or unwilling to receive such feedback as less engaged. For instance, Jean recalled a Black male student whom she struggled to engage in class because he “did not like to take any correction or feedback in front of the whole class. And so, he was very sort of, like, ‘I don't want to listen to you in front of the class because you're a woman.’” Jean was concerned about meeting this student’s needs because of his resistance to in-class feedback but found that he would engage with her and accept her feedback outside of class in one-on-one settings or written comments on his papers. Jean explained that this student’s behavior

Really irritated me at the beginning of the semester, and then . . . I… And then, reading things he wrote . . . it was a . . . he was a different person, . . . he was very thoughtful and very different, very, just like, courteous about everything that way.

To engage this student, Jean determined that she had to work with him individually and avoid calling on him in front of the class. Jean’s concerns with her student’s inability to engage as expected underlined the five instructors’ consensus that verbal interactions and collaboration were evidence that students were “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing”

Engagement in class activities also encompassed non-verbal proxies for participation, including students’ body language. In individual interviews, Jean and Margo both recalled specific students whose non-verbal behaviors indicated a lack of engagement. In the case of the Black male student referenced above, Jean noted that he appeared to withdraw when she called on him in class. Jean highlighted the physical response of another Black male student who appeared resistant to engaging in class activities.

I had a student last fall, who would like physically like sit on the side. [He would] not turn towards the group and like is very . . . He would talk to me like… conferencing… but it was hard to get him to like sit and talk about things.
This Black male student in Jean’s class maintained a physical distance from the whole class as well as from the small groups, and Jean reflected that although he was never “rude,” such physical distancing made engagement difficult. Similarly, one Latina made frequent appearances in Margo’s classroom reflections both in interviews and focus groups because of her apparent resistance to Margo’s instruction. Margo explained that “it felt like she would glare at me” and that “she’d sit there in class, and she just leaned back like this, like ‘What am I even doing here?’” Margo saw this student’s physical posture as not only a sign of disengagement but as an indication of personal animus – “she just did not like me.” Although both of the students that Margo and Jean referenced were students of color, neither Margo nor Jean identified these instances of non-verbal resistance as racially charged interactions.

On the other hand, Elisabet reflected specifically on the racial associations she had about non-verbal behavior, specifically eye contact.

I remember being in college when I first learned that many African Americans are taught not to make eye contact with authority figures, right? It is considered rude or disrespectful. And in my world, "Of course you make eye contact with people that's when you show that you're paying attention and that you're listening to them." And so, I think, you know whatever those values or beliefs are that we're raised with impact how we approach situations, whether in a classroom or work or friends or whatever.

Elisabet’s comment during an interview demonstrated awareness and some level of planning for cultural differences as well as an awareness of her own “world” as one of many perspectives from which student behaviors might be understood. Although they did not all explicitly recognize the Whiteness of their expectations for engagement, all five instructors did recognize that the engaged behaviors they expected might feel risky for their students, many of whom had not been successful in previous academic environments.
To ease the pressure to engage with a full class, all five instructors tended to alternate whole class discussions or lessons with small group work. During a focus group, Margo reflected the instructors’ consensus that “if you're in a group with three or four people, you know, it’s easier to kind of open up little by little.” Thus, all five instructors reported many small group activities both to prime students for large group discussions and to help them apply ideas and strategies taught in large group lessons. Through small group work, Elisabet planned for students to build a shared understanding of the lesson material but also to develop their own voices. She shared during a focus group that “I'm trying to encourage their own speaking and sharing of ideas …instead of just agreeing with what everyone says.” Through small group activities like “puzzle groups” or “jigsaws,” the five instructors planned for students to build understanding with one small group and then share what they learned and augment their learning with input from classmates in other groups. Clare noted that small group discussions created a safe space for students to prepare for large group discussions.

You know, I like doing small group discussions before we have full class discussions …, because I feel like that makes my students more comfortable. When I try to have full class discussions and nobody raises their hand, but then you put them into small groups, and they're talking all over the place and talking about what they're supposed to be talking about too.

In individual interviews as well as focus groups, the instructors discussed their planning for small and large group activities. All five instructors intentionally designed their instruction to allow students to practice and develop the engaged student behaviors they wanted to see.

Through small and large group activities, all five instructors also sought to engage students using a variety of learning modalities. For instance, in individual interviews, Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet referred to and then shared their handouts and instructions for “poster sessions” in which small groups documented their understanding of texts by creating posters and
then walked around the room to learn from and compare the posters created by other groups. Margo likewise discussed and shared her handouts for a “Gallery Walk” activity in which she selected and displayed visual images related to the class’s exploration of Rwandan genocide at stations around the classroom. She asked students to silently “visit each station and jot down your thoughts about the photo and its caption.” Instructions for this activity encouraged students to document their emotional responses as well as their questions and the connections they could make between the images and their prior knowledge and experience. Pedagogical practices such as these encouraged students to explore and develop their thinking through informal writing, to incorporate visual literacy skills, and to activate their kinesthetic and haptic modes. Even in remote instruction, all five instructors sought opportunities for students to interact in small groups. Clare, specifically, noted the use of group discussion boards in response to audio and visual texts as a means to address multiple learning modalities in a remote instruction setting. By allowing students to process their learning either individually or in small groups, instructors also hoped to increase student engagement and reduce the pressure on students to perform impromptu in large group settings.

Conversations in interviews and focus groups revealed that the instructors agreed with my analysis that an essential element of engagement in their classes was class participation, including collaboration in the class activities, talking during class discussions, and listening to feedback and ideas both from the instructor and from classmates. All five instructors planned for this kind of engagement through large and small group discussions and activities in which they encouraged students to test their ideas, practice literacy strategies, and receive feedback on their efforts. In conversations regarding their emphasis on engagement, the instructors concurred that
small group activities and collaboratively learning were their primary strategies for promoting student engagement during class.

Engaged Students Ask for Help

Data collected from interviews, focus groups, and class documents also indicated that in addition to managing their lives so they could attend and be prepared for class and then participate in class, students who were “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing” also asked for help and made use of campus resources. All five instructors frequently commented that students’ attendance and participation were not always sufficient for success. Stressing the unique combinations of skills and opportunities that each student brought to the developmental class, all five instructors reflected that although they worked to provide differentiated instruction through one-on-one opportunities in office hours and during class, they struggled to address each individual challenge during scheduled class time. Therefore, they explained that, in order to succeed, students needed to learn to ask for and accept help. As part of the reciprocal ethnographic processes, I discussed their expectation for help seeking with the instructors, and they concurred that in addition to regular attendance, completion of assigned tasks, and class participation, they linked help seeking with engagement. The five instructors recognized a variety of resources from which students could seek help, including the instructor, student peers, and college resources. Their instructional planning included lessons and activities to promote such behaviors.

As a first step, all five instructors expected students to ask questions and seek the instructors’ assistance, and they consistently declared that students who asked for help and accepted feedback were more successful in developmental literacy courses. Clare’s enumeration
of the ways that she expected students to seek help from her reflected a common expectation of all five instructors. Clare explained that help seeking included “asking questions, coming up to me, you know, before or after class, emailing me, wanting that feedback.” In addition, all five instructors also discussed that engaged students sought guidance and help from campus resources, especially academic resources like tutoring and reference librarians. All five instructors also encouraged students to make use of social support networks with family members and classmates. Margo described several informal alliances that arose between students in her classes so that students who fell behind or were confused on assignments had support in getting back on track. Margo encouraged students to share contact information with classmates to promote peer networks of this sort. Similarly, Clare encouraged students to use social media connections to create peer support networks. Especially during remote instruction, Clare wanted students to use social media to

Forge those connections outside of the classroom. And, you know, in a similar kind of way that they would if they were in face-to-face class and they could, you know, talk to each other before class and have their own personal conversations or ask each other questions.

Clare was unique in her deliberate facilitation of students’ social media, but her encouragement that students use social media was consistent with the instructors’ overall sense that students who were engaged would actively seek and offer help among their classmates. During an individual interview, Elisabeth recounted her delight when one of her students tried to help her struggling classmates by encouraging them to “Go see Ms. Elisabet!”

While they consistently declared that engaged and successful students made use of support systems available to them, all five instructors indicated that help-seeking behaviors often needed to be learned and practiced. During a focus group, when I shared with the instructors
Rigoberto and Miguel’s reflection that social and institutional impediments often limited help-seeking behaviors for students of color, the instructors readily supplied their own student examples of such impediments. Margo noted her awareness that students who perceive “a deficit and … don’t feel good about themselves, they’re less likely to reach out for help. Because I think that maybe they feel like something within [them] would [be] the problem.” Elisabet, Jean, and Margo also noted cultural associations with help seeking. Elisabet reported that “I know a lot of Hispanic males. And I think there’s some, ‘Oh, I’m too cool to ask for help’ or […] ‘I don’t want to look foolish by asking for help.’” During individual interviews, Margo and Jean both discussed reticence toward help seeking that they had observed in their Black male students’ behaviors. Margo specifically noted that she had learned at a conference that Black male students were likely to see help seeking as evidence of a deficit, and therefore were less likely to make use of campus resources. Margo also noted that RBCC’s tutoring service’s limited capacity created an institutional barrier that prevented her from requiring tutoring for all students to reduce the students’ deficit thinking.

Reflecting their awareness that help-seeking behaviors might require instruction and persuasion, all five instructors reported implementing a variety of strategies to encourage students’ help seeking. In course syllabi and during class sessions, they reported prompting students to ask questions by reminding them that help seeking was “good student behavior.” Margo explained during a focus group that students tended to think they were the only ones with questions, and she tried to dispel that misunderstanding. “If you’ve got a question, probably somebody else does […]. You aren’t the only one sitting there thinking that, you know?” All five instructors reported using some class time for one-on-one conferencing with students, in part hoping to show them the benefits that they could provide to students who took the additional step
of asking for help outside of class. Others incentivized students’ use of RBCC’s tutoring center either by offering opportunities to gain back points lost on assignments or by requiring students to seek help prior to resubmission of written assessments. Elisabet assigned students to visit her during her office hours as part of her course orientation module. In addition, Jean, Elisabet, Margo, and Wanda discussed during a focus group that presentations by campus resource personnel (advising, wellness, financial aid, etc.) were standard practice in the LTC classes as well as some of the ALP classes. In fact, both Jean and Elisabet required students to incorporate what they learned from interviewing or visiting campus resources into one of their essay assignments. Additionally, as she shared during a focus group, in one writing assignment at the beginning of the semester, Jean directly asked students to connect their motivation to help seeking by asking, “Why are you here? What are your goals? Who are you going to call when it’s really hard in the middle of the semester?”

Thus, in addition to encouraging students to attend class and participate in class, through direct instruction as well as class practices and conversation, the instructors actively encouraged students’ engagement by reinforcing the post-secondary expectation that engaged students seek help.

**Engaged Students Are Buying What We’re Selling**

The subthemes of Theme 1, “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing” emphasized the five instructors’ expectation that engaged students managed their complex lives and themselves in order to attend class, complete course work in and outside of class, and seek help as needed. In addition, the five instructors revealed that students’ emotional reactions to topics, texts, or assessments also suggested a level of student engagement. As a result, all five
instructors included students’ emotional responses in evaluating the effectiveness of their instruction. The instructors planned lessons and activities to promote buy in but also expected students to make their own efforts to engage with the course.

Students’ emotional buy in to the course materials affected all five instructors’ assessment of their engagement. In individual interviews, Clare and Elisabet specifically highlighted the connection between students’ “buy in” and their successful completion of course assignments. For instance, Elisabet explained that when students enjoyed the work and saw value in it, they were more likely to complete it. Similarly, Clare explained that to engage, students needed “buy in… [They ask,] “Why do I have to do this? Why? Why should I be engaged?””

Demonstrating a similar concern for students’ emotional responses, all five instructors reflected that their decisions to use or stop using a text or activity were often guided by students’ level of “buy in” to it. For instance, because students consistently chose to write about one text but avoided another, Jean decided to continue the favored text while seeking alternatives to the text students chose not to write about. Similarly, Clare, Margo, and Wanda reported choosing texts based on their anticipation that students would respond well to them and repeating some text selections because students “liked” them.

Although they tried to cater to students’ interests and emotional responses to texts, all five instructors reported that some level of students’ buy in seemed to reflect institutional and instructor constraints. For instance, Clare and Wanda both related lack of engagement to students’ frustration that they had to complete and pay for developmental courses that did not result in college credit. In some cases, as Jean, and Elisabet indicated, students’ buy in was also related to expectations created outside of their classrooms. Elisabet explained during a focus group that
I think some of our students -- my students -- get annoyed because they've also been told, and you know -- and I'm raising one of these kids -- that college only does tests. And so as long as you can pass your tests or write your papers, you're fine. And so, they don't understand why they have to come and interact in class. They don't understand why they have to do these reflection writing assignments.

In Elisabet’s interpretation, students’ anticipation of “college” created an expectation of college coursework that was not consistent with her pedagogical practices. To engage students, she felt that she had to demonstrate the purpose of informal and reflective writing. Similarly, as a result of their belief that students needed to buy in to be engaged in their literacy coursework, all five instructors reported instructional practices to justify and reinforce the value of the course itself as well as each individual assignment. At times, as was the case with Wanda and Clare’s comments about developmental course tuition for no credit and as will be seen with Wanda’s reservations about academic writing, justifying the course or the assignments evoked the instructors’ own reservations and lack of buy in.

To create buy in and therefore engagement, all five instructors endeavored to make developmental literacy instruction relevant to students’ lives and goals. Along these lines, during individual interviews, both Elisabet and Clare reflected on the benefits of pedagogy that asked students to apply their developing reading strategies to authentic situations. For instance, in addition to learning and practicing reading strategies on sample texts in their reading textbooks, students in Elisabet’s and Clare’s Rdg 91 classes also applied those strategies to academic textbooks for other courses they were taking or were anticipating taking. Through this process, Elisabet explained:

They are applying the strategy to a real textbook. And suddenly they're like, "Oh, this makes sense." Right? And they're so much more engaged, and they're practicing. And then they have to reflect on what they liked and what they didn't like about each of the
strategies. So, I'm just seeing so much more engagement. And so many of them are like, "Oh, I never understood why my teacher wanted me to do this." And now they do.

By planning instruction to give students real-world applications for the reading strategies provided in the textbook, Clare and Elisabet felt they were able to generate students’ buy in. Clare explained, “Letting them use the text that they're using for another course and analyzing that and getting practice with reading that [...] is really important because then [...] they're figuring out how . . . what they're learning in class applies.” Thus, Clare and Elisabet felt that real time applications created student buy in and engagement.

Similarly, Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet observed that students were most engaged with their writing when the tasks were experiential and informal. In individual interviews, Sara, Jean, and Wanda defined informal writing assignments as those in which students wrote and generated ideas freely without concern for grading and punctuation. Journals were one common example of such informal writing. In the first focus group, Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet all reported using journal assignments as an opportunity for students to express ideas they might be hesitant to share with their classmates. In their students’ journals, these three instructors saw students making meaning, thinking through connections between their texts and their lives – using writing as thinking. Elisabet identified students’ journal writing as an effective writing assignment that allowed students to “realize they have stuff to say” and to “get ideas out” and to “develop fluency.” In their journals, Elisabet noted, students wrote more freely. Additionally, in a focus group, Elisabet said that she responded to students’ informal writing more freely because the assignment was about students’ thoughts and expression rather than adhering to rules for academic writing.
In addition to journal writing, all five instructors identified other reflective and personal writing as assignments that were effective in their developmental literacy courses. All five instructors identified such informal writing tasks as part of a reading-writing-thinking process. Elisabet valued her students’ reflections because they helped them process the course content. Clare, during a conversation about her focus on skills transfer, also described the effectiveness of the reflection assignment students completed after applying reading strategies in their textbooks. This reflection, according to Clare, encouraged students to consider the value of the unit’s reading strategies for their current and future learning goals. Wanda, on the other hand, used informal free-writing during class. She felt these quick, focused writing assignments improved “their conversations and the things that they say and the evidence they can pull from the text.” After free-writing, Wanda explained, students were more capable of engaging in the class and with the course texts. During the second focus group, Margo explained that although she did not accept informal writing as a graded course assignment, she found that reflective writing in the form of anticipation guides before units and reflective writing at the end of the semester helped students connect their learning to their development of ideas and positions on relevant topics. During the second focus group, the instructors concurred that informal, reflective, and experiential writing assignments were an important part of a reading-writing-thinking process even though the product was not a polished piece of academic writing. The instructors felt that students engaged well with these kinds of assignments that were also part of pedagogy to generate students’ meaningful engagement.

However, in both interviews and focus groups, all five instructors explained that informal and reflective writing represented a small piece of students’ work in developmental literacy classes because the course outcomes focused on students’ development of academic writing.
Margo explained during a focus group that she planned for this shift intentionally, explaining that after assigning a narrative that allowed her to get to know her students,

> We move quickly in academic writing because that's what they're going to need to know how to do. And then they also start using sources like, “What text informed you of this?” And “How do you, you know, quote that in your paper?” and because, like I said, I'm always also thinking about where they're headed outside of my class, and it’s always to, you know, an academic writing environment, you know, so they need to understand that.

Thus, the more personal narrative writing was a vehicle for Margo to get acquainted with her students, but one that had limited value as she moved students to the “academic writing” that she anticipated they would need to be successful in college. All five instructors emphasized that the college environment required students to write academic essays, and they specifically noted that it was their job to prepare students for the demands of their college level classes.

However, Jean, Wanda, Clare, and Elisabet were concerned that shifting away from the personal and informal toward more impersonal academic writing reduced students’ buy in to the developmental literacy course as well as to individual assignments. In the first focus group, Clare acknowledged that

> I think that justifying why they need to learn academic writing is part of the challenge because I think a lot of times, they don't understand why, and so we have to know why in order for them … in order for us to place an emphasis, … in order to have them see value in what they're learning, because they think if we don't see the value in it, then they're not going to take it seriously, and they're not going to get to that next level.

Clare’s somewhat fragmented explanation suggested both semantically and latently the tension that she, Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet felt in moving students away from personal writing to academic writing. In saying that “we have to know why,” Clare also called attention to the importance of the instructors’ own “buy in” to the value of academic writing.

In more explicit terms, both Elisabet and Wanda discussed during a focus group their reservations about the value of the academic essay for developmental students. Wanda explained.
I think that we want them to be able to read and engage with texts and be able to talk about them and share ideas. And I don't know that a formal academic essay is outside of college, something that they're going to ever utilize. Yeah. So, if they are going to be in the academy for the rest of their lives, you know, great, you know, let's keep going. But if they're not, then I don't know that's the best way to demonstrate for them, demonstrate their literacy skills. [...] Are there other kinds of literacy, outside of the academic essay that can demonstrate that?

Wanda questioned the effectiveness of academic essay writing to help students develop literacy skills and engage with texts, but she also felt constrained by the course objectives to focus her students on academic writing. Wanda’s discomfort suggested that she empathized with and shared her students’ lack of buy in to the imposed structure and formality of the academic essay. Like Wanda, Elisabet questioned the primacy of the academic essay in evaluating students’ literacy development. Elisabet observed that the structural expectations of an academic essay were inconsistent with the oral storytelling she understood to be “very valued in many African American families,” and she wanted to help students incorporate elements of that storytelling into their academic writing although she admitted she did not know how to do so. Elisabet also felt uncomfortable, more broadly, with the singular focus on academic essay writing in developmental literacy classes.

Why are we only teaching essays that they will write for English 101? I am really struggling with that. I feel like we need to do more, maybe report writing, or in biology, they are going to do labs. They might do some kind of research.

While all five instructors felt the developmental education imperative to prepare students for academic reading and writing, Jean, Wanda, Clare, and Elisabet indicated that they also struggled to create “buy in” for their students (and sometimes themselves) for assignments that imposed a style that was so far removed from students’ authentic expression.

In part, the tension these four instructors felt between academic and informal writing reflected a difference between what they felt validated and supported students’ voices and what
they understood to be the expectations for developmental literacy instructors. During a focus
group, Wanda and Jean both described that tension in the struggle to engage students while also
remaining consistent with the course outcomes, their job responsibilities, and perceived
expectations from other educators. Wanda expressed the conflict this way:

I think that sometimes [the students] can have good ideas. It's just, it's how they're
expressing them. Right? And academic, we want it to be concise and effective, and you
know, in a particular format, but I... you know, sometimes they... if they don't follow
that format, does it mean that it's “bad?” Or does it just mean that they are just using a
different format, right, but if we want them to continue on in academia right, and go on
and get a bachelor's degree or whatever like they have format because all these other
people down the line are going to expect that of them.

All of the instructors sought to validate students’ “good ideas,” but Jean, Wanda, and Elisabet
explicitly discussed their struggle to generate students’ buy in when they were required to
express those ideas in a form and format that met academic expectations. The following excerpt
from a focus group illustrates Jean’s effort to negotiate the tension that she, Elisabet, and Wanda
experienced.

AD: I feel like you are indirectly or directly saying that there is a tension for you,
between students’ informal writing and reading, and their academic reading and
writing, and that they're “better” in the informal setting. But you feel an ethical,
moral, and professional requirement to get them to a different kind of writing. And
so, what I hear you saying is kind of like, “Yeah, you're really good at [informal
writing]. That's great. Now, can we turn that into this?” And I, what I think I'm
hearing is, that's what you're doing, and you think that's what you're supposed to be
doing. But it still feels … uncomfortable? Yes, no?

J: Well, I definitely think about other classes are going to take after mine. Because I
mean, I'm grading LTC essays right now. And there is one, and she wrote
something, and it is so long, and it's so good, but there are a lot of structural issues,
a lot of like, Spanish-English transfer issues in it, and it's the first essay. So, I feel
like, I have a lot of time to work with her. And she'll be great. But I do think like,
I'm so excited about this, but I mean, when she is taking history or biology or
whatever, are they going to think “Oh, my God, how did you pass into English
101?” and then, you know, like, ...I definitely think of where they're headed. And
because I have that perspective to know how…like she’s writing something so long
and so awesome but that it's not always received that way by everybody. So, I have that kind of pressure of other people in my mind, whether they are actually doing it or not.

In this exchange, Jean confirmed several tensions. First, her student was highly engaged in the writing assignment (the first essay assignment, which was narrative). Second, Jean recognized her responsibility to help the student remain engaged in her literacy work even as Jean encouraged her to shift her “long” and “awesome” writing to a more structured, more English-dominant, and more academic format. And finally, Jean, like Wanda, felt pressure to compel compliance with academic standards. Compliance with external expectations provided her student with access to academic literacy and helped Jean meet her perceived obligation to the academe and her colleagues.

Additionally, Elisabet expressed concern that academic writing added stress to students’ writing process and to her response to their writing. The excerpt from a focus group below exemplifies the struggle the instructors had reconciling the demands of academic writing with their intention to value students’ authentic voices.

AD: I hear you saying, “When I push them into their academic reading and their academic writing, they're losing something. And I'm having trouble giving them the strength of their informal writing in their academic writing.”

E: Well, and I … I think I use so much of the informal writing, to help them prepare for the academic writing, right to gather ideas, and to figure out what they're trying to say that they … I don't think they feel as much stress on the journals, let's say, as they do on the essay, right? [The journals are] not worth as many points… it’s… I’m … like don't worry about …Yes, you shouldn't have complete sentences. I would like to be able to understand what you're writing. Right, right. But you're not going to lose points if you have a run on sentence in that journal.

AD: Well, and that was the other thing, Elisabet, is I think there's a discomfort for you in the imposition. You see yourself as “mean” when you read the academic essays…

E: I feel like there's higher standards and higher … for instance in the LTC, those essays are worth 40% of their grade. Right? And so, it feels like, and there are only
four of them. And so, it's like, we spent so much time going through this process and revising and editing that I do hold them to a higher standard. Right? […] I do feel like there's more pressure on the… those, more stressed on those academic essays.

AD: So, am I right or wrong then Elisabet with the sense that there's… […] with the sense that there's sort of tension for you between the informal and the formal?

E: I do. I would agree with that.

Elisabet’s awareness of students’ low stress levels in informal (journal) writing compared to high stress levels in formal (essay) writing underscored the challenges she experienced in maintaining students’ engagement with writing when she perceived the focus was on correctness rather than students’ “good ideas.” Her concern about the pressure to conform to academic standards was consistent with her conviction that informal writing allowed for more authentic engagement and buy in from her students. However, regardless of her discomfort with academic writing, Elisabet utilized students’ authentic “informal” writing in the service of more valuable “academic writing.” Although all three expressed some concerns that strict academic essay guidelines reduced students’ engagement, Jean, Elisabet, and Wanda consciously used informal writing to help students generate ideas that they would transfer to more academic writing.

On the other hand, Margo and Clare both disagreed with my assessment that a tension existed between informal and academic writing assignments. The previous focus group dialogue with Elisabet continued when Margo shared her understanding of academic writing expectations in college. I have shared a long section of this dialogue because Margo’s disagreement with my assessment was an important part of the reciprocal ethnographic methodology of the study, but also because Margo clearly distinguished between Jean, Wanda, and Elisabet’s reservations and her own embrace of her position of authority in enforcing academic language.
AD: So, am I right or wrong then, Elisabet […] and Margo … with the sense that there's sort of tension for you between the informal and the formal?

E: I do. I would agree with that.

M: I don't know I… […] Okay, I do tell them to revise even, I mean, pretty much anything major. Because I want them to read it to themselves and think about it. Make sure that's what they meant to say. And so, I … I do have a … even their emails, I -- which you maybe do too -- I have them send practice emails to me and I tell them, “Think of your audience. You know, how many years of my life did I spend studying English? So, you are gonna wanna have you know, a greeting, and you want to sign your name.” I even put this in my quiz, like my syllabus quiz, which I let them take open, open syllabus and up to three times, but “How do you format an email? and “What do you put in the subject line?” Like… and they don’t always do it anyway, I have to make them do it. But like, “Tell me what class you’re in. I’ve got seven Joshes this semester, you know, tell me what class you're in.” And so, I …I think there's not much even that’s informal that I would look at that hasn’t been revised, doesn’t meet certain structure expectations.

AD: So informal writing then for you […] there's less tension for you in terms of formal and informal?

M: Yeah, there’s less tension because I like did…I really don't …

AD: You really don't accept informal writing.

M: And then I do … you know I’ll have them do things like I have all my classes summarize, practice summary writing, right? And I, you know, the very first sentence has to have the author, the title, the main points of the essay, and I have people rewrite those summaries three and four times, because I'm like, “So here's, you know, here's where you're giving me your personal opinion, a summary doesn't have that… Here's where you're adding support materials, a summary doesn’t have that. It doesn't matter. What three things are in that first sentence. Let's go back and do that.” So, I'll send it back and send it back. Instead of … so I don't let them fail it. I make them redo it until they get it right.

In this exchange, Margo enunciated a strict sense of what counted as acceptable writing whether for an email or a summary. For Margo, holding students accountable to expectations for the subject line in an email or the first three sentences of a summary was instrumental to treating them like college students and holding them to standards of academic communication. For
Margo, as for Clare, following such standards was essential to understanding and engaging in the rhetorical situation of the college student.

During the same focus group, Clare and Wanda discussed their interpretation of that rhetorical situation and its effect on students as follows:

C: I think that writing isn’t one thing, it's different things. There's disciplinary writing. So, you write using the standards of the discipline of English in an English class, you write using the standards for the discipline of psychology for a psychology class, when you're writing psychology papers. You know, you're following those guidelines, because that is … you're … you're being introduced to that subject in the liberal arts, liberal arts education. And part of that is learning the format, right? So that if you're taking a more advanced class in English, you can read a scholarly journal article and know why it has that structure. If you're taking a psychology class, then you can read a psychology scholarly article in a psychology journal, and understand why it has that format, and how to read that format. And so, I think, I agree with you, Jean, that you're, you're showing them that different kinds of writing have different formats. When they are going into business, a business model has a specific type of format. If you're going into a different field, they're going to have their own format, or their own writing standards and writing conventions. I think that's part of the justification for why you need to learn how to write in this specific way. Well, because you're gonna have to learn to write in a lot of different ways and, this is, you know, giving practice in that.

W: I totally agree with that. And I think that's right. I … part of where some of the tension … and the tension that I feel comes from is because I know that there's disciplinary writing. And I know that, you know, it's not going to be the same in psychology or biology or business as it is in English. But I feel like there's this pressure that we're like the gatekeepers, right? Like, you have to pass this developmental class and that says, oh, then you can write anywhere, right? Or maybe …maybe I'm misinterpreting it. And maybe it's more like really okay, if you have the fundamentals, then you're ready to be taught to write in these other ways. But I don't know that it's always framed that way either to us or the students, I guess.

In their conversation, both Clare and Wanda recognized that academic writing could take on many forms depending on the discipline. However, Clare felt that buying in to academic writing for an English class was part of a larger academic expectation that students conform to the discourse of each discipline. Clare expected students to buy in to the discourse as a cost of
admission to postsecondary education. Wanda, on the other hand, was not convinced that developmental literacy courses were effectively producing what engaged students were required to buy. As these exchanges demonstrated, buying in to academic literacy presented a wide range of pedagogical and philosophical challenges for the instructors.

The five instructors, overall, perceived themselves as helpers and facilitators who could guide students to postsecondary literacy access and success, and they understood the extent to which students attended class and completed assigned tasks as a yardstick by which they measured both themselves and their students. In various ways, the five instructors felt that their instructional decision making could impact students’ engagement, and they felt that students’ self-advocacy contributed to attitudes and behaviors that were essential to the development of students’ literacy skills. As a result, all five instructors promoted engagement through active and collaborative learning and evaluated students’ level of engagement, and their own success in promoting that engagement, through observable behaviors such as class participation and completion of homework. They also inferred engagement through students’ body language, apparent buy in, and help-seeking behaviors. All five instructors were conscious of conflicting priorities that impacted students’ engagement, including socioeconomic and personal challenges that could pull students’ focus away from academics; however, in their conversations about engagement, none of the five instructors referenced either their students’ race or their own without prompting from me. When I shared with the instructors the “color-blindness” of their beliefs about engagement, they concurred that, except for noted differences in help seeking behaviors, they did not perceive student engagement as related to race. In empowering all their developmental students to benefit from postsecondary educational opportunities, the five
instructors encouraged students to take the necessary steps to engage with their developmental coursework.

Theme 2: Connecting Any Way You Can

In revealing that the instructors rarely referenced race in conversations about student engagement, I do not mean to suggest that they were unaware of the demographics in the classroom or the racial, cultural, and socioeconomic differences between them and their developmental students. However, the five instructors, generally, focused more on connections than differences and underscored the ways that interpersonal connections fostered student engagement and success. Their descriptions of their instructional planning demonstrated a relationship between learning activities that helped build relationships and the importance of relationships in the success of those learning activities. Thus, Theme 2: “Connecting Any Way You Can,” illuminated three different types of connections described by the five instructors – instructor to student, student to student, and student to text.

They Know that I Care: The Instructor-Student Connection

My analysis of the data collected for this study demonstrated that the development of productive instructor-student relationships was a high priority for all five instructors, and they unanimously concurred with my analysis. They recognized that interpersonal connections between them and their students created a comfortable classroom environment that promoted engagement and success. Jean and Elisabet noted that, as literacy instructors, they had a unique opportunity to get to know students through personal disclosures in their writing and their responses to text-based activities. In addition, as teachers in developmental courses, all five
instructors all saw themselves as essential resources for their students; they perceived that they were not just providing lessons in literacy but were also connecting students to campus resources and helping them solve problems they encountered in their academic pursuits. During the first focus group, Jean’s explanation of her role as a resource to her students illustrated the overall attitude of the five instructors.

I think I probably overemphasize that at the beginning of the semester … Like: “If you have a question, let me know. If I don't know the answer, I'll help you find it!” Like: “If you don't know who to ask, ask me, and I can help you!” Like, trying to make a connection. Like if I'm the only person they're going to talk to, then I can help them find other answers.

Because they saw the instructor-student relationship as so significant to student success, the five instructors planned instruction and student interactions to develop and maintain rapport with their students and were concerned when their efforts met with resistance.

All five instructors described the instructor-student relationship as a supporting or helping one that promoted student success. For instance, Jean explained, during a focus group

I think it helps with ... kind of connecting to them in terms of getting them motivated to work on the assignment. [...] I don't think that they do the assignments because they know I want them to, but I think that's part of it, like, that they know that I care if they turn their stuff in or do their work and, and they... know that I care... that they do it and turn things in. I think that's ... it's all about getting them connected into the class. And it's all sort of ways to get them to succeed.

Jean perceived that students who lacked the motivation to complete coursework could sometimes find that motivation through their relationship with her. Because they knew she cared, they might also care. Similarly, Wanda felt that she could help students build their confidence. Because she believed in them, they could also begin to believe in themselves. During focus groups and individual interviews, Elisabet, Margo, and Clare shared similar experiences of their
care for students as an asset that helped students develop the affective strength to remain engaged with their course work.

As a demonstration of their caring, Clare, Jean, Margo, and Elisabet cited relationships or caring that persisted beyond the classroom or the specific semester in which a student was enrolled. Clare, for instance, described a student who did not speak English who had been placed in her developmental literacy course. Although the course Clare taught was not the appropriate placement for this student, Clare said she still wondered “what happened with that student … hopefully, she was able to eventually … she wanted to become a nurse.” Although this student was only in Clare’s class for a short time, Clare continued to feel a connection with her and wanted to know that she had gotten the help she needed to achieve her goals. Similarly, Jean and Elisabet both mentioned students with whom they maintained supportive relationships even if they did not pass their classes. In her first interview, Jean noted that her ongoing relationship with a student made his learning easier the second time he took her LTC 99 course because “I know him already and he feels comfortable telling me about [the challenges of his conflicting priorities].” Margo even joked that she wished she could call up former students to apologize for times when her evolving praxis was not as effective as she now wished it could have been. Thus, in establishing their positions in the classroom, the instructors described themselves as helpers, nurturers, coaches, and facilitators, and all indicated that they sought to establish trusting, helpful relationships with students.

Four of the five participants described their efforts to create that instructor-student relationship as nurturing or “mothering.” They were all mothers themselves. Jean and Elisabet both expressed this nurturing behavior as a strength, something that they took pride in doing well. Jean specifically connected mothering to empathy for her students’ busy and complex lives.
and contrasted her empathetic approach to what she saw as unrealistically rigid approaches from other educators. During the first focus group, these four instructors discussed ways that their mothering skills were part of their classroom management practices. Margo recognized that “I have a motherly appeal for some of them…. I think I play that to my advantage sometimes you know.” Margo tapped her mothering skills as a form of covert power in the classroom. Likewise, Jean explained,

I kind of feel like … benevolent and motherly. Like I feel like I do it as…a "I want you to succeed, so don't disappoint me" kind of power. My students will say too, "Oh, don't give me the disappointed mom face." … So… I think that's my way of power.

Jean, Margo, Elisabet, and Wanda also often drew parallels between the ways they parented and the ways they taught, noting that they had applied lessons learned from their parenting in the classroom and lessons learned from teaching in their parenting. Jean and Wanda discussed how their experiences with the learning processes of their school-age children often informed their class pedagogies and provided significant insights into their students’ learning processes. Similarly, Elisabet often framed her understanding of her students’ attitudes and behaviors through her experiences with her children. Her understanding of students’ expectations for college coursework focused on testing, for instance, derived at least in part, from her own child’s expectations. Elizabeth also explained her efforts to shift to a more student-centered instructional practice in terms of analogous shifts in her parenting. “I really try to ask more questions. So instead of telling, I’m trying to ask, which is from my parenting.” In this way, Elisabet’s efforts to establish a relationship with and understand her students were drawn from and informed by her mothering. Likewise, Wanda’s and Margo’s descriptions of their teaching included the implication of mothering.
However, both Wanda and Margo also described the complexity of establishing boundaries within that mothering persona. Wanda explained that she understood her students’ learning struggles better as a result of experiences with her children and also noted that like a parent, she grapples with the limits of that mothering relationship, “never knowing… how much I should be on them, right? Like if they’re missing assignments or whatever, like those boundaries are always kind of tough for me.” Although she strongly identified her teaching as mothering, Margo also recognized the need for boundaries in the instructor-student relationship. She explained during the first focus group, “They’re not my kids. I don’t want them as my kids …I feel a lot of affection for them, [but] … I don’t think babying them. I don’t do that.” As Margo, Wanda, Elisabet, and Jean demonstrated, the four instructors who were mothers themselves managed their classrooms and sought relationships with students in a motherly tone, but also grappled with the boundaries of that mothering behavior.

Clare also expressed the need for relationship boundaries in student-instructor relationships. Clare explained that early in her teaching career, she struggled to “establish that authority that I didn’t have by, just, you know, looking at me as a young female.” As a result, Clare worked hard to establish herself as an authority in the classroom and to also build rapport with her students. She explained that one experience had a big impact on her interactions with her students.

On my, my evaluation, a student told me that I like to flirt with my male students, but I was not flirting with them! Like, I was being nice to my students and trying to develop a rapport with all of my students, and then it was like, “Oh she flirts with everybody” and like, and that affected how I taught, you know, the next semester. I was like, "I can't be nice to my students."

As a seasoned educator with 12 years of experience, Clare indicated that she was now more comfortable with her teaching persona than she was in the past and still sought to develop
rapport with her students, but she discussed much stronger boundaries than her colleagues did. Where Margo felt that her community service background helped her work with students who were struggling with non-academic roadblocks, Clare stated that she understood her students faced such challenges but the background of those challenges was “not my business.” Although she felt empathy for her students’ struggles, she drew the line at mothering.

During the first focus group when the instructors and I discussed the recurrent language of “mothering” in their interviews, Clare responded quite strongly against the characterization of teaching practice with that term. “I would say I'm supportive. But for some reason, I just kind of bristle at the ‘mothering’ or ‘nurturing’ because I feel like that's very like expected and…gendered.” Like her colleagues, Clare was concerned for the success of her students, and through the “ally statement” in her syllabus, she sought to demonstrate her caring and to align her experiences with theirs. However, in her identity as a highly educated female professor, she rejected an intersecting identity that specifically gendered her. Clare recognized the potential for mothering in the classroom but did not join the others in identifying mothering and nurturing as a strength in her teaching as a way that she developed and maintained the student-instructor relationship.

When the student-instructor connection did not develop, Margo, Elisabet, and Jean often felt that their teaching was negatively impacted. Margo and Elisabet tied the lack of student-instructor connection to students’ lack of engagement in the course. Elisabet’s observation was consistent with the observation of all the instructors. “When we have that relationship … they’re more willing to take risks, and to … share, even if they're not 100% correct or confident that they’re correct.” Because the instructors associated help seeking and participating in class with
engagement and success, Elisabet’s observation emphasized that the student-instructor relationship facilitated student engagement.

Jean’s focus on developing strong student-instructor relationships underscored the instructors’ consensus that such relationships aligned to effective instruction. Jean explained during the first focus group, “I have had students over the years where there’s a wall, and I think that’s the hardest part about … teaching for me is when I can’t get through to the person…It’s really challenging for me.” In fact, the instructors reported working harder to establish connections where they felt students were resistant to those relationships. Jean said, “I make more of an effort with those students, and then I feel guilty for not making that much of an effort with a really good student.” Jean’s wording emphasized the importance of the student-instructor relationship and its intersection with student success. Jean differentiated the students she “made more of an effort” to establish relationships with from the “really good” students with whom, she implied, a relationship had been more easily established.

In interviews and focus groups, Jean, Margo, and Elisabet explained that when they were unable to establish positive relationships with their students, they experienced both personal rejection and professional frustration. Jean noted that she experienced the lack of a relationship with her students as a professional setback -- more of a failure than “if I can’t teach them comma splices…or something you know? So that really affects me more than content stuff.” Clearly, for Jean, the ability or inability to forge a connection with her students was a measure of her teaching skill, but the reflection that “it affects me more than content stuff” also suggested a sense of personal rejection. Margo confirmed that although she could logically accept that not all students would like her, she felt their disengagement as a criticism of her, personally. As she expressed during a focus group, “I’m trying so hard … I don’t understand why you’re still
rejecting me … My feelings are hurt.” These three instructors generally felt frustration, if not outright rejection, when students were resistant to creating student-instructor connections that the instructors perceived were essential to student success. As Margo stated, “Why would they put up that wall with the person who’s most likely to help them? [It] can be really hard to wrap my mind around.” Thus, although they approached that relationship with varied boundaries, all five instructors unambiguously explained their attentiveness to the student-instructor relationship in terms of student engagement and success. They saw a strong correlation between lack of connection and lack of engagement and therefore lack of success.

Because they perceived that the student-instructor relationship facilitated student engagement and success, the instructors deliberately planned instruction to encourage the development of that relationship. In planning for the first weeks of the semester, all five instructors focused class time on explanations and activities they felt would promote positive relationships with their students. During a focus group, Jean emphasized that “I feel [it is] more important to have relationships and like just what the class is going to be like, more so than like actually learning things the first couple weeks of the semester content wise.” For all five instructors, planning for those relationships meant sharing information about themselves. Clare explained that identifying herself as a resource for students as well as a first-generation college student in her syllabus allowed her to highlight those connections during the first day of class. Wanda, similarly, explained

Like I tell them a little bit about my life and kind of who I am and my academic journey and stuff like that. […] Well, when my classes were asynchronous in the fall, and over the summer, […]. I did the same thing, right, on the discussion boards, I have a little like, you know, "Tell us about yourself." And, you know, I had mine posted first so that way they can kind of see like, who I am and they have a bit of an example and stuff like that. There were a couple of students who were like, Oh, this was great, because then you're
not just like this random name," right? Like, there's actually a person there. So, they kind of liked that.

Like Clare, in focus groups and individual interviews, the other four instructors indicated that they talked with their students about life experiences they had in common – attending community college, working or parenting while attending college, struggling with homework, and searching for a career focus. By sharing part of their own lives, the instructors deliberately tried to capitalize on connections with the students that they hoped would promote students’ continued engagement in the class.

In addition to sharing parts of themselves, the five instructors also planned opportunities to engage with students about students’ lives and experiences. Informal conversations before and after class were part of this planning. During a focus group, the instructors discussed the ways they deliberately planned for informal connections. Clare shared that, as an adjunct instructor, her time between jobs was tight, but she always tried to arrive in her classroom 10-15 minutes before class started so that she could talk casually with her students. Elisabet also made efforts to facilitate “small talk” with her students but noted that such casual conversations were much more difficult during remote instruction. Like these informal (but deliberately planned for) conversations, students’ weekly journals facilitated one-on-one conversations and relationships with students for Elisabet, Jean, and Wanda. Elisabet explained that she might ask in her journal assignments “Okay, […] tell me about classes. Tell me about your high school experience. What did you do? What do you wish to change this semester?” When they commented on students’ weekly journal responses, the instructors were then able to have those conversations that they believed facilitated the student-instructor relationship. Elisabet described a connection she was able to make through a student’s journal:
One of my students this semester has [a medical condition], the same thing that [my child] has. And so, he and I have kind of bonded over [that condition], right? And other students, we connect over other things. So, the things that they share about in their journals, you know, I feel like those and my responses to them … and I try to talk to them about it before class or after class or whatever, and I think that helps with those connections.

The excerpt above highlights the personal relationship Elisabet valued with this student as well as the fluid boundaries between Elisabet’s personal and professional identity.

Whether they were before and after class, during class, or in informal writing, such informal chats with their students were so significant to their teaching that the instructors documented what they learned from them and sometimes used what they learned to adapt course materials. Margo explained that she would “ask them their viewpoints on certain things or readings too as well as your personal experiences that connect to that” and that through both the texts she selected and through her interest in their feedback, the students “get a sense that that’s the person I am.” Margo planned surveys and reflections as part of her instructional time because she understood her interest in their lives and their feedback on the class would also promote the instructor-student connection. Elisabet too, noted that “once I get to know my students a little bit more, I might switch text out and think, ‘Oh, I think they will like this one better.’” In addition, the instructors all reported that in their monitoring of small and large group activities, in the ways they responded to their students’ questions, comments, and engagement, they were showing their students who they were and what mattered to them.

Thus, the class time, as well as the thought and energy they devoted to establishing personal connections with their students, accentuated the importance all five instructors placed on connecting with students any way they could. During the focus group conversation about relationships and connectedness, Jean expressed a common sentiment that the student-instructor
connection, “controls everything that we do in the classroom when I think about how we're gonna do small groups, or how I'm going to conference with them individually, or how I'm responding to them when I'm grading their assignments.” This focus on the student-instructor connection began with introductions and icebreakers on the first day of class and extended through informal conversations as well as feedback loops and class activities and materials.

Learning from Each Other: Student to Student Connections

Naturally, the impact of icebreakers and class activities was not limited to the relationships between instructors and students; the instructors explained that such activities also helped to connect students with their classmates. In fact, the student-instructor connection often facilitated student-student connections. Elisabet explained how one student in her LTC class benefited from a supportive instructor-student relationship with Elisabet and as a result encouraged her classmates to reap those benefits also. Elisabet reported that the student said, “I told him, he needs to reach out and talk to you because you'll help him” and that the student continued to connect other classmates with Ms. Elisabet “because we have that... that relationship. She's feeling comfortable enough sharing it with others, and I think it goes both ways.” Thus, the student-instructor connection is one link in Theme 2, “Connecting Any Way You Can” which is interdependent with the instructors’ work to engage students with other students. According to Clare, “the student-student piece is getting them connected in any way that you can. ..., whether that's by connecting via the content ...so just discussing the content with each other, or just making personal connections as well.”

All five instructors indicated that student-student connections promoted success by allowing students to engage with the course. During a focus group, Margo expressed a
conviction shared by the other four instructors that “a lot of [student success] comes when they feel connected to each other” and that “being able to interact with other students helps them be successful.” In this way, facilitating connections between students helped the instructors create an environment in which students were more likely to talk about course materials and to learn from each other. To that end, Elisabet reflected that

I want them all to be learning from each other. And one thing I will often say to students is, "You all have had very different life experiences that you can learn from each other, but I want you to share your knowledge with other people because that's valuable." […] I think probably I want them to recognize the importance of learning from others. I want them to …yeah… engage with others.

Elisabet’s goal for students to learn from each other was consistent with the instructors’ expectation for students’ active participation in class and also demonstrated an asset-based assumption that students had knowledge to share with their classmates. Because Elisabet held an asset-based perspective of students’ experiential knowledge, she promoted the student-student connection on the premise that interdependent relationships would promote collaborative construction of knowledge. Wanda also emphasized the benefit of student-student relationships in getting students to talk with each other about their course readings and the questions they had about their reading or writing.

I think that, especially in developmental classes, talking is important -- and talking through ideas and things like that and having students support one another -- because I think that they're all in … while they might have some kind of characteristics in common in terms of, like, their reading and writing skills and abilities, they often have different perspectives. And I think that they're able to sometimes articulate what they're thinking better verbally. And it benefits for them to hear each other's opinions and ideas and things like that.

Like Elisabet and Margo, Wanda assumed that students’ unique perspectives and experiences provided opportunities for synergies between students. Jean voiced a similar conviction that if students had established relationships with their classmates, they were more
willing to talk with them during class and therefore more likely to get their questions answered and deepen their collective understanding of course content. Talking about course materials led students to “better answers” according to Wanda. Also hoping to direct students to “better answers,” Clare likewise recounted that she deliberately paired students to help them establish relationships that would promote success. So “someone who gave, like, really good peer review comments on the first peer review, I try to pair them up with somebody who may need those comments a little bit more on the next peer review.” All five of the instructors saw connections between students as essential to student engagement and success.

Small group activities were a primary way that these five instructors planned for facilitating meaningful relationships between students. In each focus group conversation during this study, the instructors reiterated and concurred that group work was a mainstay in their instructional planning. Through small groups, the instructors explained, they could increase students’ willingness to talk about course material and collaborate in the classroom. In an interview, Clare expressed the five instructors’ collective experience, “When I try to have full class discussions, nobody raises their hand, but then you put them into small groups, and they're talking all over the place and talking about what they're supposed to be talking about too!” Through these small groups, the instructors felt students were getting to know each other and therefore feeling less alone in the learning process. As Jean explained during a focus group, “I feel like they’re more comfortable talking with two or three people than in front of everybody all the time.” Thus, the instructors’ instructional planning that promoted student-student connections through small group work also promoted the kinds of verbal and collaborative work the instructors associated with “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing.”
The five instructors noted several ways that they gauged students’ willingness to connect with their classmates. Just as Jean and Margo identified physical distancing as an unwillingness to connect with the instructor, likewise, they construed students’ physical distancing from classmates as a sign of disengagement. Jean talked about one Black male student who sat on the perimeter of class and appeared unwilling to engage with her or his classmates. “He would sit far away from everyone else, but when his group asked him questions, he’d say a word here or there. He would turn toward them and say one or two things.” Jean also recalled that his “body language – looking down, elbows on the table, hiding his face … [made him seem] very closed off” and unwilling to connect with her or his classmates.

So, his, I mean, . . . the groups are usually where they are sitting, so it was where he was, . . . the table he was closest to… and they….so he was … he would interact with the people that . . . at that table. So, when they did small group things sometimes …sometimes they would... they would like... like call him by name and ask what he thought, and he so he would do some of that. Umm….So, he wasn't rude to them. He wasn't rude to me either. Um…so, and I think that he did kind of feel bad for them when they kept asking him like what his opinions were so he did interact some. So, and I mean, I think that that small group is probably the people that he felt most comfortable with in the class so I think it was…even though it wasn't much of a comfort level, I think it was better than nothing.

Jean recalled this student’s behaviors but did not offer any explanation for his disengagement. However, the many pauses and stops and starts in her explanation spoke clearly to her discomfort with this student’s lack of engagement and connection. In a follow up conversation about this student, Jean confirmed her sense that he was hesitant to engage and physically withdrawn but not rude to his classmates. In individual interviews and during focus groups, Margo also mentioned students whose behaviors suggested a “too cool for school” attitude that interfered with their ability to connect with her or other students. She recalled one Latino student who was publicly dismissive of an activity Margo arranged, but then seemed to revel in it away from his
classmates and instructor. She explained, “He … balked at having his photo taken in a graduation gown, but when he put it on, he went around the corner and began taking selfies.” Additionally, this student “often came to class late and unprepared and was very casual about it. He wasn't very serious about group activities or pair shares.” Margo was frustrated by this student’s refusal to value this activity with his classmates and did not see his private participation as a serious commitment to the learning activity she had designed.

Students’ seriousness about their collaborative work provided another means for instructors to assess their efforts to facilitate student-student connections. A successful student-student connection, like an effective student-instructor connection, involved giving and taking. In our individual and focus group conversations, the instructors confirmed that they watched for meaningful rather than performative collaboration or compliance. As Wanda explained, “making sure that they're actually collaborating, I will oftentimes say, ‘You need to talk to people at your table,’ or ‘You need to talk to your partner.’” In addition, although they recognized that they could not require students to show their faces during remote instruction, the instructors felt strongly that students’ choice not to turn on their video cameras during virtual instruction negatively impacted the instructors’ ability to facilitate connections. During a focus group, Jean voiced the frustration expressed by others; when faced with “a bunch of black squares with white letters on them” in a synchronous online class session, “It’s harder for me to … connect them to an actual … person.” The other four instructors echoed Jean’s experience of difficulty connecting students in a virtual environment, and they all suggested and recommended that students turn on their microphones and cameras at least for breakout (small group) sessions. Whether the small group interactions were virtual or face to face, the instructors gauged the effectiveness of their
group activities, in part by the level of student interaction, which they associated with students making connections to other students.

Thus, by planning for and facilitating instructor-student as well as student-student connections, all five instructors emphasized the importance of interpersonal connections as a dynamic leading to or resulting from student’s “doing what they’re supposed to be doing. Jean explained that “if somebody has already made a connection with them then they feel like they can start making more connections” that will help them engage with and succeed in developmental literacy classes and beyond. The instructors demonstrated the value of these connections by devoting class time to their development. They monitored outward signs of engagement including posture, positioning, and verbal interactions. And yet, in the end, the most crucial measure of engagement was students’ completion of the course work. Thus, even if the instructors often saw connections and engagement as synonymous or tightly interconnected, they also noted that a student could be “super nice and super friendly, but [if] they’re not doing anything, […] they’re not engaged” (Jean).

Because They Relate to It: Student to Text Connections

In Jean’s assessment, to engage productively, students needed to do the work in and outside of class. Consistent with the practices and assumptions revealed in Theme 1, in addition to facilitating interpersonal connections either between students and instructors or between classmates, all five instructors also sought to facilitate students’ engagement with class texts. They described students’ ability to make personal connections between themselves and the class texts as both a significant literacy strategy and an essential link that affected student engagement. Elisabet described engaged students as those who “are able to make some personal … whether
connections or integrations … on the different ideas [in texts] with [their classmates].” As a result, the five instructors chose unit or course topics in large part to help students build connections between their own lives and the texts they would be reading, discussing, and writing about. The instructors’ text-selection process influenced and was influenced by students’ ability to connect to the texts used in the developmental literacy classes.

As skills-based rather than content-based courses, RBCC’s developmental literacy course objectives (Appendix F) center on the development of reading, writing, and thinking skills which can be applied to a variety of texts focused on a variety of topics. For instance, students can develop skill at “producing essays that demonstrate a clear thesis” while writing about any number of topics, just as they can “assess, interpret, and distinguish word meanings to develop academic and advanced word knowledge” equally well while reading about physics, or psychology, or a wealth of other topics. Not surprisingly then, the topics and specific texts instructors selected varied widely. At RBCC, literacy instructors have complete freedom in their selection of class texts; the college does not prescribe a common or required textbook. On the whole, although the instructors voiced a preference for open-source texts that provided flexibility and low-cost student access, they selected a combination of hard copy and open-source texts (Table 8). All instructors reported using both print and electronic sources, and all used audio and video as well as written texts. Despite this large range of text types, the instructors described a fairly consistent set of criteria for selecting topics and texts. Because text and topic selection remain entirely within instructor control and because the instructors identified students’ connection to texts as an important factor in student engagement, I was particularly interested in the criteria the instructors used to select these texts and the topics on which they focused units of study in their courses.
### Table 8

Types of Texts Used by Instructors

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In large part, the five instructors’ text selection processes hinged on the effectiveness of the texts; they tried to find texts that initiated a domino effect of increasing student engagement, enhancing student achievement of course objectives, and facilitating knowledge transfer. As previously noted, all of the instructors recognized that students’ complex lives and competing responsibilities meant that students often did not prioritize completion of school work. To counteract that tendency, all five instructors sought to elevate the completion of course work on students’ priority lists by selecting texts that were relevant to students’ lives. When selecting texts for students to read, discuss, and write about, they all looked for current topics that they judged would interest the students. For example, Clare explained that she used “open text, like a newspaper article or magazine article that’s relevant, that brings something up.” In selecting such texts, Clare aimed to both capture student interest and introduce “timely” topics that students could react to and consider. If students reported liking the text and were able to complete text-based assignments accurately, then Wanda considered the text to be effective, so she tried to select “a variety of topics …. So that somebody will be engaged with something somewhere
along the line.” In addition, Wanda looked for texts that would interest students enough to generate questions.

From semester to semester, the instructors modified course topics and texts based on students’ reported engagement as well as on students’ understanding of the text and their achievement of course objectives. Jean explained during a focus group that “if I can tell from their journals that they relate to [a text] a lot and they're not like, "Well, I didn't really understand... I didn't relate to this at all," then I know that's a good article to keep doing.” Elisabet, likewise, looked for texts that students could relate to and to which they responded positively. Thus, all five instructors believed that their selection of texts could promote student engagement and therefore students’ achievement of course objectives and transfer of learning to future contexts. When instructors felt that a text was relevant and promoted student-student engagement, they continued to use it. For instance, Jean noted during a focus group that an article called “The Sanctuary of School” (Barry, 1992) which explores a low-income White girl’s experience of safety and security in school was

My favorite thing to do to start the semester because they relate to it so much … Almost 100% of them latch on to that because …they had some kind of a teacher that made a difference at some point … School was a safe place for them at some point.

According to Jean, her students demonstrated engagement with “The Sanctuary of School” through their willingness to enter into large and small group discussions about the text. Jean also noted that “almost all of them” used this text (one of three they could write about) in their first essay. Although the text was almost 20 years old, Jean felt that students’ interaction with it demonstrated the universal nature of the themes the text explored. Jean did note that

I haven't noticed this a lot, but I do, I do remember one Black male student who wrote in his journal about, like, a younger grade teacher that was really impactful. And then he
kind of talked about how that was when he still enjoyed school, and he ended up writing a paper about like, when he started out not liking school anymore and how that was different from like his second-grade teacher.

Although this student’s reaction to the text essentially repudiated the idea of school as a sanctuary for him, Jean felt comfortable that overall, the relevancy of the text to students’ lives encouraged student engagement.

Because they selected texts that they believed were relevant to students’ lives, all five instructors also emphasized that those texts could increase other connections related to Theme 2 during lessons and activities. In fact, it was Wanda’s initial analysis during a focus group that allowed me to see the relationship between student-student connections and student-text connections, and, as a result, the entirety of Theme 2: “Connecting Any Way You Can.” In the process of reciprocal analysis, I asked the five instructors “Are you identifying with what you are hearing? Any ‘me too’ moments?” Wanda’s response helped me to see the more fully developed theme.

W: A lot of the same thing, some similar things, um, in terms of like connections and like I mentioned using like text as like a common thing that we can all relate to, right? Or like readings in the classroom where they talked about experiences that our students are likely to have, especially in terms of like discrimination and things like that, where, you know, we're pretty sure that if they haven't experienced this, right, they know someone close to them, who is probably experienced a similar situation right? Um, and so they can choose to disclose that information or not. But in terms of the bigger picture using that because as a way to kind of make connections and build relationships I think . . . does that that makes sense?

AD: I'm glad you said that. I had not. I had not picked that up in our first interview that the text for you is, is the through line is the way you're connecting.

As Wanda’s analysis in this excerpt demonstrated, the instructors’ overall focus on creating student-text connections also intentionally facilitated student-instructor and student-student connections.
Margo also reiterated the complex intersections between the subthemes of “Connecting Any Way You Can.” Margo looked for texts to which students could build a “personal connection and the interest and then that connection with their peers in discussions.” In addition, however, Margo also mentioned text selection during a focus group when I asked the instructors to clarify how they promoted student-instructor relationships.

AD: And are there any other ways that as you pick texts and plan for class, and writing assignments, and figure out what your assignments are, that you're planning for that relationship to build that relationship? Or does that just sort of happen?

M: So, when I choose readings, I try to choose things that are going to be relevant to them. And even if I think they may not personally connect with it, I make a real effort with all my students to talk about, you know, basically social justice, right, or, you know, fairness and what. ...So, ...

AD: So, connect that back to your relationship with them

M: Well, because I think, because I get feedback from my students, where they tell me that they feel that, um ... so even in some of my classes, I've tried to evaluate identifying stereotypes, overcoming stereotypes, right? This is something that we're working on. How do you think we're doing with it? and you know, I even had students tell me that we should rename the class Empathy 101. Which was really sweet, but I mean ...?

AD: But get that back to your relationship with them.

M: Yeah, so I think that's a part of who I am. And they connect with me and feel ... because they feel like I care about every single one of them.

AD: Okay, ...

M: You know what I'm saying? So, I think through what they read, or through what they... they ... You know, I feel like they get a sense that that's the person I am.

Thus, the instructors demonstrated the importance of text selection, not just to interest students in a topic but also to encourage students’ connections to instructors and classmates.
During a focus group, a conversation between Jean, Wanda, and Elisabet confirmed my analysis and a slightly different perspective on instructors’ intentionality in text-selection processes.

W: It's because [the text is] kind of neutral, right? Because they can choose to talk about the text and the people in the text and the experiences, but they don't, ...you know what I mean, ... like they might talk about them in a way where you're like, "I'm pretty sure that there's a personal thing going on there," but they don't have to say that. Right? But it still allows them to talk about that experience without saying, "Oh I did this right or I've had this happen to me," it's, you know, focus on that text as the base will kind of work through their ideas and stuff.

AD: That's interesting to me. Do any of the rest of you think of text that way?

J: I thought of it when Elisabet gave her a little thing about why she became a teacher how school was her safe place I thought of that right away because the first thing that I teach in LTC is "The Sanctuary of Schools," by Linda Barry, and that's exactly what she's talking about, and that there's so many of the LTC students. It's almost 100% of them latch on to that because they feel the same way and they had - - even if they have an unhappy home life which is what it's about.

AD: Awesome. Interesting.

E: I never thought about the text of being a connector, but I think I do that subconsciously, um, because when I'm trying to pick out text for us to read, you know, I'm trying to figure out topics that a) they'll be interested in which is not always easy, but B) that they can connect to in some way. And so, I mean, our students are not a monolithic group by any sense of the word. But, there, there have been interesting times where students will choose to self-disclose "Oh that happened to me" or "That happened to my sister." or whatever. And, um, and so, without choosing them like purposefully like "Oh I want them . . ." I mean I do. […]. I do want them to connect with them, but I never . . . I don't think I ever stop and say that's why I'm doing this.

In this exchange, Jean, Wanda, and Elisabet confirmed that even if, like Elisabet, they were not always conscious of doing so, choosing texts that students could relate to helped them to forge connections between students and class texts.
In addition to relevance and the ability to increase student engagement, three of the instructors also reported that they selected at least some texts based on the texts’ representation of students’ races, cultures, and identities. During her first interview, Clare described her increased awareness of the importance of representation in her text selection:

I'm always conscious of ... who, you know, what the topic is of the article, who’s written it. I wasn't as intentional about that in the past. But I think that representation matters. So, I try to ...to pull in people, you know, diverse authors for diverse topics, topics that are, you know, timely, but also represent issues that my students might ... might affect my students or that they might care about.

Curiously, in a later focus group conversation, Clare rejected the idea of representation in text selection and clarified that she sought to create a “diverse” group of texts but did not necessarily try to assure representation of all her students’ identities in class texts. However, Jean selected texts that she felt were representative of the main demographics she anticipated in her developmental literacy courses. For instance, she described her use of “Names, Nombres” by Julia Alvarez saying that it was “interesting to talk about with students because usually, it’s their parents that have had that experience and then they’re different from that, so we talk about that.” Because a large proportion of RBCC’s developmental literacy students are generation 1.5 Latinx, Jean anticipated that her students could appreciate the perspectives of both the parents and Alvarez herself as described in “Names, Nombres.” Similarly, Wanda explained the importance of selecting texts through which students could see their own experiences.

I think most of [the texts I use] have some sort of cultural aspect where [the students] can see themselves … So that there were some, like Hispanic cultures and LGBTQ, and some, you know, some of the main characters are Black…. Because, like, … they need to see themselves reflected more in addition to that fact that they like it. And they’re more engaged with it. I feel like that's important for them to be able to see themselves represented as main characters in their culture and those kinds of things that they can identify with because I think they need that... familiarity to help boost their reading comprehension, right? Because if you can make connections to it, if you already kind of understand the circumstances that are going on … you can... better understand the words.
Thus, Clare, Wanda, and Jean chose culturally relevant texts and topics to capitalize on student-text connections to build student-student connections.

In selecting culturally relevant and sometimes potentially controversial topics, Wanda, Margo, and Clare also realized that they might expose students to levels of personal or interpersonal conflict. During individual interviews and focus groups, Clare and Margo both expressed the belief that texts that exposed students to controversial current issues helped them develop cultural knowledge as well as critical thinking skills. In addition, Wanda and Margo both explained that by choosing topics they felt were relevant to their students’ lives, they could give students the opportunity to talk about and process their own life experiences through the text -- using discussion of the text as a proxy for disclosing personal experiences that they were not ready to share. Wanda explained during a focus group that students might discuss the text and “I’m pretty sure there’s something personal there, but they don’t have to say that, right?”

On the other hand, Clare, Margo, Elisabet, and Wanda also selected texts to expose students to ideas and cultures that were outside of their own experiences. Wanda specifically selected texts that exposed students to varied cultural and gendered perspectives. Clare explained that selected texts from the “Code Switch” podcast to ensure that students could read “a good balance of […] perspectives, […] a good balance of authors.” Margo noted in interviews and focus groups that she especially focused on helping her students develop empathy. As a result, in her selection and teaching of narrative texts, Margo explicitly instructed her students to “put themselves in a different character’s position …And I try to get them to relate some things to their own lives because I can’t imagine anyone can read the book and not…find something that you can feel connected to.” Relating the ability to empathize with others to the development of
critical thinking, Margo explained in an individual interview that she asked students to write and problem solve from different points of view through reflective writing based on *The Line Becomes a River: Dispatches from the Border* by Francisco Cantú.

I might have them, um … you know, write about … the [Mexican immigrant] who was being sent back, and he was in jail, and you know, “You're in this position, you know, you have this family with the … with you know, two sons that really need you… what things are you going to do, you know? How are you going to…so write about that, right? You know, you're a border guard, and you get, you know, you pick up this young woman, and here’s… What are you going to do? So, what do you know? What kind of research do we have to do to understand what options the border guard has? Right? Or what options was… does this man have? If he, if he's … Legally, they're not going to allow him to stay in the country.” Now, a lot of students will say, “I would come back over the border, “or I would…” you know, I mean, they start to understand that “I can't leave the family. So, I guess I would enter illegally,” right?

In this reflective writing assignment, then, Margo called on her students to put themselves in the shoes of characters who might have been very like them or very unlike them to understand the complexities of a current issue like border security. So, although some of her students might have been able to make more personal connections to *The Line Becomes a River* than others could, Margo considered the book an effective text because she was able to design activities around it that helped students develop empathy and awareness of other perspectives, cognitive skills Margo associated with critical thinking. Similarly, Elisabet also noted that her selection of text was driven both by an interest in representing cultures in her classroom and by her desire to “help students . . .normalize… but I don't want to say, I don't want to say "the other,” but … but people who don't look like them.” In their selection of texts by and about non-White people, the instructors sought to both facilitate connections to texts for non-White students and to nudge their White students into the development of more cultural awareness.

Theme 2, “Connecting Any Way You Can” and Theme 1, “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing” were closely related in the five instructors’ explanation of their
instructional planning. Whether selecting texts, planning for class activities, or developing text-based assignments, the instructors thought carefully about connecting students to the course materials, to their classmates, and the instructor because they believed that such interpersonal connections would foster student engagement and success. In describing the ways they promoted student connections, the instructors also began to reveal some of the ways they engaged with race in their instructional planning. Their discussions of text selection priorities, for instance, revealed an awareness of the demographic differences of race, gender, and culture in their developmental literacy classrooms. Their desire to help students build connections by appreciating other perspectives and developing empathy often led them to select “diverse” texts that held the potential for conversations about race, even though the instructors did not explicitly identify race as a criterion for text selection in the context of this study. Likewise, in their assessment of students’ willingness to connect with instructors and classmates, I heard the instructors’ first unprompted references to students’ race. As I will discuss in the next section and analyze more explicitly in Chapter 5, the extent to which the instructors did not reference race in their conversations with me or their text-based assignments was as important to understanding their engagement with race as the extent to which they did so.

Theme 3: Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences

Theme 3, “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences” encompasses the emotionally charged ways the five instructors talked about avoiding conflict and the ways their avoidance of such conflict impacted their instructional decision making. Because Whiteness theory indicates that White folks tend to feel uncomfortable discussing race (Carter & Helms, 1990; DiAngelo, 2018; Flynn, 2018; Helms, 1990; King, 1991), I was not surprised by the instructors’ reticence about
race during interviews and focus groups. However, as the instructors and I cycled through the data collection process of interviews, document analysis, and focus groups, I began to recognize several codes that directly or indirectly elevated concerns for comfort and indicated patterns of conflict avoidance. From these codes, I drew and shared with them the theme of “Avoiding ‘Oh my God experiences’”

A conversation with Elisabet expressed emphatically the “‘Oh my God’ experiences” the instructors sought to avoid for both for themselves and for their students. Elisabet explained her avoidance of texts that raised too much conflict in her classroom when she shared the story of a text that she found ineffective because it caused a strong negative reaction from some of her students. The text was “The Meaning of a Word” by Gloria Naylor which explores a young Black girl’s first experience with a racial epithet. Elisabet explained that a Black woman in her class responded very positively to the text, saying “This is real, like this is . . . lots of people go through this.” However, Elisabet also reported that two White students in the same class were highly offended by the text. Elisabet described the atmosphere in the class when she tried to teach the Naylor text “shut down.” As a result of the oppressive silence that fell over her classroom when she used the Naylor text, Elisabet has not used that text in her class again. She explained that “I try to find things that [students are] going to be interested in but that aren't gonna shut them down or make them have these ‘Oh my God’ experiences where they don't want to interact anymore.” In this case, the relevance of a text that directly addressed a sensitive racial slur conflicted with Elisabet’s priority for creating a discord-free classroom. Elisabet’s decision regarding the Naylor text highlighted a criterion for text selection and the third theme I drew from the data that impacted these instructors’ instructional planning in sometimes conflicting ways – the creation of a comfortable class environment. Although Elisabet’s story provided the
most emphatic representation of this theme, this meaning came up in many contexts during interviews and focus groups. Thus, “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences encompassed the strategies these instructors described that maintained a comfortable classroom environment, often by silencing conversations about race.

In describing their pedagogical planning, all five instructors revealed that they prioritized both students’ and instructors’ sense of safety and comfort. As a result, the instructors carefully navigated differences in power and vulnerability as they selected texts, planned in-class activities, and planned for text-based assessment. Additionally, because the five instructors recognized a strong correlation between engaging in class and connecting to class materials, their focus on comfort and safety also impacted the other two themes of “Connecting Any Way They Can,” and “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing.”

Assumptions About Comfort and Safety

The theme “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences” describes a range of ways that students and instructors could feel comfortable or uncomfortable based on the explanations the instructors provided or the assumptions they made about comfort and safety. For instance, part of “feeling comfortable” related directly to the interpersonal connections the five instructors worked hard to create. For instance, Clare’s explanation during an interview that she had students “do discussions […] to try to build that sense of community” suggested that her goal was not only to help students engage with each other to achieve course outcomes but also to create a group identity and set of norms that would generate a sense of belonging. These goals were consistent across the five instructors’ explanations of instructional planning. Thus, through icebreakers, ally statements, group activities, and text selection, the instructors saw themselves as laying the
foundation for student success. In a focus group, Jean summarized her approach in the first weeks of class as “Let me make you feel comfortable first, and then let me try to teach you some things.” However, the data also suggested a corollary to Jean’s statement, “Let me get comfortable first, and then let me try to teach you some things.”

The five instructors indicated that school generally had been a safe place for them, and in their interviews, they shared how their positive school experiences informed the way they planned instruction. Elisabet found escape from a troubled home life in the care and calm of school and modeled her nurturing and mothering teaching style on the teacher who had the strongest positive impact on her as a student. Jean, whose parents were also both educators, found in school a mental “happy place” to solve increasingly complex puzzles through reading and research. As a result, she sought to create a similarly safe and stimulating environment in her classroom. All five instructors described school as a site where they could excel, address gaps in their personal or professional knowledge, and “climb the ladder” to career opportunities. As college instructors who had attained Master’s degrees as well as varying additional credentials, these five instructors not only liked school, they were also good at “doing” school and to a large extent accepted the premises that education is beneficial, that education prepares students for success, and that working through the educational system is in students’ best interest. Although they all reported experiencing some typical stress during their educational careers, “Oh my God” experiences were not the norm for these instructors when they were students. In some ways, the five instructors expected that students shared their positive experiences of school. For instance, Jean’s use of “The Sanctuary of School” drew in part on an expectation that her students “had some kind of a teacher that made a difference at some point … School was a safe place for them at some point.” Because school was a safe space for Jean and because she endeavored to be a
“teacher that made a difference,” the narrative of school as a safe and comfortable space felt natural to her. She further assumed, from students’ engagement in class discussion and successful completion of the essay for the unit about school experiences, that their involvement in the U.S. education system also aligned to that narrative.

Because they perceived school as a safe place, the instructors assumed a level of trust between themselves and their students. Although they included “code of conduct” policies in their syllabi, they reported few behavioral problems and generally expected that students would behave appropriately in class. Clare, for example, explained that she trusted her students to treat each other with kindness and respect, as this excerpt of our interview conversation demonstrates.

C: I can't think of a behavior that I might be [discouraging]. […] I think ... monitoring that … just making sure that nobody's being discriminatory or causing unsafe learning environment for somebody else. But I wouldn't say that... I mean, obviously, those are things that you don't want them to do, but I'm not... I wouldn't say I am not intentional about that. But I'm not like, ...there's a policy in my state...in my syllabus about that. But I wouldn't say I am using those forms of communication in order to prevent that because it could happen in the ways that I have students interact with each other... And I… it has, so I, you know, have to call it out.

AD: […] So you're not planning activities to avoid [discriminatory behaviors] happening.

C: Right. Yeah, I am giving my students benefit of the doubt that they're not going to.

In this exchange, Clare’s perception of school as a safe place allowed her to give her students “the benefit of the doubt.” Clare noted that students could be unkind to their classmates and that if such behaviors occurred, she would address them, but she trusted that her students would not discriminate or create an “unsafe learning environment.” Even when students’ behavior did not conform to their expectations for engagement and connection, both Margo and Jean were quick to note during interviews and focus groups that their students were not “rude”
and did not disrupt the class. All five instructors indicated that the way they set up their classrooms invited and assumed a level of trust that students would treat their instructors and their classmates kindly and help to maintain the sanctuary of school.

Although they perceived school to be a safe environment, the five instructors also planned instruction based on the assumption that their students were new to the college culture and would need guidance to acclimate to and succeed in the postsecondary environment. For this reason, Jean, Margo, Wanda, and Elisabet invited representatives from campus services to speak to their classes, and all five instructors included links to wellness services, financial aid, veterans’ services, and the like in their course syllabi and course management systems.

In addition, for Margo and Clare, assistance in adapting to the college culture included focusing students on the externally motivating “carrot” of grades. For instance, Clare described during a focus group the way she prompted students who were not participating in class or turning in assignments by “contacting the students saying, ‘Hey you didn't turn this in. You need to get this in. […] As a reminder, it is worth this percentage of your course grade.’” By reiterating the course expectations and consequences for non-compliance, Clare attempted to motivate students to comply with college course expectations. During another focus group, Margo similarly described the differences between her expectations and her perception of students’ expectations for course success:

When you show them […] their grade and you show them the number of points there are, . . . you know, and you explain to them what kind of grades they need to get to get through the class. . . . And sometimes they really take convincing because, I think, you know, they still think that at the end I'm just going to say, go ahead. . . . You know, I guess one of the things I always try to explain in my classes. You know, it's all a matter of if you meet the bar, right? Here is the bar you need to meet to be successful at the next level, and so it's just a matter of how, you know, your work shakes out basically.
In these excerpts, both Margo and Clare demonstrated their acceptance of the structures that govern “doing school,” but in their explanations also demonstrated their perception that developmental students were less compliant than they with the rigors of postsecondary education. Margo felt that her students were expecting her to “just say go ahead” to the next class, and Clare felt that students needed to be reminded that their grades were dependent on the completion of coursework. By warning students about the short- and long-term consequences of not completing assigned tasks, Clare and Margo sought to avoid the “Oh my God” moments when students discovered they were not passing their courses. Additionally, however, in their reference to students’ grades, Clare and Margo disclosed a fallacy inherent in the assumption that school is a safe place where teachers’ role is to “connect with” and nurture their students. At the end of the semester, as Margo explained, student success is “just a matter of how […] your work shakes out” not how well students connected with their classmates or instructors or how well they participated in class.

The Power in the Room

Thus, Margo and Clare’s comments about grades exposed an inherent conflict. At the same time that the instructors worked to establish meaningful relationships with their students, because they assigned the grades, they also wielded all the academic power in the classroom. The five instructors revealed varying degrees of comfort with this power. On one hand, the excerpts above demonstrated, Clare and Margo recognized and accepted their power to hold students accountable for and evaluate coursework. Margo displayed comfortable confidence in the power she held as the instructor.
When they first come in, I really do think that they're just thinking, if I show up, I'm going to get through and I'll go to the next level. You know, so I think it's something I try to break them of early. I mean, all my students, I do try to break them of that, and just tell them you know, “This is how many hours you need outside the classroom to be successful at this, you know, and a lot of what we do in here … [...] So, you need to have this done so that you can participate and be active in the class because this is what we’re going to be doing.” … But I think they don’t have that expectation. I think they really do think… you know. And I tell them, you know, you might be used to writing an essay the night before, but it's not going to fly in this class.

In “trying to break them of that” and telling her students what is “not going to fly” Margo’s word choice demonstrated her determination as an instructor to hold her students accountable for completing assignments as instructed and on her timeline. However, in the two excerpts above, Margo’s use of “you know” and “basically” reflect a pattern evident in most of the instructors: an effort to distance themselves from the consequences of grades and course policies or to co-opt me and the other focus group members in agreement with them. Although Clare and Margo seemed the most comfortable with this power, Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet seemed less confident. Wanda, for instance, stated in an interview that “I never know how harsh to be, or how strict.” In terms of deadlines and student accountability, Wanda explained

Getting them to do that work outside of class and ahead of time […] is sometimes challenging because it seems like you know, there's always an excuse from one person or another. And, you know, . . . we all know that legitimately things happen sometimes.

In empathizing with her students, Wanda demonstrated a more flexible approach to student accountability but also revealed in her wording (“sometimes,” “it seems like,” “you know”) a lack of confidence in her decision to be flexible. Jean, with more years of teaching experience, had established a more flexible approach to deadlines and course policies than Margo and Clare but was more comfortable with the level of flexibility she had established in her classroom than Wanda. She explained that she had learned “I could still kind of be an authority in the classroom […] but not by just having a bunch of rules;” however, unlike Margo’s embrace of her authority,
Jean hedged her authority with “kind of.” As caring instructors who sought to engage and connect students and to create a safe learning environment, the instructors also had to find their level of comfort in establishing course policies.

In my discussion of the theme “Connecting Any Way You Can,” I noted the instructors’ concern that the expectations for academic reading and writing might reduce students’ “buy in” to the course. In negotiating their power in the classroom, Jean, Elisabet, and Wanda also struggled with the enforcement of standards for academic language. Elisabet explained during a focus group that she struggled because

> We want people to know that their voices matter. But I also feel like in many workplaces and academia, right, standard English is prioritized. And if we want to be successful, if we want our students to be successful in these areas, we need them to be able to function within those rules. So, I don't know. I go back to … I don't even know where to start.

Although she did not express herself in the language of critical race theory or emancipatory pedagogy, Elisabet recognized and was somewhat overwhelmed by her role in perpetuating the dominant discourse. At the same time, Elisabet did “not know where to start” in unraveling the structural inequities of academic language, and appeared to be frozen in inaction. Similarly, Jean seemed surprised in an individual interview to realize that she was more likely to invite students to include their “own language” if that language was a recognized international language but less comfortable inviting students to include English variants, like African American Vernacular English (AAVE) or Black Language (BL) in their academic writing. Although Jean seemed uncomfortable with this realization, like Elisabet, she was not sure where to start to address the discrepancy, in part because she was concerned that code meshing with AAVE or BE would be less accepted in academic discourse than similar code meshing with Spanish. In negotiating a shared understanding of the tension between formal and informal language during a focus group,
Wanda most clearly voiced the reservations she, Jean, and Elisabeth felt about rigidly enforcing expectations for academic language.

Yes, I am questioning that a little bit. I'm not 100% sure that I have the answer. [...] Um, [...] We are more like funneling them down a path. Right? So, like down this academic path, which, if we're going to make them take psychology, and biology and art appreciation, they ... all those classes have expectations, right in terms of academic writing. And so, if they are going to be successful in those classes, then they do have to know [academic language and academic essay structure]. But again, if all they're ... I mean, if they're getting a bachelor's degree, they need these skills in order to get that degree, but then once they go beyond that, I think it depends on the career that they are looking for, right? If they're going into business? Great. If they're going to be an English teacher? Great. If they're in a CTE program? ... Maybe? Right?

In their discomfort, Jean, Wanda, and Elisabet demonstrated the limits of their authority and their sense that they were constrained by structures and expectations outside of their control. So, although they had generally experienced school as a safe place and worked to make their classrooms safe spaces for themselves and their students, the instructors were also aware of uncomfortable realities that also took up space in their classrooms.

All five of the instructors also understood from their own experiences as students that school could sometimes be an intimidating place and these experiences impacted their teaching. Margo, Clare, and Wanda shared stories of their own college experiences when they were unsure of and stressed about their educational goals. These three instructors used those experiences to empathize with students who were likewise struggling to determine academic goals. Likewise, Wanda, Elisabet, and Margo reflected that as adult students with children and complex lives, they sometimes struggled to keep up with academic demands. In addition, Elisabet and Jean shared significant negative school experiences that affected their teaching. Elisabet recalled two experiences when instructors had made her feel uncomfortable speaking in class. She described a college poetry teacher who openly rejected students’ understanding of class readings, and a
“Spanish teacher who would call on [me] only to make fun of the way I talked. No seriously, I ended up leaving the room crying because she made fun of the way I talked.” These were “Oh my God” experiences for Elisabet. The discomfort and threat she felt as a student in these classes remained with her and influenced the way she planned instruction in her developmental courses. Elisabet frequently noted that students needed the courage to speak up in class, and said, “I don't like putting people on the spot. And I know it’s because I hate when teachers call on me. It makes me so anxious.” Although they did not all identify their own experiences of intimidation in school the way Elisabet did, all the instructors described small group work not just as a way to engage and connect students but also as a way to avoid making students comfortable by calling on them to speak in a large group setting.

Jean also tapped a negative experience she had as a student to guide her planning for class discussions about texts.

So, I can think of a professor that I had in grad school, […] and he was very, like, “Read the stuff. Write a one-page paper about it, and then turn it in.” So, it was very… We had hardly any discussions. I don't know if we had any class discussions at all. And it was like really hard material that we were reading and kind of doing on our own. And I think of that often when students are reading something that's hard, to not do that, to not just say, “Read it, write a paper, and then we're never going to do anything with it.” Like what kind of discussion, can we have? Or, or I think of what … what would have made that easier, not even easier like to understand but more appealing because now I feel like everything we talked about in that class is just – blech – Like it’s not something that I care to ever think about again. So where to take that for students who maybe don't understand or don't really care about what they're reading and at least make it something that’s beneficial.

The explanation Jean provided contrasted the uncomfortable class environment that Jean’s professor created with the way she planned class discussions. Rather than assuming her students would independently and confidently make meaning from “hard” texts, Jean sought class activities that would allow students to explore and discuss texts without the pressure she had felt.
Thus, the instructors’ discussions of instructor power revealed one aspect of Theme 3, “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences.” Clare and Margo expressed a sense of comfort in wielding their instructor power to grade and impose academic standards, but Elisabet, Jean, and Wanda expressed uncertainty in imposing those standards. For Elisabet, Jean, and Wanda, imposing power over students made them feel uncomfortable and activated their memories of their own “Oh my God” experiences as students.

**Talking About Race**

Creating a comfortable environment for both themselves and their students sometimes drew the five instructors into uncomfortable encounters with race. Although the instructors generally did not mention their Whiteness explicitly or recognize White as a raced perspective, in talking about race or in sharing their experiences discussing race in their classrooms, all five instructors demonstrated uneasiness and awkwardness.

In their interviews, Jean, Elisabet, and Clare all reported experiencing a degree of discomfort in discussing texts that elevated racial inequities. As Jean explained, discussions of such texts made them aware of their Whiteness.

In my head, I'm thinking how, like "How do I feel like I have any authority to talk about this person's experience?" And so, like *Always Running* for example which is a Latino man (Luis Rodriguez), and he's writing about how all of his teachers and administrators are White and he felt like he didn't belong. And then we talk about it. Right? And then we talk about that in class, and I think, "I'm a White teacher, and I felt like I belonged when I was in high school. So, how do I get these students to talk about how they didn't with me?"

Jean’s explanation of her discomfort in leading discussions about *Always Running* reflected a fairly consistent lack of confidence all five instructors felt in their ability to lead class conversations about race with students who were mostly non-White. Elisabet’s discomfort was
especially noticeable as she reflected that when it came to discussing racialized experiences.

“There’s so much I don’t know […] and it’s almost fearful, right, like I don’t want to say anything that’s going to offend or upset somebody.” Similarly, Clare reflected her discomfort in speaking about race from her position of Whiteness.

I do tend to feel more comfortable when it’s . . . when we're talking about, you know, a representation . . . a diverse representation that's not in the classroom because I feel like, you know, I don't feel . . . as much like I'm. … I don't feel self-conscious about talking about like an identity that I don't belong to if it's if there's nobody else with that identity in the classroom, I guess. Because I… I'm not worried about what they're gonna think about us talking about it, which maybe is a bad thing.

Like Elisabet and Jean, Clare expressed her uncertainty and awkwardness in leading discussions about race. Their lack of confidence and their fear of offending or insulting students in the classroom threatened to create “Oh my God” experiences that these instructors chose to avoid.

Even in individual conversations with me and in focus group conversations with their colleagues (not students or people of color that they might offend), all five instructors demonstrated their discomfort in talking about race. In interviews and focus groups, they stumbled over word choices including whether to use “Black” or “African American” or even “race” or “ethnicity” as this conversation between Jean and Wanda demonstrated:

W: [Alison] commented that we say “ethnicity” instead of “race” and sometimes to me, they're the same. But I'm…

J: It’s hard for me to know the difference.

W: They’re sometimes also considered different categories. So, I didn’t have that clear definition, so I probably use them interchangeably.

They also tended to deflect questions directly about race to topics they were more comfortable speaking about, including language acquisition, socio-economic status, or even their own experiences as international students. Thus, during a focus group, my question “How does
race impact literacy?” resulted in some thoughtful answers about the impact of students’
language acquisition and students’ culture and values, but the instructors seemed to skitter away
from a subject they were uncomfortable discussing. When they did address the question (often
because I kept redirecting them to it) their responses to questions that focused specifically on
race tended to be disjointed and punctuated with stops and starts as the examples in Table 9
demonstrate. In addition, their responses to questions centered specifically on race highlighted
their discomfort in not knowing, as shown in Jean’s comment that “I don’t really know how to
articulate this.” The extended excerpt from the second focus group demonstrates my efforts to
direct Margo’s attention specifically to the portrayal of race in the text and her negotiation to
avoid that focus.

AD: Margo, did you have any thought about how race is portrayed?

M: In the texts I choose? Um, I mean I think it is in most texts actually that I choose,
you know and socioeconomic, you know, inequities are dealt with in almost all of
them. I can't think of any that aren’t. But it is interesting. You made me think of
Hillbilly Elegy. I don't know if I mentioned that. I have used that one, and of course,
that is about a White man from the Appalachian area, an impoverished area. I mean
and he talked about how Trump got elected right because his book came out after
Trump was elected, but this whole group of people that felt like nothing in this
country was working for them, and so that’s interesting because there really aren't a
lot of Latino or African American… But there is a pretty common thread of
experience in terms of social class in there. And it’s a newer perspective, I think, in
what we generally look at, you know, when we when we talk about the inequities
and everything, so…

AD: So, I'm hearing you say that socioeconomics is a theme through all of your texts.

M: Yeah, I think it fits in all my texts. I can’t think of any it doesn’t.

AD: Connect that to race for me. Because my question was, “How is race portrayed?”
and you shifted over to socioeconomics.
### Table 9

Sample of Instructors’ Responses to Race-Focused Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>How does race impact literacy?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Clare</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Elizabet</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Jean</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Margo</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wanda</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**M:** Well, and I guess the reason I did that is because I was thinking race is more directly connected in all my other ones, you know, and so many times the difficulty of being African American and succeeding, right in, in the world that we live in, or dealing with many of the prejudices that they deal with, right or Latino, or, you know, Mexican dealing with all kinds of unfortunate, uh ... you know, ... ideas that people have that are, you know, that put ... so I think most of mine deal more directly with race and social class directly. And I guess, that is race, you're talking White, too *Hillbilly Elegy*, but it's not the traditional way to go. It's not the traditional thing you think of.
In this excerpt, even when I specifically redirected Margo to the question of race in the course text, she shifted the focus to socioeconomics. In that shift, Margo did recognize that “I guess [White] is a race,” but her discomfort was clear. As the shorter excerpts in Table 9 demonstrate, Margo’s discomfort in discussing race was not unique.

During the second focus groups, when I shared with the instructors my observation that they were uncomfortable talking about race; generally, the instructors confirmed my analysis. Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet\(^3\) all expressed their sense that as White women they felt out of their depth speaking to race. They explained that what they did not know about race made conversations about race difficult for them. They mentioned specific terminology and their fear that they would offend someone by using the wrong word (Hispanic/Latinx; Black/African American; race/ethnicity). In fact, in interviews or focus groups even during probing conversations about their discomfort talking about race, their shifts in their speech reflected their discomfort. When I pushed them to talk about race, their speaking tended to stop, start, and pause. When talk about their discomfort moved into an intellectual conversation about the difference between “race” and “ethnicity,” Jean’s, Wanda’s and Elisabet’s speech patterns contained fewer starts and stops. Jean, Elisabet, and Wanda appeared to be on more solid ground when discussing word choice than in exploring their Whiteness, but they were willing to have the conversation. During a focus group, Jean also explained that she felt the intersectional nature of students’ lives made speaking specifically about race too limiting.

I think part of it is that it's so mushed together that there's like … I … I think a lot of times when I was answering questions, I was thinking of specific students, and I didn't know how to pull apart like, what if it was race? What if it was gender? What if it was social class? Because so much is connected, so I think that's part of it. I also think that

\(^3\) Due to a schedule conflict, Clare was not present during this part of the second focus group.
like Wanda said, it's sort of hard to stop and think about the right way to say it and try to be sensitive to everything that's going on in the world.

In her response, Jean demonstrated her awareness of the micro-intersectionality of her individual students’ lives as well as the intersections she experienced in trying to answer my questions about race. Although they said they had not consciously done so, Jean and Wanda acknowledged during the focus group that by shifting the conversation to language differences or differences in values or celebrations of diversity, they could reorient themselves within their areas of expertise. Although they felt uncomfortable with their discomfort, Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet verified that talking about race made them uncomfortable.

On the other hand, Margo firmly stated that she was not uncomfortable talking about race. I include below a long section of the focus group conversation between me and Margo to clearly represent Margo’s renegotiation of my interpretation.

AD: So, one of the things I saw in the interviews is that when I would ask you questions directly about race […], you talked about economic inequality.

M: And I would say that I don't feel uncomfortable talking about race. But you know what, I don't come at it from the angle of… like you said, there's a lot I don't know. So, there's a lot I can learn. And I use my characters, lots of times, or the essay we wrote …read, or, you know… so I really push try to push the limits to get people to think differently. I do… I do see race tied in a great deal to socioeconomic, I, you know, …

AD: Oh, yeah, absolutely. There are intersections there. I'm not questioning you there. What I found interesting was that when I asked a question directly about race, you did what looks to me like deflection, but I don't know whether it is and that's why I want to check it with you. I say “race,” you say “economics,” I say “race,” you say “ethnicity.” I say “race,” you say “ESL language learners.” I say “race,” you say “culture.”

M: Which is interesting. I still really don't believe that I feel uncomfortable.

AD: Okay. So, so when you when I say “race,” and you say “economics,” … Why is that?
M: Probably because my focus is so much economic, you know, that that’s like…? My world revolves around it, you know, reading and thinking about things and a whole class designed around it. And I mean, I find that to be the case in so many circumstances. Maybe, maybe, you know, I mean, because I don't probably directly address race, like, I do feel like I do directly address it. But again, it's always in terms of something we’ve read, or I mean, I probably just don't sit down and say, “Hey…” right? I mean, I try to get them to read things that I really think they're going to disagree with, you know, or it's either gonna open their eyes or they're gonna really disagree with it, initially, like before they read it. Right?

So yeah, I guess I just think because… uh …it all seems to be tied together, but I don't know maybe. I don't feel like I'm uncomfortable with it. But maybe I'm not addressing it the way…Maybe I appear that way. I don’t think I feel that way.

In answering my question about her discomfort talking about race, Margo, like Jean, identified areas of intersectionality in students’ lives and focused on the socioeconomic factors which she felt more comfortable discussing. I include Margo’s explanation and her rejection of my analysis here in the spirit of the study’s reciprocal ethnographic methodology. Additionally, I agree with Margo’s closing premise that my observations can only identify what I observed not what Margo actually felt. Whether Margo felt uncomfortable talking about race or not, in this conversation, as in others throughout the data collected, she, along with her colleagues in the study, shifted conversations focused on race to less sensitive foci.

Jean, Clare, Elisabet, and Wanda also acknowledged that they avoided conversations about race that they believed would make their students uncomfortable. A primary driver of this avoidance was concern about asking students to “represent” their race or culture. Jean’s explanation is representative of Elisabeth, Wanda, and Clare’s concerns.

I definitely always keep in mind I don't want students to feel like they're called out and have to be like the voice of their group of people. Like if we have one black student. I don't want that student to have to be like, “Well, this I how it is for everybody.” Right? And so, I feel like that's why I try to do like a few things at a time and never just do like, “Okay, we're gonna talk about the one Black person article today. So Black students, tell us your experience,” you know. So that there is more… like we would read something by a Muslim man after September 11th, or something like that, so we’d read them together
and then talk about how they’re the same and how they’re different, so we… we never have to call out a student. Which I wouldn’t do, but I don't want everyone to like look at that one student. And then maybe like in a journal, they can write more about if they have, you know if they relate to it in like, a person way. Just very … because I feel like our society does that a lot like – “You answer my questions Black person. Tell me all of your experiences.” Which are very…. I definitely want to avoid that in class.

These concerns led Elizabeth, Wanda, Clare, and Jean to avoid direct discussions about race in the classroom, and to avoid calling on students whose race was represented in the text to avoid asking students to “represent their race.” In individual interviews, Jean and Clare specifically noted, for instance, that when they assigned a text by a Black author or a text that discussed Black experiences in the U.S., they hesitated to call on their Black students because they did not want to make them uncomfortable. Clare explained,

"I don't want […] to be like, "Okay, well this is […] an African American author. You're Black, why don't you speak about how you interpret it." […] You hope that they speak to their experience, but you don't want to call them out and be like, "Here speak for your race!"

To avoid such questions of “representation,” Jean explained that “a lot of times, I had them write about it, and […] they’re more comfortable doing that than talking about it altogether.” Jean, Wanda, and Elisabet, who used journals in their developmental courses, gave students opportunities to discuss their race-related experiences and connections to the texts in journal entries, thus avoiding discomfort for themselves or their students during class. The journal responses provided students an opportunity to discuss race but did not require them to do so.

Discussion questions and reading prompts from documents the instructors shared with me demonstrate a similar reticence to facilitate conversations about the raced experiences in texts. In their group activities, for instance, the instructors did not specifically focus the students on race but asked students to share what they understood about the author or how they could “relate” to
the text. Either individually or in their small groups, the students could choose to discuss their own raced experiences or those shared in the text, but successful completion of the class activity does not impel them to do so. In her small group discussion questions for an excerpt from Luis Rodriguez’s *Always Running* Jean focused students on text structure, vocabulary, and their personal connections to the texts, but did not specifically direct students to discuss the racial tensions in the text, even though she was aware of them and discussed that awareness in our interview. Questions that broadly invited students to connect with texts allowed the instructors to maintain the safety and comfort of their classrooms by avoiding interrogation of race within the diverse texts they had chosen for the course. Table 10 provides representative samples of discussion and reflection prompts for texts instructors identified as “diverse.”

Although these options allowed for student choice and respected the microsocial intersections of students’ identities, in providing these options, the instructors also avoided naming race as one of those intersections. For instance, Jean explained about the first essay assignment in her LTC 099 class:

> I mean, I … it’s not specifically about race but it’s … my … the first one I do in LTC, they … write about … they pick one of the things we read, and then they analyze it, and then they also talk about … experiences they can connect to it. So, it's not … the assignment doesn’t say “write about race,” but they're … the pieces that they're writing about are from like three different, diverse racial perspectives. So, they are writing about it. They're not like, … like it's not … the actual topic is not race.

Because the instructors did not, in either the discussion prompts or in the text-based essay assignments, specifically ask students to analyze or reflect on the raced experiences of these texts, they minimized the impact of race in the text and on students’ lives.

Similarly, the five instructors’ essay assignments allowed students and instructors to choose or avoid discussion of race and racism. For instance, Clare developed an essay
### Table 10
Prompts for Discussion and Reflection About Texts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Sample Prereading or Discussion Prompts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rodriguez, L. (1993) <em>Always Running</em></td>
<td>“Who is Luis Rodriguez? What do we know about him as an author?”&lt;br&gt;“What personal connections do you have to this section of the article? How can you relate to what the author writes?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chambers (2000) <em>Secret Latina at Large.</em></td>
<td>“As you read this article, pay attention to how the author changes and how she describes herself.”&lt;br&gt;“Pay attention as you read words you are unfamiliar with.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A series of images of personal items left by immigrants</td>
<td>How does it make you feel? What questions do you have? Can you relate it to anything else you have seen or heard about? What surprises you? These questions are not meant to limit you but to give you some direction to begin.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>along their route through Mexico and into the U.S.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donnella, L. (2020). <em>Why We Aren’t Who We Think We are.</em></td>
<td>Reflect on and respond to each author's discovery of personal identity and family history and the moment that they have chosen to focus on in their memoir essays that either made them redefine what they thought about their identity or influenced how they formed their identity. Also, reflect on how each author weaves personal memoir and cultural, historical, and/or political contexts together to form a more robust picture of their place in American society.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodriguez, L. (1993) <em>Always Running</em></td>
<td>“Who is Luis Rodriguez? What do we know about him as an author?”&lt;br&gt;“What personal connections do you have to this section of the article? How can you relate to what the author writes?”</td>
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</table>

assignment integrating texts that explored the Black Lives Matter movement from various perspectives. The instructions for the essay directed students to “Find the common topics, discover what each source has to say, and weave each source’s perspective together to create a cohesive picture of the similarities, differences, and connections between them.” Although the
BLM protests are clearly race-focused, Clare’s assignment did not ask students specifically to explore race. In fact, Clare explained that when one White female student struggled with the assignment, Clare attempted to focus the student by reiterating that the assignment did not ask her to explore the complexities of race but only to summarize and explore the similarities and differences in the text’s arguments. Clare explained, “I didn't want to pick apart like, "What do you not agree with?" Like. … I didn't want to pull that thread. So, I was just kind of more trying to focus on the purpose of the assignment.” By not “pulling” the thread of race, Clare avoided a difficult conversation and refocused the student on the academic focus of the assignment. In analyzing the meaning of this event, Clare shared her perception that she was helping the student avoid a crisis.

AD: So that student that objected to that writing assignment, do you think that was ... What do you think that was about? Why was she ...

C: Yeah, I think it was about, um, when you have a certain perspective, a certain worldview when something contradicts that it's ... difficult. You know, even if it's factual, then, you know, you, you ha-- people tend to resist facts that don't fit in with their ... um... concept of the way that the world works or their personal experiences. So I think that was just it. She was just she was having a very hard time... not being able to put her perspective, her views aside and just focus on "What are these people saying?" and being objective about it.

AD: And so in the process of, of responding to her and trying to guide her through how to complete that assignment, were you ...were you ...were you dealing with her issue? Or you're trying to stay out of the issue and just deal with the assignment?

C: Sort of, in a way, like, you know, it's not ... I wasn't trying to convince her that these were factual... Or that, you know, that these are ... Like, so I didn't ... I didn't want to pick apart like, "What do you not agree with?" Like. ... I didn't want to pull that thread. So I was just kind of more trying to focus on the purpose of the assignment. Um, you know, this isn't about ... you ... trying to address that, you know, it's okay. ... Like, you have a different opinion. You don't agree with them. But that's not the purpose of the assignment. It's not whether you agree with them or not, it's what they're saying. So, you can not agree with them and still tell your reader what they're saying about the topic and what the similarities and differences are in these three different podcasts.
AD: Okay, …

C: So like I was trying to, like approach it in that way. You know, here's the purpose of the assignment. Like, it doesn't have to be an existential crisis for you because you're not saying ... by saying what these people are saying, you're not saying that that's what you were saying. Like you're saying, "That's what they say."

Like Elisabet’s decision to remove Naylor’s “The Meaning of a Word” from her class texts, Clare’s decision not to unravel this White student’s thinking about race allowed her to maintain comfort and safety for her and her student. However, in both cases, the instructors devalued the difficult conversation about race and Whiteness that could have emerged from these confrontations. Rather than pulling that thread, Clare chose, instead, to focus on less confrontational academic analysis – the purpose of the assignment. Although Clare and Elisabet provided two of the clearest examples of how their instructional decision-making prioritized comfort over conflict and therefore elevated “safe” over risky conversations, their explanations describe the trend in all five instructors’ writing assignments that did not specifically address race in exploring texts.

All five instructors, in seeking to engage and connect students, prioritized comfort over confrontation. Consistently, they aligned their own educational experiences with their perceptions of students’ educational experiences and inferred that difficult conversations about race threatened to create “Oh my God” experiences that would result in uncomfortable silence or offense that would decrease students’ willingness to engage and connect. The conversation below demonstrates my initial efforts to articulate the instructors’ fear with Elisabet.

AD: I feel like part of what I'm hearing from all y'all is that there's this sense of well, Juan's experience, it may not be the same as Jose's experience even if they're… even though they're both Latino. And so how do I be culturally responsive without essentializing and assuming that they both have the same experience because they're Latino.
E: Right. Right. How do I reach them...? How do I help them without also making assumptions or stereotypes, or creating those assumptions?

AD: Yeah, I'm kind of, kind of getting this, I think I'm gonna have to figure out what the picture is because you know me and pictures. But the more we talk with all five of us, the more I get this... see if this sounds, accurate to you, the more I get this picture of this picture. this White woman with like walls so tight around her. Like "must do this can't do this," "must do this"... "can't do this." "Don't say that. Think about this." To the point that it I can almost see y'all, like you're stuck.

E: Right! And it is almost fearful, right? like I don't want to say anything that's going to offend or upset, somebody. And I do try to get people, my students, to understand different perspectives. But yeah, exactly I feel that "walled in" is a really good analogy, and like, I don't want to say something wrong. And especially, I think, lately with social media and everything. I have been really aware of how people are judged for things that they said or did 20 years ago. According to today's standards, right? And I talked about this with my kids, like the whole idea of Blackface, right? Yeah, maybe it's not okay now, but when I was growing up, nobody thought twice about it, and I don't think people were doing it to be mean. It was just that they didn't know, right, or they didn't... And so, I don't know how those two ideas connect, but it's just another piece of that. "Well, what if I say something, and I didn't know it was offensive, but I do something to shut a student down?" Right? Or "What if I misrepresent something, or maybe even if I had the best of intentions. What if that affects my, my students, or my career?"

Although I had initially conceived this theme as one of discomfort, the sense that Elisabet truly felt a threat to her professional security helped me to understand that the instructors’ concerns were more than discomfort and to see Clare’s hesitance to “pull that thread” to avoid a student’s “existential crisis” as well as Margo’s focus on socioeconomics as indicative of a consistent theme of “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences.”

Such avoidance was consistent with Jean’s and Elisabet’s general avoidance of conflict. For instance, Jean explained that she avoided “negativity” from her students, and had learned to sideline “aggressively negative [...] outbursts in class.” Because she did not want students to be angry with her, and she did not want negativity to affect the whole class, she developed strategies to sideline the confrontation. For instance, she described rearranging groups to avoid student-
student confrontations or handing back papers at the end of class so that “if there’s going to be a negative thing, we can isolate it.” However, Margo and Clare, while concerned about student comfort, were much less wary than Jean of general instructor-student conflicts that might arise from their exercise of teacher power. As we have seen, Margo confidently discussed her strict adherence to academic writing standards and did not shy away from enforcement of those standards. However, her instructional planning for text-based activities and assessment emphasized “empathy” over confrontation, and when she explored texts that elevated race, she focused on socioeconomic rather than racial implications.

In their selection of texts by and about non-White folks, the instructors sought to be inclusive and to create an engaging classroom environment that would give students the opportunity to connect with each other, the instructor, and the course material. However, to maintain what they perceived to be a safe and comfortable class environment, they avoided difficult conversations about race – either passively or actively. Passively, they created assignments that allowed for exploration of race but left that exploration largely to chance or students’ choice. Actively, they focused course discussions and text-based assessments on academic analysis, text structures, and vocabulary, prioritizing “comfort and safety” over engagement with the role of race in the interpretation and creation of those texts.

Summary of Chapter 4

In this chapter, I have shared instructors’ reflections on their instructional planning for text selection, development of text-based activities, and development of text-based assessments, highlighting how those reflections can be understood within the context of three themes, “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing,” “Connecting Any Way You Can,” and “Avoiding ‘Oh my
God Experiences.” I drew all of these themes from the interviews, focus groups, and document analysis, and used the three data sources as well as reciprocal ethnographic processes to triangulate my findings within and across data sources. In my presentation of these three themes, I have assembled relevant excerpts from interviews and focus groups to demonstrate the culture exemplified in the instructors’ instructional planning. I have also shared the moments when instructors disagreed with my analysis and the discussions and negotiations that arose from those disagreements. These agreements and disagreements include the instructors’ discussion of the role race played in their instructional planning. Although the instructors identified race as a significant part of their text selection process, they were less apt to identify race as a priority in their planning for class activities or text-based assessments. However, the instructors demonstrated engagement with race in their avoidance of race-based conflict in their instruction.

Figure 13 provides a visual image of the themes and subthemes I presented in this chapter. In the figure, I have used truncated identifiers (engagement, connectedness, and comfort/safety), rather than full phrases, to maintain conciseness. Surrounding the truncated identifiers for each them, key phrases (buy in, help seeking, attendance, completion of coursework) indicate the subthemes that exemplify each theme. The vertical lines between themes as well as the dotted lines around each them represent the tight connections and interweaving between the themes and subthemes. For instance, the vertical lines between themes represent the instructors’ understanding that students need to engage in class activities to be successful (Theme 1), but to engage in class activities, they need to feel connected to the texts, their classmates, and the instructor (Theme 2), but that students who do not feel connected may not feel comfortable or safe in class (Theme 3), and as a result, may not engage in class (Theme 1). Thus, each theme is affected by the others in the instructors’ instructional planning. Likewise,
tracing the subthemes of Theme one, the dotted lines around each theme reinforce the connections between subthemes. That is, the instructors recognized that students who do not attend class often also do not complete coursework, but at the same time, students who do not complete coursework are likely to stop attending class.

Figure 13 Themes and subthemes of the study.

Because the themes are closely related, this study’s data can be understood from top to bottom (moving from comfort and safety to engagement) or from bottom to top (starting with engagement), or from the middle moving out (starting with connectedness). Although the instructors highlighted engagement and connectedness as high priorities for student success, their
concern for comfort and safety in the classroom was the sometimes less explicitly stated and yet most elemental theme I drew from the data, the theme to which all others ultimately referred.

In Chapter 5, as I unpack the discussion surrounding my themes as responses to my research questions, I include a discussion of how the findings of this study create a paradox – a warm invitation to postsecondary literacy and all its benefits but a dismissal of Black students’ authentic connection to texts. In Chapter 5, I also discuss the pedagogical and research implications of my findings.
In Chapter 4, I provided evidence for the three overarching themes that I felt answered the study’s driving research questions. I drew the three themes from interviews and focus groups with five white female developmental literacy instructors and from analysis of course documents they shared with me. First, the instructors were committed to engaging students, and their strategies and planning for engagement constituted Theme 1, “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing.” Theme 2, “Connecting Any Way You Can,” highlighted the instructors’ efforts to build links between students and the course materials, between classmates, and between the students and the instructor. The instructors perceived that these connections were imperative to students’ comfort and safety in the classroom and that if students did not experience necessary levels of comfort and safety, they would not build the necessary connections with classmates, instructors, and texts, and therefore, would not engage in the class. As a result of this empathy for their students, the instructors planned their instruction to avoid what Elisabet referred to as “Oh my God” moments that threatened the sense of safety and comfort in the classroom. Theme 3, “Avoiding ‘Oh My God’ Experiences” revealed instructors’ strategies and patterns of practice to avoid conflict and uneasiness for them and their students.

In Chapter Five, I first provide a summary of the study itself, followed by a summary of themes I drew from the data, demonstrating how they align to research on literacy instruction and specifically instruction of Black male students. I then provide further discussion of the paradox
introduced in Chapter Four, explaining how the three themes I drew from the study demonstrate a warm invitation to postsecondary literacy and all its benefits but may also silence Black students’ authentic connection to texts. I then discuss the implications of the study’s findings and provide pedagogical and research implications.

Summary of the Study

The persistence of educational inequities for Black male students in the U.S, and specifically for Black male students enrolled in developmental literacy courses at community colleges in the U.S. provided the impetus for this study. Structural racism in U.S. culture generally and the U.S. education system specifically is reflected in the over-representation of Black male students in developmental literacy courses and the inequitable success rates for Black male students who take such courses. Although a great deal of research has focused on educational inequities for Black male students in K-12 settings (Baker-Bell, 2018; Boucher, 2016; Brooms & Davis, 2017; Camangian, 2010; Guiffrida, 2005; Kirkland, 2015; Popp et al., 2011; Warren, 2015a, 2015b; Wood & Newman, 2017) and on Black male collegians in four-year universities (Harper, 2012; Howard et al., 2016; Lamos, 2012; Rodgers & Summers, 2008; Shorette & Palmer, 2015), very few studies have focused on Black male students in community colleges (Harper & Harris, 2010; Weiss, 1985; Wood & Hilton, 2012; Wood et al. 2016), and none have focused specifically on the instructional decision making of White female developmental literacy courses. As a result, research provides little insight into how critical theory can inform the classroom practices of individual educators to address educational inequities in community colleges. Through this study, I sought to address the gap in the research
and to provide insights that could help White female developmental literacy instructors take concrete steps to address the opportunity gap in their classrooms.

I focused this reciprocal ethnographic case study on the ways White female developmental literacy instructors engaged race in their instructional planning because I believe that what teachers do in the classroom embodies how they perceive themselves, their students, and their roles in the education system. Like the overwhelming majority of U.S. educators, I identify as a White female, and that identity is a central fact in my research. My values, beliefs, and experiences as a White female educator are an inextricable factor in the study. My positionality gave me access to the thinking of my White female developmental literacy colleagues but also could have limited my objectivity. Throughout the study, I have been aware of the tensions inherent in researching other White female developmental instructors’ engagement with race, and in the study’s design, I sought to address those tensions. Although quantitative data provided evidence of educational inequities for Black male students nationally and at RBCC, through qualitative, rather than quantitative research, I was able to draw out the meaning and context for the study participants’ instructional decision making to shed light on those educational inequities. Additionally, because I, like my study participants, am a White female developmental literacy professor, I was aware of and had experienced myself the discomfort White folks can experience in discussing race and their engagements with race. In designing the study, therefore, I chose to reduce those tensions through a reciprocal ethnographic case study (Lawless, 1991, 1992, 2000) by which I shared interpretive authority with my study participants. The study participants were aware of my analysis throughout the study and in interviews and focus groups confirmed and countered my findings. Our discussions about our interpretations of the data were an essential part of the data analysis process of this study.
Finally, this study’s focus on race and gender accentuated my positionality. I acknowledge that my background and experience informed the codes and themes I drew across multiple data sets to “make sense of collective or shared meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 57). Although my coding was both inductive and deductive (Braun & Clarke, 2012), I positioned my study as inductive, critical, and constructionist, as I sought to understand how engagement with race impacted what my participants’ pedagogical practice. To answer the overarching research question, “How do White female developmental literacy instructors engage race in their instructional decision making?” I narrowed my focus with three subquestions:

1. How do White female community college literacy instructors engage with race in selecting texts for their literacy courses?
2. How do White female community college literacy instructors engage with race in developing and planning classroom learning activities based on texts?
3. How do White female community college literacy instructors engage with race in developing and planning text-based assessments?

With these three subquestions, I focused my research on the participants’ instructional planning rather than the actual instruction or assessment processes. As a result, the themes I drew from the data provide insights into how their understanding of race intersected with their pedagogical knowledge to impact their praxis.

Discussion of Themes

In this section, I provide an analysis of the three themes that I drew from the study’s data and explore the instructional decision-making of five White female developmental literacy professors through critical race theory, intersectionality, and Whiteness.
Theme 1: Engagement: Doing What They’re Supposed to Be Doing

As indicated in Chapter 4, using Theme 1, I uncovered the ways the five instructors promoted student engagement in the developmental literacy classes. The instructors tried to increase student success by facilitating students “Doing What They’re Supposed to Be Doing.” To promote student engagement as measured by their attendance, class preparation, class participation, and apparent buy in to the course and the project of developmental literacy, the instructors designed in-class activities to prepare for or follow up on out-of-class activities, and selected texts and course topics that they felt were current and relevant to students’ lives. All five instructors also promoted students’ help-seeking behaviors and considered help seeking to be further evidence of student engagement.

The instructors’ focus and instructional planning for student engagement align with educational research on college success. The large body of research indicating that students’ engagement in the academic work of college is important for both retention and success is reinforced by research documenting the importance of academic engagement for Black male students specifically (Gerald & Haycock, 2006; Harper, 2009, 2015; Johnson Kirkpatrick, et al., 2004; Strayhorn, 2014; Tinto, 2006; Williams et al, 2018). The instructors’ attention to establishing relationships with their students to increase engagement aligns with Warren et al.’s (2016) emphasis on the importance of student-teacher relationships in student engagement. Likewise, the instructors’ frustration and sense of helplessness when students either did not complete the coursework or physically withdrew from class activities are consistent with
Michael’s (2015) finding that White teachers felt lost and confused when their Black male students disengaged.

**Engagement and Management of Complex Lives**

All five instructors associated students’ disengagement, to some extent, with the complexity of students’ lives. They mentioned out-of-school priorities including jobs, children, and other family responsibilities which often distracted students from meaningful engagement with developmental literacy instruction. Margo especially focused on the socioeconomic challenges that impacted student success. Although all five instructors described ways that they could “relate” to students’ life management challenges, none of the instructors remarked on the contribution of their White privilege to their achievement of advanced degrees. Additionally, none of the instructors recognized the impact their well-intended by false empathy (Delgado, 1997; Parker, 2015; Warren, 2015a; Warren & Hotchkins, 2015) could have on Black male students whose daily lives required them to manage not only jobs, family, and other outside responsibilities but also the incessant impacts of structural racism, Whiteness, and stereotype threat that were likely to leave them exhausted (Steele, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Toldson & Owens., 2010). Because successful White students tend to see their success as the result of their hard work rather than their White privilege (Applebaum, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 1994; Harper et al., 2009; Noguera, 2008; Patton, 2016), the instructors’ focus on self-management reflected their Whiteness as well as their lack of awareness or sense of helplessness in the face of the structural racism that complicates Black male students’ ability to manage their lives.

Research does indicate that socioeconomic status is negatively correlated with student motivation, achievement, and success (Dixon-Romn, 2012; Rowley & Bowman, 2009), and
Black men collectively are likely to be first-generation students and low-income students (Cuyjet, 2006). However, the instructors’ focus on self-management corroborates Howard’s (2013) research on deficit views of Black male students. Only Clare directly noted that students’ complex lives could be assets. Generally, the instructors’ focus on self-management suggested a deficit view of disengaged students and a lack of understanding of the structural forces that inhibit student engagement.

Engagement and Cooperative Participation

Additionally, although the instructors’ efforts to create engaging topics and assignments suggested an awareness of their power to promote or inhibit engagement, their focus on students’ time and priority management as well as their emphasis on verbal and cooperative participation also highlighted students’ shared accountability for engagement. Although the instructors all recognized that both students and teachers played significant roles in creating engagement or disengagement, they did not appear to recognize how intersections of race, gender, and class might play a role in students’ (dis)engagement. For instance, the instructors did not indicate any awareness that students’ disengagement could be a form of self-efficacy, a logical decision for students who felt unseen or over policed, or who understood that their success was not expected and that the educational system was not designed for Black male students’ success (Chavous et al., 2003). From an individualistic standpoint, the instructors recognized that racism existed, but they saw themselves as caring and culturally responsive instructors and did not tend to see themselves (White educators in the U.S. education system) as elements of an inequitable system. As Duncan (2002a) indicated, the instructors generally perceived the U.S. education system as
“reasonably fair” (p. 134), and therefore interpreted students’ lack of engagement and buy in as individual problems to be overcome rather than symptoms of larger structural inequities.

Thus, the five instructors’ expectations for students’ buy in to developmental literacy itself and their coursework specifically hinged on observable behaviors – talking to classmates, completing and submitting assignments on time, seeking and responding to feedback. In these expectations, the instructors were aligned with research and pedagogical best practices for student engagement (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paulson & Theado, 2015; Weimer, 2002). However, in these expectations for individual students’ demonstration of buy in, the instructors did not indicate significant awareness that surface level participation was less important for Black student success than the instructors’ ability to recognize and problematize race with students in the classroom (Brown et al., 2017). Black male students who have been misled and marginalized by the U.S. education system bring their experiences of marginalization to the developmental literacy classroom (Johnson Kirkpatrick et al., 2001) just as the White female educators who have been well-served by the U.S. education system bring their experiences to their teaching in that classroom (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Fine, 2004; King, 1991; Lawrence & Tatum, 2004). For the instructors in this study, the macro intersections of educational experiences created a cultural conflict. The White female instructors expected overt signs of buy in, but Black male students’ current and historical experience of education have led to institutional distrust that makes disengagement a logical choice. Students’ motivation to do school work is largely dependent on their sense of its value and their ability to complete it successfully (Chavous et al., 2003); the U.S. educational system and the U.S. culture generally have failed to show Black male students the purpose, meaning and value of formal education, and deficit narratives of Black males as “a) absent and wandering, b) castrated and emasculated,
c) soulful and adaptive and d) endangered and in crisis” (Howard, 2013, p. 64) have failed to highlight Black male students’ ability to do the work. The instructors in this study prioritized student engagement as individual choice but either appeared to be overwhelmed by or unaware of the larger structural and historical forces that might limit student engagement or make disengagement a logical form of self-preservation.

**Engagement and Help Seeking**

The five instructors in the study did indicate some awareness of the ways the U.S. education system has failed Black male students, but again viewing education through their White experience of an individualistic meritocracy, the instructors also equated engagement with help-seeking behaviors. The five instructors’ focus on help seeking aligns with recommended practices for Black male students (Harper, 2012), as did their recognition that their male students of color were less likely to seek help. Dembo and Seli (2004) encouraged instructors to help students develop help-seeking strategies because many students fail to ask for help and because those who need help the least are most likely to seek it out. Warren (2015a, 2015b), however, explained that in the “whiteness of good intentions,” White female teachers may believe that their experience as White students and educators in a White school system gives them insight into what any student needs for success. But the Whiteness of their own experience may blind them to need for other and different options for Black male students who have been consistently underserved and poorly served by standard school resources. As a result, the instructors’ confident referral to tutoring or campus resources may fail to truly address Black male students needs and may result in pushback or disengagement from Black students. Jean and Margo both recognized the vulnerability and risk required for students of color to seek help, and all of the
instructors reflected positively on students of color who overcame their hesitance and did ask for help. All five instructors equated help seeking with engagement and “good student behaviors.” As a result, Margo attempted to reduce the stigma attached to help seeking when she required all of her developmental students to visit the tutoring center, and all of the instructors, by styling themselves as resources and inviting campus resource personnel to their classrooms, attempted to teach help-seeking behaviors.

Unfortunately, for Black male students, onlyness, stereotype threat, and historical experiences of racism make help seeking especially problematic because their experience of the educational system has not demonstrated equity. Burns (2004) noted that those White students who perceive school as a safe and generally supportive of their goals understand how to work the system. By asking for help, they demonstrate their ability and willingness to do school. The five White instructors, whose advanced degrees attest to their academic success, perpetuated the expectation that students’ help-seeking behaviors demonstrated that they care about their education because that expectation reflected their own educational experiences. On the other hand, the Black male student who has not experienced safety and support in an academic setting may feel that he risks confirming assumption of his academic inferiority of Black men (Steele & Aronson, 1997) or being stigmatized by seeking help. Powell Pruitt (2004) found that her academically successful Black university students were less likely to ask for help than her White students. Powell Pruitt attributed the difference in help seeking, in part, to the fact that the White students were less likely than Black students to see help seeking as stigmatizing. Thus, the five instructors’ focus on promoting help seeking aligns with recommended practice, but what the instructors did not say about the risks of help seeking for students of color, and specifically
Black male students, also confirms research on the influence of Whiteness on instructors’ perceptions of Black male students.

Overall, the five instructors who participated in this study demonstrated a commitment to pedagogy that fostered student engagement. By developing class activities that correlated with homework assignments, by creating learner-centered teaching activities that promoted collaboration, and by selecting course topics that were current and relevant to students’ lives, all five instructors took deliberate steps to create engaging class experiences for their developmental literacy students. However, in the dialogues and discussions in this study, in what they did not say about structural racism and Whiteness, they did not demonstrate awareness of the complex issues intersecting in their classrooms (Gay, 2000) and therefore were inattentive to structures than can complicate engagement for Black male students.

**Theme 2: Connection: Connecting Any Way You Can**

Theme 2, “Connecting Any Way You Can” encompassed the ways the five instructors facilitated and prioritized connections between students, between students and the course texts, and between students and themselves. The instructors’ emphasis on the importance of interpersonal connections is consistent with research on success for Black male students (Gay, 2000; Inoue, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Milner, 2007; Strayhorn, 2010). Likewise, the instructors’ motives for establishing connections were aligned with Strayhorn’s (2019) research documenting the importance of such connections to create a sense of belonging for Black male collegians. Thus, in their efforts to establish positive relationships with their students, their efforts to facilitate relationships between students, and their efforts to select texts in which students could see themselves and their experiences, the instructors were generally in line with
culturally responsive teaching practices. At the same time, their lack of critical awareness may also have been problematic for creating these connections.

**Instructor-Student: Caring for Black Students in a White-Dominant Environment**

In seeking to establish positive relationships between themselves and their students, the instructors demonstrated an ethic of care (Gilligan, 1993; Noddings, 1984). Jean, Margo, Wanda, and Elisabet all described their caring relationships with their students as “nurturing” or “mothering,” and Clare described herself as “supportive.” Research supports the instructors’ belief that students benefit from caring instructors who take the time to hear about their lives outside of school and who care about students’ aspirations, challenges, and preferences (Barr, 2011; Boucher, 2016; Claessens et al., 2016; Crosnoe et al., 2004; Howard, 2013, 2016; Lyons, 1990; Milner, 2007; Toldson & Owens, 2010). Through informal conversations as well as their responses to personal and reflective writing, all five instructors indicated that they made efforts to understand and relate to students on a personal level.

However, caring relationships between White female instructors and their Black male students can create disengagement and distrust if the instructor fails to recognize the intersections of race and gender inherent in those relationships. Historically and culturally, Black men have been characterized as dangerous and criminal (Goff et al., 2008; Harper, 2009, 2015; Love, 2014). White females have been characterized as nurturing and fragile (Chodorow, 1978; Grumet, 1988; Weiler, 1991). The intersection of these cultural tropes and research revealing that White female teachers are afraid of Black male students (Brooms, 2018; Harper, 2009, 2012, 2015; Kirkland, 2013; Ukpokodu, 2003) highlights a tension that may inhibit authentic connections between Black male students and White female teachers. Warren (2015a), in fact,
noted that differences in perception between White teachers and non-White students can negatively impact the student-teacher relationship. Clare rejected the concept of “mothering” because of the ways it gendered her as an educator. However, none of the instructors recognized the potential risk that “mothering” students, especially Black male students, could reinforce deficit narratives by casting the students as children in the student-instructor relationship. In a culture that has honored Black men more for their physical strength and athletic prowess than their cognitive abilities, mothering, while well-intentioned, may speak loudly to Black male students of an instructor’s “parental” power over students’ “childlike” dependence and powerlessness. In their efforts to establish caring and supportive relationships with their students, none of the five described her awareness of how cultural and historical differences and differences in perspective between her and her Black male students could complicate those relationships.

Describing their teaching behaviors, the five instructors also did not indicate awareness of how their Whiteness impacted their relationships with students of color. At times, they demonstrated a “false empathy” (Delgado, 1997) in attempting to align their own experiences of marginalization with their students’ experiences. For instance, Jean and Margo felt that their study-abroad experiences helped them empathize with their students' marginalized experiences. They remembered feeling their otherness when their own culture and language were not the norm. Although such experiences are excellent opportunities for White educators to experience some of the struggles that English learners experience in U.S. classrooms, the centrality of racism and Whiteness prevented these White women from ever truly experiencing the marginalization and oppression that their Black male students experience. Unfortunately, their efforts to connect with students through their experiences of marginalization in these study-
abroad experiences may have had the opposite effect on their Black students. The Black experience in the U.S. is often not an immigrant experience because so many Black students are descended from enslaved people and impacted by the structural racism that marginalizes Blacks differently than immigrant populations (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Ladson-Billings, 2005). As a result, the instructors’ experiences in study abroad programs may have given them a valuable recognition of the struggles that language learners experience, but White privilege may have blinded them from seeing the distinct forms of “othering” that occur in classrooms when the single Black male student fail to assimilate into class activities or masks his discomfort by signifying his masculinity (Love, 2014). Jean saw her Black male students’ resistance to public feedback as a gendered response only, and Margo felt that her student’s resistance to her simulated graduation activity was an individual choice based on projecting a “bad boy” image. However, neither Jean nor Margo recognized that such “bravado” and efforts to control their participation in these activities might signal a response to perceived low teacher expectations (Swanson et al., 2003), nor did they recognize Black students’ silence as possible resistance to their Whiteness (Harper, 2012; Hodge et al., 2008).

I do not mean to suggest that Jean, Margo, Clare, Wanda, and Elisabet did not sincerely feel empathy for all of their students, nor that their efforts to establish relationships with them were insincere. Their attention to their relationships with students appeared to be both sincere and well intended. In fact, such attention to instructor-student relationships is one of several benchmarks that “have been shown to be powerful contributors to effective teaching, learning, and student retention (CCCSE, 2016, p. 13). At the same time, Warren’s (2015a) words of caution provide a critical lens through which to view their empathy for their Black male students. “Beliefs about one's own degree of empathy when negotiating interactions with youth should be
considered in light of one's own position of privilege and authority in the context" (Warren, 2015a, p. 595). As the White female instructors in developmental literacy classes, instructors hold both privilege and authority over their students, and as a result, their efforts to establish caring relationships may be questioned by Black male students who have been misled and poorly served by the U.S. education system. Despite the appropriateness of their pedagogy, instructors who are not fully aware of their Whiteness may find that their Black male students respond with suspicion and rejection (Patton, 2016; Tatum, 1992) rather than the appreciation and connection instructors may expect.

Student-student: Valuing cooperation and collaboration. In addition to prioritizing student-instructor connections, all five instructors also emphasized the importance of connections between students, indicating that student-student connections helped to create a class environment where students could learn from and help each other. Their pedagogical priorities are again supported by research. Research has shown that pedagogical practices that decenter the instructor and promote collaboration between classmates can be effective and culturally responsive (Gay, 2000; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). However, because authentic power resides in the instructors’ role, students who have learned to navigate the invisible and unacknowledged power of the dominant White culture may understandably scoff at student-centered approaches like collaborative small group work that purport to redistribute power. In monitoring students’ collaborative work, all of the instructors noted that they checked up on students and redirected them when their answers were incorrect or incomplete. Although this practice may be pedagogically sound, it also demonstrates the artifice inherent in much student-centered instruction. For White students, the pretense at power distribution may be a comfortable part of doing school (Burns, 2004). However, for Black male students, consistently misled and
underserved by the U.S. education system, such pretense may confirm White power and inauthenticity, therefore limiting the value of collaborative work (Chavous et al., 2003).

As with their encouragement of help-seeking behaviors, the instructors’ use of cooperative and collaborative learning is consistent with researched and recommended best practices. However, because students’ motivation is interrelated with their perception of the work’s “purpose, meaning, and value” (Chavous et al., 2003, p. 1076), the perceived value of group work may affect students’ willingness to engage with it. Although all five instructors signaled the value of the collaborative work by allotting significant class time to it, none indicated that they graded group work or that the results of collaborative work developed into essential elements of graded assessments. This discrepancy creates a pedagogical challenge for educators. An emphasis on course outcomes – and practical limits on instructors’ time -- may limit the number of “points” allotted for class participation. However, grades and points earned determine students’ success in college courses, and therefore, instructors signal value by allotting points to assignments and coursework. As a result, the value and purpose of collaborative group work may be questioned by many students but especially by Black male students, whose voices “are often overlooked, ignored, and outright dismissed” (Howard, 2013, p. 64), who are aware of the false promises of the educational system – especially when that work that ends in the instructor providing the “right” answer. Additionally, as the only Black male student (or one of very few) in the class, Black males may resist engagement with classmates who also appear to doubt their contributions and hesitate to select them as group members (Harper, 2009). As a result, group work may not result in the kind of meaningful student-student connections the instructors hoped to facilitate.
Thus, the instructors’ prioritization of student-student connections, like instructor-student connections, is consistent with recommended best practice. However, the instructors’ limited awareness of the impact of structural racism and their own Whiteness may be restricting the benefits of such student-student connections for Black male students.

Student-Texts: Relating to Course Readings

The third element of Theme 2, “Connecting any Way You Can” was the five instructors’ focus on encouraging student-text connections. All five instructors indicated that they selected course texts and topics with conscious consideration of subjects that students could relate to, see themselves in, or benefit from. Clare, Margo, and Wanda’s intentional selection of texts with a social justice focus is consistent with theory and research on culturally responsive instruction (Jay & Jones, 2005; Tatum, 2009; Williams, 2013). Likewise, all five instructors’ attention to texts that prioritized non-dominant points of view, whether in terms of gender and sexual identity, race, or culture, provided opportunities for students who were outside the dominant culture to see themselves in class texts and to apply their funds of knowledge in the discussion of these texts (Gay, 2000; Guthrie et al., 2013; Kirkland & Jackson, 2009; Lee, 2001; Moll et al., 1992; Tatum, 2008, 2014; Tatum & Gue, 2010). In their text selection processes, all five instructors appeared to recognize the importance of selecting texts that were relevant to student experiences.

However, Stewart (2016) emphasized that incorporating representative or diverse texts into class instruction was insufficient to transform education or eliminate the marginalization of students of color. While the five instructors who participated in this study spoke of their care for students and their concerns for equitable educational opportunities, they also positioned
themselves within their prescribed role as literacy instructors, describing themselves as helpers and facilitators, not social transformers or disruptors of the dominant culture. From their positions as literacy instructors, they indicated that class texts, in addition to providing points of connection for students, served as artifacts on which students could practice their developing literacy skills – finding main ideas, processing new vocabulary, analyzing rhetorical structures, and integrating texts into their academic writing. Although Clare incorporated the CodeSwitch podcast into her courses to “infuse” diversity and inclusion into her classes, and Margo and Elisabet hoped that their text selections would help students increase their empathy, none of the instructors indicated that they explicitly taught or required students to address the elements of race and inequity in either class discussions about or individual assessments based on such texts. Thus, the five instructors’ decision making around class activities and text-based assessments reinforced texts as vehicles to practice literacy rather than foundations through which to inspire students to meaningful social action.

Although they intentionally “diversified” the texts in their classes by selecting texts by and about people of color, the five instructors saw texts by and about White people as well as content materials including textbooks and news articles as race neutral. Likewise, they generally understand race as a topic that might appear in a text but not as a foundational element of human experience in the U.S. So, Jean could represent her choice to discuss or not discuss race based on the author’s focus. As a White woman, Jean did not perceive that the author’s Whiteness was significant to her experience of the “Sanctuary of School.” Similarly, because of her Whiteness, Margo could focus multicultural texts on socioeconomics or immigration without explicitly picking up the intersections of race in the texts, and Clare could choose not to “pull that thread”
when a White student hinted at intersections of Whiteness that impacted her objective analysis of raced texts.

Thus, by focusing their class discussion and assessments of texts on literacy skills, the five instructors’ instructional decision making fell well within academic expectations for their roles as literacy instructors, but outside of expectations for critical and transformative pedagogy (Brown et al., 2017). The use of texts by a range of authors and about a range of experiences provides students with the double benefit of literacy practice and cultural development (Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011). However, by focusing primarily on literacy skills at the expense of authentic engagement with race in the rich course texts they selected, the instructors appeared to neglect opportunities for any students to grapple with the racial perspectives of the texts or to consider their own cultural journeys. In addition, making discussion of race within the texts optional failed to create a “counterspace” in which Black male students could “share their experiences with those who are willing to listen” (Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011, p. 29). The instructors’ focus on academic literacy skills and promises that academic writing will serve them well “when they get to English 101” also did not address Black students’ aspiration for social and civic action (Banks, 2004; DuBois, 1901/2009).

The five instructors’ focus on academic reading and writing skills was appropriate and in line with both their expertise and the discipline within which they taught. At the same time, the course texts lost efficacy as elements of culturally responsive pedagogy because the instructors often focused on sections of the text that helped them teach academic literacy skills rather than social action. As a result, the White female instructors in this study, therefore, fulfilled their roles within the White dominant education system but failed to disrupt it.
Theme 3: Comfort and Safety: Avoiding “Oh My God” Experiences

Theme 3, “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences,” illuminated the significance that the five instructors placed on creating a safe and comfortable class environment, most significantly by avoiding conflict and confrontation. In prioritizing students’ comfort and safety, the instructors demonstrated the importance of both students’ affective and academic needs (Popp et al., 2011). Although the instructors themselves had experienced generally safe and comfortable school environments, research has demonstrated that the instructors’ concern for students’ intellectual and emotional safety was well founded. For instance, Jones (2020) highlighted the forms of “curriculum violence” that impact students of color, and the instructors’ efforts to maintain students’ comfort by connecting students through class activities and text selection demonstrated that awareness of the power of curriculum to cause harm. In addition, the instructors’ focus on student’s comfort and safety was consistent with awareness of the risks of stereotype threat (Steele 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1997) as well as overt and covert acts of discrimination. However, the instructors’ focus on safety also “suggest(s) [the] …ethical belief that the classroom environment should not reflect the dangerous outside world, and that [the instructor] has the power to somehow prevent outside influences from breaching the classroom walls” (Schmidt et al., 2007, p. 53). Although Armstrong et al. studied elementary school teachers, the community college instructors’ avoidance of direct talk about race in my study suggests that they, too, attempted to shield their students and themselves from the realities of race and racism in the U.S. In doing so, however, the instructors may have actually perpetuated curriculum violence that made disengagement a logical choice for the Black male students.
Protecting Students From Race Talk

Research has shown that although they may include non-White texts in their curriculum, many educators lack cultural competence and self-assurance to facilitate students’ engagement in critical analysis of the texts or critical examination of their own communities (Barrera, 1992; Hall & Piazza, 2008; Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1992, 1995). Reflecting patterns demonstrated in such research, the five instructors in this study tended to avoid direct discussions of race and racism. Jean, Elisabet, and Wanda acknowledged their reluctance to discuss race in their classrooms, and Margo and Clare both demonstrated intentional or unintentional avoidance of race talk. The five instructors’ avoidance of race talk appeared to derive, at least in part, from a desire to protect their students. Armstrong et al. (2009) noted that the elementary school instructors in their study avoided race talk in the classroom, invoking concerns that Black parents might be angry if the teachers exposed their children to the trauma of the history of enslavement in the U.S. In their college literacy classrooms, however, the instructors in my study reported avoiding explicit race talk by invoking the emotional needs of their Black college students, because they did not want to call on students to “represent their race.” All five of the instructors also recognized that being one of few Black male students in the classroom put Black male students at risk of marginalization through attention (Bonner & Bailey, 2006; Harper, 2012). In fact, Clare noted that it was easier to discuss race in a text when the represented race was not present in the classroom. If, for instance, the class read a text by or about Asian or Middle Eastern cultures and there were no Asian or Middle Eastern students in the class, Clare felt that students could more comfortably explore what they knew and did not know without fear of missteps that might offend a representative of those cultures. Additionally,
if no students in class identified with that race, then Clare and her students avoided the discomfort of asking students to represent their race. Rather than exposing their Black student to this pressure, the instructors chose to relegate students’ experiential knowledge of race to optional disclosure in small groups or reflective and informal writing. In doing so, however, they squandered an opportunity to validate Black students’ experiential knowledge. Alehano-Steele et al. (2011) explain that

> Part of decentering the classroom is giving a voice to students and their perspectives. Instead of a focus upon the teacher’s voice and experiences, the students’ voices and experiences come to be much more integral to the learning in the classroom through a socialized process of knowledge creation. In turn, the material becomes more personal to the students. Because their voices contribute regularly to discussions, their stories and experiences seep into the class narrative, and they make intellectual connections to their own lives. (p. 93-94)

Thus, in protecting Black male students from the pressure to be spokesmen for their race, the instructors also silenced students who have been repeatedly silenced, and as a result, perpetuated superficial diversifying of the curriculum without substantive inclusion or equity for Black male students.

In sharing this theme and my analysis with the instructors, I met with varying levels of agreement. Margo agreed that creating a comfortable class environment was essential to her teaching and recognized her “mothering” and her promotion of empathy as essential to that comfort. However, Margo strongly disagreed with my assessment that she was not comfortable talking about race. Wanda, Elisabet, and Jean, on the other hand, agreed that they were out of their depth in talking about race and concerned that their not knowing would negatively impact students’ comfort, connection, and engagement. Early in the study, Clare mentioned that she was aware of her Whiteness when discussing a text that elevated race and avoided “calling out”
students to represent their race. However, she said that she had learned to sit with her discomfort.

In the exchange below, I sought to clarify the extent of her agreement with my analysis.

Clare: So I can kind of facilitate the conversation as an outsider. But maybe I feel more uncomfortable because I am White. . . . like asking people for their, their perspective, you know, because that might seem like I'm putting responsibility on them, that is not fair because of my gap. And, you know, how I'm . . . how I've experienced the world differently.

Alison: Yeah. Mmm. . . . hmm. Is that about, and it could . . . .it . . . this is not an either-or. I hear . . . I think I'm hearing some concern for making them uncomfortable. And I think I'm also hearing awareness that you're uncomfortable.

Clare: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. Both.

Alison: All right. So, what have you done about that [discomfort]?

Clare: I kind of just, um, . . . I think I've just sat with my discomfort because, you know, it's nobody else's responsibility to make me comfortable.

In this instance, Clare verified my understanding that her concern in class was both for her comfort and the comfort of her students, but that she had learned to be comfortable with discomfort. However, later in the study process, I readdressed this understanding with Clare when she chose not to engage a student’s issue with race.

A: Right. Okay. So, so no, you don't . . . don't get into her issue, you just deal with the material. So, . . .

C: Yeah,

AD: That's interesting to me because um... there are... You have described a lot of times when you will go there. Like, you know, you've discussed that when you're in a class and you're talking about a racial issue that if there are discomforts and if students are saying things that are harmful that you're going to, you're going there.

C: Right,

AD: But with this individual student, you didn't

C: No, because they... I think it was the context. It was a context of nobody else was part of that conversation. And, you know, if it had been on a discussion board
where there were offensive things that she was saying, then I would have pointed those out. And, would have, you know, called attention to that. But I think that because ... she didn't stipulate what exactly she disagreed with. I mean, I could infer ... But she didn't say like, "I don't think that, you know, racism exists" or whatever,

AD: Right

C: Like if she had said something explicit like that then I would have been like, "Okay, let's talk about that." But because it was like, "I can't do this assignment," I wanted her to get to the place where she could actually just do the assignment, the way that she was supposed to do it.

In describing this incident, Clare indicated that she inferred the student did not think that “racism exists” but that since she and the student were alone the incident was victimless. Avoiding the confrontation allowed Clare to address the student’s issue with the assignment and to support the student in completing her work.

Safeguarding Racial Privilege

By avoiding race talk to protect Black students from the threat of representing their race, the instructors in this study also distanced themselves from the danger of race talk, and in so doing, “safeguard[ed] racial privilege” (Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2000, p. 52). Jean, Elisabet, Wanda, and Clare demonstrated awareness of their Whiteness in acknowledging that direct conversations about race were difficult for them to lead. First, these four instructors recognized that as White female literacy instructors, they knew a great deal about their own (privileged) experiences and about the literacy strategies they were responsible for teaching, but they could not “speak to” the experiences of the people of color in the course texts. For instance, Elisabet frankly acknowledged that although she held expertise in reading strategy and instruction when she considered the racial experiences in texts or the racial experiences of her Black students,
“there’s just so much I don’t know.” These four instructors’ concerns are consistent with research demonstrating K-12 teachers’ and preservice teachers’ discomfort in discussions about race (Fine, 2004; Finerty, 2018; Milner, 2007; Rosenberg, 2004). Such not knowing created a sense of discomfort which these instructors tended to avoid. As caring instructors, the study participants did not want to fall on the “bad” side of the racist/not racist binary (Ahlquist, 1992; Flynn, 2018; Powell Pruitt, 2004; Utt & Tochluk, 2020), so avoiding open discussion of race allowed them to avoid disclosing what they did not know from their own White experiences.

Instead of exposing what they did not know, the instructors focused on their expertise. In terms of the course objectives, although Wanda, Jean, and Elisabet recognized discordance between prioritizing “academic writing” and valuing student voice, both Clare and Margo accepted academic writing and academic language as part of the students’ rhetorical situation. With or without reservations, all five instructors enforced the discourse of power (Delpit, 1995) without exploring or resisting the intentional marginalization produced in its enforcement (Inoue, 2020). From a CRT perspective, the instructors, whether reticent about or supportive of enforcing academic language, maintained the status quo by adhering to it without addressing the White hegemony of academic language. Margo’s insistence that she did not accept any student work that did not conform to academic language standards demonstrated her commitment to giving students access to discourses of power, but also her compliance with and complicity in the Whiteness of academic expectations. In their enforcement of “college expectations” including academic language, the instructors also sometimes voiced their sense of being policed themselves – a sense that they were required to enforce academic language and academic writing to meet the expectations of the college or of their colleagues who would eventually teach the
same students. At the same time, Wanda expressed her sense of helplessness, perhaps aggravated by her own sense of marginalization as an adjunct instructor.

Because we can’t really affect change because we're not at the top right? We're like, somewhere in the middle, probably closer to the bottom. Right. And so, we say like, “Ah, screw it, don't worry about it,” and they're gonna move on and then they’re gonna fail because they will be totally unprepared for what those classes are going to throw at them.

Whether they accepted or felt constrained by the focus on academic reading and writing, the instructors maintained their own safety and professional standing by upholding the rules of Whiteness in academia.

The instructors also expressed their discomfort in not knowing. Jean, Clare, Wanda, and Elisabet demonstrated common discomfort not only with the complexities of racism but even the naming involved in such discussions. Word choice felt precarious for these four instructors and added to their discomfort when talking about race. In addition, the instructors felt confused and threatened by changing guidelines for talking about race. Elisabet recalled that she had been cultured in a colorblind perspective of race, and, in reasoning through her avoidance of raced conversations, identified her sense that she was following a set of binary rules for “good” behavior. As DiAngelo (2018) noted, the colorblind perspective results in a belief that only racists recognize race. So, for Elisabet, talking about race was fraught with the risk of stereotype threat, “the risk of confirming as self-characteristic a negative stereotype about one’s group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995, p. 797). For both Elisabet and Jean, concerns about appearing racist by “saying the wrong thing” increased their discomfort in discussing race in class and the context of this study.

Thus, the instructors tended to shift professional and class conversations toward their professional knowledge and away from risky conversations that left them feeling insecure. Their focus on literacy skills and relegation of race talk to optional small group or reflective and
informal writing allowed them to maintain their own comfort and safety (Flynn, 2018; Helms, 1990). The instructors’ avoidance of race, however, also revealed their Whiteness in ways that decreased the authenticity and transparency of their instruction (Warren, 2015a). When the instructors chose not to address race and racism directly, they silenced both the texts that exposed these topics and Black students’ response to the texts, limiting their students’ (and their own) authentic engagement with the text (Enriquez, 2013). Wanda, Clare, Elisabet, and Jean identified such silencing as a deliberate choice to avoid discomfort and conflict. By focusing instead on the reading and writing skills identified in the course objectives, the instructors kept themselves and their pedagogy comfortably within their area of expertise as White literacy instructors. In doing so, they engaged their Whiteness as well as the power in their roles as instructors to determine what parts of the text had significance. Not talking about race was a colorblind approach that kept them safe but was also likely to damage their credibility and connection with their Black male students who would not only see the race in the text but also in the teaching (Cochran-Smith, 2003). Thus, the theme of “Avoiding ‘Oh my God’ Experiences” demonstrated the many ways that the instructors compassionately planned their instruction to avoid causing discomfort for themselves and their students.

While discussion of race and racial inequities could have arisen during their planned class activities and in students’ formal writing assignments, the instructors did not specifically ask students to explore either how race was engaged in the texts or how students themselves engaged their own race in reading or creating texts. The instructors believed that students did not feel comfortable talking about race, and they did not want students to feel uncomfortable in class. Unfortunately, the result is a bit like throwing a class pizza party and never inviting the students to eat the pizza. The richness is there for the taking, but the power structure of the education
system does not invite students to draw attention to that which the instructor chooses to ignore. Many of the instructors’ class texts exposed students’ authentic experiences with race in the U.S, but graded classwork allowed those experiences to remain hidden. As a result, Black students’ experience and Black students themselves remained marginalized (Elisoph, 1999; Gonsalves, 2002; Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011).

Maintaining Silence

In their instructional planning and assessments of texts, the five instructors positioned themselves and therefore their students to avoid and silence authentic conversations about race (Hall et al., 2010). Such silencing of race talk constituted a missed opportunity to promote equity. Although Margo did not report feeling uncomfortable discussing race, her explanation of her instructional planning and review of shared course materials, like the other four instructors’ explanations and documentation, demonstrated that class activities and writing assessments allowed for but did not explicitly call for discussion of race. Research indicates that class discussions of race are rare, and when they do occur, they are limited and carefully planned (Brown et al., 2017). The lack of explicit discussion about race is both cause and consequence in the context of a nation that is conflicted about racial discourse and in which racial discourse has been silenced. Social media and mainstream media are full of conversations about race. Classrooms remain essentially silent.

The instructors’ avoidance of race in class assignments and discussions was especially ironic because, in selecting texts like *Between the World and Me, The Line Becomes a River,* or *Always Running,* the instructors were seeking texts that Latinx and Black students could relate to in large part because these texts were not by and about White experiences. Instead, these texts
highlighted experiences of marginalization and non-Whiteness in the U.S. However, because the instructors did not, in either the discussion prompts or in the text-based essay assignments, specifically ask students to analyze or reflect on the raced experiences of these texts, they minimized the impact of race in the text and on students’ lives.

Often, instead of highlighting the racial interactions in a text, the instructors highlighted proxies for race, like language differences or socioeconomic status. In these choices, they enacted one of two of the three stances Gonsalves (2002) identified in her study of White and Black college composition faculty. The instructors either “deemphasize[d] the effect of racial differences” or became “overly hesitant or in some cases paralyzed by their awareness of racial differences” (p. 9). Although, like Gonsalves’s participants, the instructors in my study were equally concerned about creating a safe classroom atmosphere, they did not “demonstrate a special awareness of the effect racial differences have on students of color” with an explicit “awareness of racial difference” (Gonsalves, 2002, p. 15). Thus, in discussing texts like “Mother Tongue” or *Their Eyes were Watching God*, the instructors discussed the marginalization experienced in the United States but attributed that marginalization to language differences. Wanda emphasized that discussions about the storekeeper’s mistreatment of the mother in “Mother Tongue” prompted students to discuss their own experiences in translating for and observing the language struggles of their parents. In lessons about *Their Eyes were Watching God*, Margo chose to highlight the linguistic complexity of the African American Vernacular English used in the novel. Similarly, Jean, Margo, and Clare emphasized the very real impact of socioeconomic inequities as depicted in texts and as experienced by their students. In exploring the impact of language difference and socioeconomic inequities, the instructors appropriately elevated relevant and significant social issues, and they chose not to elevate the centrality of
racism that facilitates marginalization based on language differences and intentionally creates socioeconomic inequities. In doing so, they lost an opportunity for Black male students to express their experiential knowledge and expertise (Howard-Hamilton & Hinton, 2011) in ways that would have empowered them and allowed the instructors to authentically express their own limitations.

The instructors’ silencing of such conversations was intentional but compassionate. First, because they assumed they and their White students did not have raced experiences to share, the instructors were hesitant to explicitly address race in these discussions. Thus, they avoided the discomfort of exposing White students’ (or their own) lack of knowledge, or exposing the class to the intentionally or unintentionally racist comments they or their White students might make. Regardless of their intentionality, by maintaining silence about race, the instructors were colluding with the White power structure in which they lived and worked and from which they benefited. Second, because they assumed their students of color did have raced experiences to share, they were hesitant to explicitly address race in discussions of class texts. By compassionately shielding students from discussion and exploration of issues that dominate the news cycles and directly impact all students’ lived experience, whether of privilege or of marginalization, the instructors demonstrated low expectations for all students in their developmental literacy classrooms. Although, as Clare indicated, the instructors generally trusted students not to engage in overtly “rude” or discriminatory behaviors, they did not trust them to engage authentically in class by openly exploring experiences of race in their own lives or in texts.
Summary of Themes: A Paradox

From the data assembled from instructors’ shared class documents and their contributions to interviews and focus groups, I drew three themes.

- **Theme 1 Engagement**: “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing”
- **Theme 2 Connections**: “Connecting Them Any Way You Can”
- **Theme 3 Comfort and Safety**: “Avoiding ‘Oh My God’ Experiences”

When I considered each of these themes in conjunction with the others, my analysis revealed a significant paradox: In their efforts to create a safe classroom environment, the instructors in this study silenced conversations about race. In doing so, they reinforced the Whiteness of education and perpetuated educational structures that devalue Black male students’ experiential knowledge. As a result, rather than increasing Black male students’ opportunities for meaningful engagement with classmates, instructors, and texts, the instructors’ pedagogical decision making may have invited Black male students’ disengagement as I unpack in the following sections.

Evidence of Cultural Competence

The five instructors who participated in this study demonstrated many strengths in cultural competence. First, they recognized the limits of their cultural competence. Although they were not experts in Whiteness theory, they understood that their Whiteness had allowed them, generally, to move easily and safely through the U.S. culture. Thus, their open admission that they could not speak to students’ raced experiences or the raced experiences depicted in texts demonstrated important awareness of their positionality. As my peer checkers reminded me, admitting what they did not know demonstrated important cultural humility on which they
can continue to develop their cultural competence. Along these lines, the instructors positioned themselves as continuous learners and identified learning more about race and improving their skill in teaching students of color as personal and professional priorities.

Secondly, the instructors recognized some ways that intersecting genders in their classrooms impacted power relationship and connections between them and their students. They understood that both they and their students felt the influence of gender in determining classroom behaviors and structures. They also recognized that their femininity was an important aspect of their classroom persona. In their nurturing (and in Clare’s resistance to nurturing), the instructors acknowledged the gendered nature of their teaching and the gendered nature of their classroom power and students’ potentially gendered resistance to that power. They knew that their male students might experience different academic and social challenges than their female students did. In her recognition that a Black male student was resistant to being criticized in front of the class by a woman, Jean acknowledged the macrosocial intersections of gender in the classroom although she failed to acknowledge the racial intersections in that same response. Similarly, in her negotiation of how “friendly” to be in her classroom, Clare recognized the gendered interactions that had resulted in students’ interpretation of caring as flirting but did not recognize the additional racial intersections of a young White woman teaching young Black and Latinx men.

Finally, all five instructors’ pedagogical choices elevated culturally responsive, learner-centered best practices. In order to engage and connect students of color in developmental courses, these instructors intentionally selected rich multicultural texts that explored current and relevant social issues including race and class. In selecting texts for students to read and write, these five instructors chose topics that were relevant to students’ lives and texts in which they
could see themselves and the world in which they lived. Thus, their text selection was consistent with Banks’s (1993) description of multicultural education as “an education for functioning effectively in a pluralistic democratic society” (p. 5). Additionally, in preparing students for postsecondary academic culture, they used those diverse texts to help students meet the course objectives rather than teaching from a “skill and drill” perspective. All five instructors also reinforced academic language skills and provided students with strategies for reading academic texts, to help students “cross cultural boundaries freely” (Banks, 1993, p. 8). Further, the instructors promoted student collaboration and made every effort to move themselves into facilitator and “guide on the side” roles. From their discussions and the assignments they shared, the instructors unambiguously endorsed active, collaborative, small group work. Through jigsaw activities, poster sessions, and think-pair-shares, they kept students engaged in classwork and encouraged students to develop their own voices. Just as they sought to engage students in authentic work in the classroom, the instructors intentionally planned out-of-class work that was meaningful and relevant, and all five voiced their disdain for busy work. By consciously selecting texts by authors from many cultures and texts about topics that they believed were relevant to students’ lived experiences, the instructors’ planning as described in this study fulfilled the content integration dimension of multicultural education as described by Banks (2004).

Through all of these pedagogical practices, the instructors demonstrated the extent of their cultural competence as well as their sincere care for their students. They saw teaching as part of social justice work, and as Jean noted, they focused the intensity of their caring on students who were not connected and engaged with the class. Perceiving that student success depended on a sense of safety in the classroom, the instructors worked hard to know their
students through journals, free-writing, and informal conversations, and they diligently connected with students to create student-instructor relationships as well as a safe class environment. They made themselves available before class, after class, and by email and during office hours, repeatedly broadcasting their willingness to assist students with academic or extracurricular support to achieve their goals. They connected students to campus resources and campus activities.

Limits of Cultural Competence

However, the instructors themselves, as White middle-class women, felt that they had little standing in discussing issues of race and racism, and were hesitant to lead class discussions of them to protect their own and their students’ comfort and safety. The instructors demonstrated their Whiteness by avoiding raced conversations or discussions in which they or their students might “offend” a classmate by “saying the wrong thing.” Steele (2000) confirmed that “everyone experiences stereotype threat. We are all members of some group about which negative stereotypes exist…. And in a situation where one of those stereotypes applies … we know that we may be judged by it (p. 253). In their developmental literacy classrooms, the instructors’ awareness of the intersections of race, gender, and power highlighted the risk of judgment, both for themselves and their students. The instructors were afraid of confirming stereotypes of White women as racists, and as a result, they were hesitant to engage authentically about the raced experiences in the multicultural texts they had selected for their classes. Likewise, in their appropriate avoidance of “asking students to represent their race,” they tried to protect students from calling attention to their race and raced experiences. Thus, protecting their students (of any race) from negative judgments resulting from their race meant avoiding direct discussions of
race, even in planning for lessons and activities around texts that specifically exposed racial experiences and inequities.

As a result, the instructors’ activities and assignments around multicultural texts failed to capitalize on rich opportunities for authentic engagement, and rather than validating Black students’ lived experiences, these activities made race invisible. Instead of discussing and exploring the racial structures revealed in these texts, the instructors focused class activities and assignments on what they perceived to be less dangerous topics aligned to the course objectives. So, rather than asking students to discuss and analyze the impact of racial structures in the multicultural texts they assigned, the instructors focused on identifying and practicing rhetorical structures. Rather than helping students recognize racist ideas in the White culture of the texts or the classroom, they asked students to recognize the main ideas in texts they read and highlight topic sentences in texts they created. Rather than attending to the challenges inherent in naming race, they reminded students to pay attention to vocabulary words in the texts they read. In essence, in a compassionate effort to keep students safe so that they could make connections and engage in classwork, the instructors reduced the benefit of the multicultural texts that they had selected.

In Chapter 1, I noted the significance of my study in filling gaps in the research on college success for Black men. This study provided a needed focus on community college literacy education and additionally, a needed focus on White female literacy instructors. Neither Black students nor White instructors can be held individually accountable for inequitable educational outcomes resulting from historical educational and social practices. However, my study’s focus on the White instructors rather than on the Black students acknowledges the responsibility White educators hold for disrupting educational practices that maintain those
inequities today. Additionally, this study’s exploration of the instructional decision making of White female instructors provided much needed insight into praxis. As a result of this study, White female educators in community colleges have findings from which they can reflect on their praxis and on which further research into community college success can be built. My study extends the literature focused on educational equity and developmental literacy by specifically addressing the intersections of race and gender in developmental literacy classrooms and by directly elevating the ethic of care.

Implications

I designed this reciprocal ethnographic case study of how White female developmental literacy instructors engage race in their instructional planning to better understand their role in promoting equitable educational opportunities for Black male students in community colleges. The study’s findings have provided some significant insights into what is working and what needs work to increase equity for Black male students. As a result, the study has provided both pedagogical and research implications.

Pedagogical Implications

The findings of this study offer White female developmental literacy instructors and the community colleges in which they teach insights that can affirm the positive steps they have taken to address the needs of their Black male students as well as insights into additional steps they can take to promote Black male students’ meaningful engagement and success. Table 11 provides practitioners with an overview of practical steps instructors can take. The instructors’ strengths provide insights essential to understanding the pedagogical implications of the study.
Table 11

Suggestions for Developmental Literacy Instruction

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<tr>
<th>Planning for</th>
<th>Keep Doing</th>
<th>Start Doing</th>
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| **Text Selection** | • Select texts by and about a broad range of races, identities, genders, and abilities  
• Select texts with topics relevant to student lives  
• Incorporate choice in student reading | • Select non-fiction texts by non-White authors.  
• Select texts that counter deficit narratives and highlight Black men in positions of expertise (beyond entertainment)  
• Discuss with students how selected texts might have been different if authors’ race and gender were different  
• Encourage students to discuss the reading choices they make  
• Include texts by and about Black men regardless of class ethnic makeup |
| **In-Class Activities** | • Seek a comfortable and caring class environment  
• Use student-centered, active learning  
• Invite and honor student meaning making  
• Facilitate help seeking  
• Teach text structures and reading/writing strategies | • Encourage comfort with discomfort. Model being out of your comfort zone  
• Validate collaborative work through grading process and application of collaborative outcomes  
• Monitor group work less; query group answers more  
• Directly ask questions about race:  
  o In what way is race important in this text?  
  o What counts as “normal” behavior in this text?  
  o How do your experiences of your race affect your reading/writing of this text?  
• Use text structures and reading/writing strategies as vehicles for discussion of race rather than ends in themselves |
| **Text-Based Assessments** | • Plan for student choice  
• Encourage application of literacy to students’ educational and career goals | • Include exploration of race in texts as (at least) an option  
• Discuss/expose the Whiteness of “academic language.”  
• Promote code meshing as a language asset in student literacy  
Elevate student narrative and student experience as a valuable source of knowing |
Their care, their academic expertise and pedagogical knowledge, and their sincerely good intentions are important. Excellent instruction and good intentions matter, but without sufficient professional learning and unlearning, good intentions are not enough and may, in fact, do harm. Success and retention rates for Black male developmental literacy students at RBCC and across the country demonstrate that these strategies have not gone far enough to make the developmental literacy classroom an optimal learning environment for the Black male students who remain marginalized in postsecondary education.

Reflective Professional Development: Say the Words

The study’s finding that instructors are uncomfortable talking about race demonstrates a need for more deliberate and reflective professional development about race. Community college developmental literacy professors need to be able to talk about race, including Whiteness (Cochran-Smith, 2003; Harper, 2009; Howard, 2003) because their students will go on to be teachers, doctors, dentists, mechanics, nurses, business leaders, parents, and citizens who will also need to be able to talk and think about race. Whether Black or White, both students and instructors need to develop their cultural competence, and that will not happen if instructors let their fear of being wrong prevent them from saying the words.

Instructors communicate their racial fear to their students by avoiding conversations about race, by stuttering over their word choice, and by not acknowledging their own race. That fear confirms Black students’ expectation of stereotyping and racism (Howard, 2003), creating a storm of stereotype threat (Steele, 2000; Steele & Aronson, 1995) that envelopes the entire class and encourages collusion with the culture of Whiteness to avoid discomfort. Black men know White fear. The 2021 defense of Derek Chauvin used that fear to explain why Chauvin felt he
needed to subdue an unarmed and defenseless Black man. A White female instructor’s fear of recognizing race, coupled with her Whiteness and her femaleness is a historical recipe for Black male student disengagement. Placing the blame and responsibility for disengagement on the Black male student ignores the self-interest that would logically lead him to resist and disconnect in the face of White female fear. White female instructors need to stop being afraid.

The courage to talk about race comes from self-awareness. First, White female instructors need to recognize their own Whiteness, not as a source of guilt or blame, but as their race (Ahlquist, 1991; Carter & Helms, 1990; DiAngelo, 2018). Recognizing Whiteness means recognizing that White experiences are raced experiences, that textbooks with “no race” have a race, that no topic they could choose to discuss would be free from race (Inoue, 2020; Kendi, 2019). In the classroom, that self-awareness means acknowledging their Whiteness and acknowledging their lack of expertise about Black male experiences. To authentically identify herself as a raced being with her own perspectives and challenges is to share her own vulnerability and to allow her Black students to share their own experiential knowledge as well.

Learning to talk about race also requires White female instructors to learn more about race and racism (Carter & Helms, 1990; Gallagher, 2007; Helms, 1990; Inoue, 2020). As my findings demonstrated, humility is a positive element of cultural competence. Recognizing our ignorance today is an excellent first step; maintaining our ignorance tomorrow is not. Many times during this study, individual instructors responded to my questions with comments like, “That’s a good question,” and “I never really thought about it;” this study was clearly the first time these committed and dedicated instructors had considered some of the issues that arose. As a result, the study itself created an opportunity to increase the cultural competence of this group of instructors, myself included. The instructors’ consensus at the close of the study was that the
interviews and focus groups had helped them to think more and differently about race in their instructional planning. The dialogue that was an essential part of this study allowed “for all parties to sit with and inquire about their difference and discomfort” (Inoue, 2020, p. 137).

The study’s findings demonstrated the instructors’ need to know more about race and racism to develop the confidence to talk about race. The instructors professed their interest in knowing more but also felt that learning about race was a slow process that they had to fit into their already busy personal and professional lives. With full sympathy for the full lives the instructors lead, our Black male students cannot wait for White instructors to learn about race. While we waited for the verdict in the Derek Chauvin case, three other Black men were shot by police. Black men have waited for 158 years for the U.S. to live up to its promises of emancipation. This study has also shown that White female developmental instructors can collaborate with colleagues to learn to talk about race and racism and that their conversations with colleagues can guide them to insights they might not have on their own. The instructors who participated in this study could have avoided spending the time and experiencing the anxiety of talking about race with me and their colleagues. But they cared enough to take the time and face the difficult questions.

Thus, the study’s findings indicate that to move forward, White female instructors need more professional development like this study provided. Michael’s (2015) work with White K-12 teachers provides an excellent model for how White educators can work together to raise and address their raced perspectives in the classroom. We need more opportunities to discuss race, to discuss texts, to discuss instructional planning and engagement of race with other White women who can and will check us and challenge us to see and speak authentically about race. Instructors need the “apartness” from their classroom that will enable them to “deliberately notice their own
practice” to see the “unexpected tangles of conflicting values, …stubborn ambivalence [and] …surprising prevalence of half steps” (McDonald, 1992, p. 11). I envision an ongoing series of conversations one to two times per month in which White female instructors can share and discuss the texts they are using in class or considering using in class. Although a Black colleague could be a great resource for such a group, the group itself would need to be run by a White female colleague so that the participants did not depend on the Black “expert” to uncover the text for them. Again, this is work White women need to do themselves.

Because educators are predominantly White and female, this work is White women’s work. Not only is it not appropriate for us to ask Black folks to guide us, to do so would also be counterproductive. We need to do the work, and the work stems from our critical reflection (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; Henfield & Washington, 2012; Howard, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1995). The fear of saying and doing the wrong thing comes from our binary sense of racist/not racist and good person/bad person. There are many wrong ways to handle race in the classroom. Ignoring it is one of them. But there are many options, too. Rather than looking for a method, a practical set of steps, that instructors can follow to create a culturally responsive classroom where Black male students succeed, White female instructors need to accept that we will make mistakes; we will say the wrong things. But White female developmental literacy instructors need to make mistakes in a safe environment where they can develop the confidence to enact their cultural competence in the classroom.

To learn to say the words, then, White female instructors need to engage in their own critical reflection but also to work with their White female colleagues to practice engaging race in their instructional planning. The White female instructor needs to understand the micro intersectionality of her teacher self. In trusted spaces with equally trusted colleagues, they need
to discuss texts and develop text-based activities so that they feel less vulnerable engaging race with their students.

**Authentic Literacy Education: Expose the Power**

Because this study’s findings demonstrated that concern for comfort and safety can silence Black voices in the classroom, we need to expose the power in developmental literacy classrooms. Conversations about race are not just about race; conversations about race are about equity and power. In her developmental literacy classroom, the White female instructor holds all the significant power. She knows this. She knows that only she creates the assignments and only she assigns the grades. Without her “okay,” students in the class have no access to higher education. The students know this, too. The power and privilege of the developmental classroom is a structural reality that instructors must account for in their planning. The instructors “did not create the privileges from which [they] benefit because of skin color nor did [they] construct the racial discourse surrounding Black males. These conditions are rooted in the fabric of American society to which we are all exposed” (Love, 2014, p. 295). However, the intersection of Whiteness and the instructor’s role gives her the power to signify what matters through attention and grading. Greater clarity in both using and sharing her power will provide a foundation for more authentic communication in the classroom.

First, instructors wield power when they elevate topics for class instruction and discussion. For this reason, ignoring race in discussions of texts is problematic. In their text selection and instruction, developmental literacy instructors need to move beyond celebratory multiculturalism to critical multiculturalism – to uncover the “inequalities of power that both motivate and result from practices of racial, ethnic, gender, class, or sexual discrimination” (Jay
Inclusion of *Between the World and Me* or *Their Eyes were Watching God* without critical discussion of race gives students the sense of inclusion without validation of their authentic experiences of the racism exposed in the texts. To use such texts to explore universal themes (we all face challenges, we all have so much to learn from our families) or primarily as vehicles for literacy analysis ignores the power of race in text and the classroom.

Discounting that power communicates to all students, but especially to the Black students, that the racism in the text is less important than the text’s structure or word choice. If instructors have spent time on their professional learning and unlearning, they should be able to help students overcome their own fear of engaging race, and the rich multicultural texts like those the instructors in this study chose will provide ample opportunities for those discussions. Likewise, however, texts by and about White people also provide ample opportunities to discuss race and power. Texts by and about White people are not race neutral (Inoue, 2020; Kendi, 2019; Sleeter, 2017). The White habitus in which both students and instructors exist has race. So, whether the text is “about” race or about any other topic of interest to students and instructors, if the instructors do not elevate race as one important lens through which to understand the text, they devalue their Black male students’ experience of race in the U.S.

Creating a classroom in which students and instructors can safely engage in conversations about race and power may well include opportunities for students to process questions of race in journaling or free writing. However, if those reflections remain hidden in private, informal writing and do not merit time for full class discussion, then the instructor devalues the questions and the raced experiences that are a central part of her Black male students’ lives. Whether students discuss race and power in texts during large or small group work, those discussions should build on students’ experiential knowledge by moving beyond the search for vocabulary
words, main ideas, and supporting details. Thus, instructors need to be aware of the power they
tend in deciding how to engage students in discussions of texts.

Second, instructors also need to be aware of how they use their power when planning for
collaborative group work. The commitment to student-centered learning and collaboration
demonstrated by participants in this study was evidence of laudable culturally responsive
instruction. I am not recommending that instructors stop using small group instruction or stop
promoting student collaboration. But I am recommending that White female instructors plan
more carefully to make sure that the power they distribute to students in the classroom is
authentic and that the product of students’ collaborative work is valued. This could mean giving
more consideration to the questions and problems small groups are asked to solve. Rather than
focusing on skill development (finding the main idea, determining the thesis statement, etc.),
small groups could be engaged in discussing the levels of power exposed in the text. A group’s
presentation of their findings would certainly reveal any misunderstandings of the main idea or
vocabulary, but would also unveil students’ authentic meaning making. Validating group work
might also mean reducing the amount of monitoring instructors do, trusting students to make
meaning so that collaborative group work becomes authentic and important work rather than
academic hoop jumping.

In addition to signifying value through the attention they give to topics and tasks,
instructors designate value through their power to assign grades. The instructors who participated
in this study explained that they generally assign no grades or minimal grades to informal writing
assignments. The instructors explained that formal writing assignments constituted the majority
of graded work in developmental literacy classes, and students’ performance on reading strategy
assignments constitute the majority of graded work in developmental reading courses. Such point
distributions make sense. One would not expect students’ informal journal entries to determine their success in a literacy course intended to prepare them for the literacy demands of college coursework. However, instructors need to be aware that by relegating discussions about race to students’ informal and reflective writing and then allocating fewer points to such writing, they signify that discussions about race are of little value in their developmental literacy classrooms. Likewise, if the collaborative work students complete has value, and if instructors want students to engage in it authentically rather than performatively, they either need to grade that work or structure graded assignments so that the outcomes of collaborative work are significant to students’ formal graded assessments.

Third, whether in collaborative group work, whole class activities, or individual work, instructors can empower students by validating students’ experiential knowledge. The use of narrative provides opportunities for students to tell their stories and elevates students’ voices. However, even as they acknowledged storytelling as cultural assets for people of color, both in selecting the texts for students to read and in assigning texts for students to write, the instructors used narrative as a stepping stone to more “academic” texts such as argument, comparison-contrast, and various forms of analysis that they believed were more “objective.” Unfortunately, the logistics of scaffolding students’ transfer of narrative to their “academic” reading and writing was not clear; instead, my findings showed that the narratives through which students shared their experiential knowledge and connection to the lived experiences of others were quickly passed over in favor of more “objective” and more valued texts.

Such dismissal of narrative robs students of a piece of their cultural capital and communicates its inferiority to more academic rhetorical styles. From a critical race standpoint, literacy instructors need to be aware of the exercise of White power in defining “academic” texts
as objective. In fact, the counternarrative or counterstory is a rhetorical style endorsed by critical race theorists (Harper, 2009, 2015; Harper & Davis, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) as a way to offset the assumption of objectivity in academic writing, specifically in academic research. As a result, in planning instruction for equity, developmental literacy instructors should reconsider the power of narrative as a valid and valuable rhetorical option both for students’ reading and students’ writing. If course objectives control or limit the instructors’ ability to magnify students’ narratives, then instructors could and should expose the White power of those objectives and the academy, so that students are not only taught the discourse of power but are critically aware of the power structures that enforce it. At the same time, instructors who are committed to equity in education should also begin strategic work to dismantle the power structures that devalue students’ experiential knowledge.

Overall, by exposing the power in the classroom, developmental literacy instructors can present a more authentic self to the students and can break the pattern of pretense that has characterized instructional power for Black male students. In doing so, the instructors will not lose their authority. Developmental literacy students attend college by choice; they come to the classroom to give education a second chance. Our authenticity or pretense will communicate to our Black male students whether we are truly able to see them and truly willing to engage with them to make this second chance count.

Increase Engagement: Plan for Blackness

Because the study’s findings demonstrated instructors’ concerns for the marginalizing effect of Black male students’ onlyness in developmental education classrooms, instructors need to plan for Blackness. The Black male students who enroll in developmental literacy courses
embodi the social and educational inequities perpetuated throughout U.S. history. At RBCC, Black male students are overrepresented in developmental literacy placement and underrepresented in developmental literacy success. Statistically, more Black male students place into developmental literacy courses, and statistically, fewer Black males succeed in developmental literacy courses than other demographic groups. However, because the overall representation of Black students at RBCC is small (13%), numerically, Black male students are a minority in the developmental literacy class enrollment numbers. This numerical reality had an impact on the instructors’ planning for text-based assessments and class activities. Generally, the instructors planned to provide a representation of a range of student demographics but highlighted the immigrant experiences. To address the onlyness that aggravates educational inequities for Black male students, developmental literacy instructors need to plan explicitly for Blackness.

Planning for Blackness requires a selection of texts that elevate Black experiences. Because a large percentage of the students in their developmental literacy courses are recent immigrants or children of recent immigrants, the study’s findings demonstrate that instructors favor texts about immigration or immigrant experiences. However, to give Black male students opportunities to engage authentically with texts, instructors must not essentialize race and delude themselves that they have tapped into the experiential knowledge of Black male students by employing a text about the marginalization experienced by immigrants. Most Black experiences are not immigrant experiences, and instructional planning needs to demonstrate instructors’ awareness of this distinction. Consciously and specifically planning for Blackness in their instruction will increase Black students’ sense of belonging and increase the cultural competence of all students who are impacted by the Whiteness and racism of U.S. culture.
Selecting texts about immigrant experiences and ignoring the scourge of racism on the Black community devalues issues that are relevant to Black male students’ lives and survival. In developmental literacy courses at RBCC, a Black male student is likely to be the only Black male in the classroom, or in a best-case scenario, one of very few. In his “onlyness” (Harper, 2012), the lone Black male student is already “othered.” Classroom practices that ignore his experiences in order to “protect” him, his classmates, and the instructor do not keep him safe. However, inclusion and meaningful discussion of texts by and about Black men can reduce the othering and validate his experiences. Thoughtful explorations of the ways Black males are policed in the U.S., for instance, can cause Black male students to be seen and heard in the developmental literacy classroom. Discussions of the structural racism in the U.S that perpetuates the policing of Black males can facilitate Black and White students’ recognition not only of how their actions and beliefs perpetuate and support such policing but also how they can take social action as educated citizens to create a more equitable society. When instructors not only select texts that reveal Black male experiences but also facilitate the meaningful discussion of them, they tap into the social justice imperative of CRT by “unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations (Ladson-Billings, 1999, p. 213).

But planning for Blackness should not focus only on what instructors consider “Black issues.” Because “the social acts that people accomplish with language play a central role in making students and teachers the types of people they are,” (Hall et al., 2010, p. 235), texts should also elevate the contributions of Black folks to American and global society – not just historically, but in current time. By selecting experts, on any issue or topic, who are Black, instructors give all students the opportunity to challenge dominant themes of troubled, underemployed, and downtrodden Black men. For example, if students are learning about
adapting to college life, instructors could intentionally use Terrell Strayhorn’s (2019) *College Students’ Sense of Belonging*, a full text available online and written by a Black man highly respected and in a leadership position in his field. Other Black male experts that could help instructors and students rewrite deficit narratives include Dr. Philip Atiba Goff, a Stanford psychologist and co-founder of the Center for Policing Equity; astrophysicist Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson, director of the Hayden Planetarium; Luc El-Art Severe, a law professor, small business advocate, and United Way volunteer; and Mark Dean, an IBM fellow and an inventor who holds three patents for the IBM personal computer. The writings and presentations of these four men are readily available online. But to find them, instructors have to look past the first results of the Google search and plan for the inclusion of Blackness in their classrooms.

Through their selection of texts that reference the experiences of Black males, and through their authentic incorporation of texts that highlight Black male cultural capital, instructors can begin to address the othering of Black male students by seeing and valuing the assets they bring to the classroom. The responsibility for planning for Blackness sits with the White female developmental literacy professor, but it does not sit only with her. In collaboration with other White female developmental literacy professors, they can and should explore their teaching practices as well as developmental literacy curriculum to ensure all developmental literacy courses plan for Blackness. Such work will take time and commitment, but our Black male students cannot afford to wait while we get ourselves more fully prepared for equitable and inclusive developmental literacy instruction.

The results of this study indicate areas in which the instructors’ engagement with race fell short of exposing the structural racism that impacted their students’ educational experiences and the ways that their avoidance of race perpetuated the silencing of Black male students. The
pedagogical implications discussed here reflect the impact that their enacting of Whiteness might have in the macrosocial intersections of their developmental literacy classrooms.

**Research Implications**

In addition to the pedagogical implications discussed above, the study’s findings also suggest several implications for research in terms of methodology, theoretical lenses, and topics and participants for further research.

First, I designed this reciprocal ethnographic case study alert to the risks White female educators were likely to feel in talking about race in relation to their instructional planning. Currently, the literature provides few examples of reciprocal ethnographic research and very little concrete guidance on reciprocal ethnographic processes. Because reciprocal ethnographic research provides opportunities to reduce the risk to participants by giving them agency in the analysis process (Lawless, 1991, 1992, 2000) the education field would benefit from further research and exploration of the application of reciprocal ethnography to studies of Whiteness and educators’ engagement with race. White female instructors hold privilege and power. However, the study’s findings show that the guilt, fear, and fatigue that accompany their White privilege warrant researchers’ attention not only as a topic of study but also as a consideration in the design of future research.

Secondly, because the findings of this study demonstrate the microsocial intersections of race and gender in the instructional decision making of the instructors as well as the macrosocial intersections of race and gender in the developmental classroom, more educational research from an intersectional lens is warranted. I designed this study using a theoretical framework of critical race theory, Whiteness theory, and intersectionality. CRT is common lenses in educational
research (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Parker, 2015; Patton, 2016; Pérez Huber & Solórzano, 2014; Rogers & Mosely, 2006; Shorette & Palmer, 2015; Solórzano et al. 2000; Taylor, 2018).
Likewise, a great deal of current research explores the impact of Whiteness on educational settings and practice (Burns, 2004; Fine, 2004; Hytten & Warren, 2003; Jay & Jones, 2005; Powell Pruitt, 2004). However, little educational research uses an intersectional lens (Alehano-Steele et al., 2011; Jones et al., 2012). Like their students, educators also bring their personal experiences to the classroom, and these experiences are raced, gendered, and bodied. As a result, more research that seeks to understand and improve equitable educational practices should include an intersectional lens.

Thirdly, because the findings of this study demonstrated instructors’ silence regarding structural and historical racism of the U.S. education system, further research should explore both what educators say and what they do not say about race. Although they may not be well informed about the historical marginalization of Black men in the U.S. education system, White instructors and their Black male students exist within the power-knowledge created by that system. As a result, the White female instructors’ praxis must be understood within a historical context. Critical race theory and Whiteness theories both emphasize that racial inequities arise not just from bad people but from social structures designed to benefit White folks by suppressing and restraining the elevation of others, in this case of Black males. Research that seeks to examine the instructional decision making of White female instructors must attend to both “absences and presences” (Lawton & De Kleine, 2020, p. 207) -- the instructors’ power to speak or not speak about race as well as the institutional power to value White perspectives and “standards” while devaluing and “othering” non-White perspectives.
This study extended the literature on educational inequities by focusing on White female developmental literacy instructors’ instructional planning. Because this study did not explore the actual classroom implementation of their planning, further study should include class observations to help instructors examine how their planning for race develops in actual classroom practice. This is consistent with Cochran-Smith’s (2003) call for “communities of teachers to use multiple forms of inquiry to make visible and accessible everyday events and practices and the ways they are differently understood by different stakeholders in the educational process” (p. 104). In addition, the assumptions I made about the impact of the participants’ instructional planning necessarily relied on the extensive literature on the educational experiences of Black male students in the U.S. educational system as well as on the inequitable success rates for Black male students in developmental literacy courses at RBCC. This study’s findings, therefore, can tell us a great deal about the instructors’ engagement with race, but they cannot tell us how the Black male students they teach were actually affected by the instructors’ instructional decision making. Thus, the insights obtained from this study could provide a rich line of investigation into Black male community college students’ experiences. Additional focus groups and interviews with Black male developmental literacy students could enrich or counter the analysis and implications presented here.

Most importantly, the developmental literacy field needs additional research by and about White instructors. The five instructors who participated in this study demonstrated the strength of RBCC’s developmental literacy faculty as well as gaps that must be heeded to address inequitable outcomes for Black male students. Although the responsibility for addressing the power in her classroom, developing competence in speaking about race, and planning for Blackness sits with each individual instructor, she does not and should not do this work alone.
White instructors need to research their own praxis, in collaboration with other White colleagues who can support and critique their work in a spirit of mutual inquiry. As a result of their participation in this study, the instructors indicated that they had developed additional questions and lines of inquiry into their instructional practices and engagement with race. Michael’s (2015) practice of inquiry with six White K-12 instructors provides an excellent model for further group inquiry-based research into White teachers’ praxis. The results of such collaborative group study would provide rich opportunities for action research as instructors implement the insights gained from deep conversation and reflection about race.

Conclusion

This chapter concludes my dissertation study by discussing the implications of my findings and making recommendations for increasing the authentic engagement of race in developmental literacy courses. The study design and analysis, as well as my conclusions and recommendations, are not neutral but are focused on a social justice imperative to provide more equitable educational opportunities for Black male students. In this study, by focusing on White female developmental literacy instructors, I addressed a gap in research – lack of critical research focused on the perspectives of White female educators in community college developmental literacy programs. From the lens provided the three-legged theoretical framework of critical race theory, Whiteness, and intersectionality, I examined how White female developmental literacy instructors engaged with race in selecting texts, in planning for text-based instruction, and in developing text-based assessments. Throughout, my focus has been on the imperative for more equitable educational opportunities for the Black male students who have been most consistently misled and underserved by the U.S. education system. Because the majority of educators in the
U.S. are White and female, this study provides an essential perspective from which to renew our focus on equitable instruction.

Race and gender create macrosocial classroom intersections that complicated literacy instruction for the five instructors who participated in this study. From their racial and cultural positions, the instructors often struggled to engage students in meaningful and substantive dialogue about race or to recognize the “privileges that allow for some to avoid such race discussions” (Inoue, 2020, p. 137). The instructors’ planning revealed their rich pedagogical expertise paired with a sincere desire to help and empower their students. At the same time, their own intersectional identities also influenced their responses to race, gender, class, and their role as instructors.

Three overarching themes best addressed my research questions. The study participants’ instructional planning focused on instructional practices that would ensure students were “Doing What They’re Supposed to be Doing” in large part by “Connecting Students Any Way You Can.” The instructors’ use of one-on-one conferencing, small group work, journals, and informal writing all sought to create student-student, student-instructor, and student-text connections that would make developmental literacy work engaging and meaningful for their students. Ultimately, the instructors sought to ensure comfort and safety in the classroom – to “avoid ‘Oh my God’ experiences” that threatened to shut down the students or the instructor. These three themes reveal sincerely caring and passionate instructors engaged in important work. However, despite the instructors’ good intentions, these themes also revealed patterns of instructional planning that perpetuate the marginalization of Black male students.

The White female instructor’s fears of being wrong, of offending someone, of making students uncomfortable are, in the end, fears of her own discomfort. I, myself, can remember the
sleepless nights and painful self-criticism when my teaching went wrong. I can still see the faces of students I have failed in one way or another over the years. No one seeks out those failures. But our feelings must take a back seat to students’ needs. Like teaching itself, engaging race is a risky move that threatens our competence. As White women, many of us have been cultured in colorblindness. We, too, are products of the American educational system that Whitewashed our education (Utt & Tolchuk, 2020). But, if we truly intend to create an equitable educational system, we have to see ourselves as essential partners in disrupting and rebuilding. By exposing the power in our classrooms, by planning for Blackness, and by speaking openly about the race in class and our texts, we can create a truly safe space for all students where the curriculum, the instruction, and the instructor herself intentionally include Black male voices.
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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL
Interview Protocol

Individual Interview 1

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me for this interview. My name is Alison Douglas, and I am conducting this research as a part of my dissertation study. The purpose of my project is to investigate the ways that we, as White female developmental literacy instructors, make decisions about texts and text-based assignments in our classes. This interview is voluntary. Please feel free to provide only the information that you are comfortable sharing. As part of the method of this study, I am recording and will transcribe the interview. I will share the transcription and my analysis with you and ask you to also interpret what you have said and to look for patterns between your responses and the responses of other study participants. All reporting of your responses will be anonymous.

Part 1: Let’s talk a little bit about your teaching and educational background. Help me understand your school experiences and how you think about yourself as a teacher.

1. Please tell me your teaching story:
   a. What brought you to teaching?
   b. What have been the most significant stages of your teacher journey?
   c. How do you feel about your role as a teacher today?
   d. How would you describe your teaching style?

2. Can you tell me about 2-3 significant learning experiences in your life?
   a. How old were you?
   b. What was the circumstance?
   c. What did you learn?
   d. Why was this experience significant for you?
3. We’ve talked a bit about your educational background and your teaching story. Is there anything else you would like to add about those topics at this point?

Part 2: Let’s talk a little bit about your experience as a developmental literacy instructor. I realize that you may teach classes other than developmental literacy, but as much as possible, please try to focus on your developmental literacy students as you answer these questions.

4. Tell me about your developmental literacy students.
   a. What are their greatest challenges? Can you give me an example of a student with these kinds of challenges?
   b. What are their greatest strengths? Can you give me an example of a student with these strengths?
   c. What is the demographic makeup of your classes?
   d. What kinds of students seem to be most successful in your developmental literacy classes? Can you give me an example?

5. What behaviors lead to students’ success in your developmental literacy classes?
   a. Which students most often demonstrate those behaviors? Can you give me an example?
   b. Which students most often do not? Can you give me an example?

6. What are the greatest challenges you currently experience as a teacher of developmental literacy? Can you give me an example of a time you experienced this kind of challenge?

7. If you had the power to completely redesign developmental literacy education, what would you change? Why?

8. We’ve talked a bit today about your experiences and thoughts as a developmental literacy instructor. Is there anything else you would like to add about that right now?
Part 3: In this study, I am interested in understanding how our race and gender, as White females, might affect the way we teach and think about teaching developmental literacy students. These questions may feel a bit personal and may cause some discomfort. I encourage you to be as honest as you can in sharing your stories.

9. Can you tell me about a time that you recognized your privilege as a White person?

10. Can you tell me about a time that you felt your gender was affecting the way you experienced a situation or the way you managed yourself in a situation?

11. Can you tell me about a time that you were aware of your race in the classroom?

12. Can you tell me about a time that you were aware of your gender in the classroom?

Thank you for your time and openness today. I will be contacting you soon with a copy of the transcript and my initial analysis of your responses. I will give you some time to review those documents and then schedule a focus group with all participants so that we can discuss your observations and analysis.
Individual Interview 2

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me for this interview. The last time we met, we talked about your educational and professional experiences, your experiences of race and gender, and a bit about your experiences as a developmental literacy teacher. Since then, we have met with other study participants to talk about their responses to those questions. In this interview, I’d like to explore a bit more deeply how you think about and plan for instruction in your developmental literacy courses. This interview is voluntary. Please feel free to provide only the information that you are comfortable sharing.

1. Before we get started, are there any topics or themes from our previous interview and/or the focus group that you want to discuss?

2. Do you have any concerns or questions about the ideas generated during the focus group?

Let’s shift then, to your instructional planning for developmental literacy students. I know some of your pedagogical practices may impact classes you teach other than developmental literacy, but for the purpose of this interview, please try to focus specifically on how you plan for instruction in your developmental literacy classes.

3. When you think about “literacy,” what behaviors and skills come to mind?
   a. What behaviors and skills are you charged with teaching your developmental literacy students?
   b. What “counts” as literacy for you and your students?
   c. How would you describe your developmental students’ literacy? Can you give me an example?
   d. How does race impact literacy?
4. Tell me about a text you have used that has been particularly effective with your students
   a. How did you know the text was effective?
   b. How was race portrayed in the text?
   c. How was gender portrayed in the text?
   d. Did your male students respond differently to the text than your female students?
      If so, how?
   e. Did your White students respond differently to the text than your Black students?
      Did they respond differently than your Latinx students? If so, how?

5. How do you select texts for your developmental students to read?
   a. What criteria do you use when selecting a text for students to read?
   b. Do you choose texts written by men or women? Why?
   c. What images and stories about Black people are developed in the texts you use in
      your developmental literacy classes?
   d. What images and stories about Black men are developed in the texts you use in
      your developmental literacy classes?
   e. Can you give me an example?

6. Tell me about a text you use in your developmental literacy class that discusses the
   experiences of Black men.

7. What kinds of lessons and activities do you use to help students interact with the texts
   you assign?

8. When you design lessons and activities for your developmental literacy students, what
   kinds of student interaction and engagement do you try to create?
   a. What kinds of interaction and (dis)engagement do you try to discourage?
b. How do you plan lessons and activities to promote the behaviors you want and discourage behaviors you don’t want?

c. Can you give me an example of a lesson or activity you use to encourage or discourage certain behaviors?

9. What kinds of writing assignments do you assign for students in relation to these texts?

   a. How do you decide what types of writing students should create?

   b. What kinds of writing assignments have been most effective? Can you give me an example? How do you know the assignment was effective?

10. Can you tell me about a time a student objected to a writing assignment?

    a. What were the objections?

    b. How did you respond?

    c. What do you think caused the students’ objection?

11. Overall, thinking about how you design your lessons, select texts, and design writing assignments how important are race and gender in your planning?

12. How well (or poorly) do you think your pedagogy aligns with your students’ expectations? What evidence do students give you of that alignment (or lack of alignment?)

13. Thinking about how you design your lessons, select texts, and design writing assignments what other information do you think we need to have?

Thank you for your time and openness today. I will be contacting you soon with a copy of the transcript and my initial analysis of your responses. I will give you some time to review those
documents and then schedule a focus group with all participants so that we can discuss your observations and analysis.
APPENDIX B

FOCUS GROUP 1 PROTOCOL
Appendix B
Focus Group 1 Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again for this second phase of my research. As I mentioned in our first interview, my name is Alison Douglas, and I am conducting this research as a part of my dissertation study. The purpose of my project is to investigate the ways that we, as White female developmental literacy professors, make decisions about texts and text-based assignments in our classes. My objective today is to talk about the main ideas that I learned from your first interviews. I recorded our last session and made a transcript that you have reviewed. Today, I want you to reflect on some of the important ideas in your transcripts. But first, we will take a few minutes just to get to know each other and see similarities and differences in our thinking.

I need you (all) to help me interpret and understand the information you provided me, so I will be asking about some of the things that you mentioned in the previous interview. This focus group is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. To protect your confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms in the transcripts. While I ask that the focus group participants maintain confidentiality regarding what is shared in the group, I realize that I cannot guarantee confidentiality. Please provide only the information that you are comfortable sharing.

Focus Group 1 Interview Guide:

1. In your individual interviews, we discussed your teaching stories. Can you share with the group a bit of your teaching story? What brought you to teaching? What keeps you in this field?
2. Most teachers were good students. How do you think your own educational experiences contributed to your choice of teaching as a profession and your success as an educator?

3. What factors, in your mind, contribute to your success (or lack of success) in teaching your students? What do you see in your transcript that you think is important to understand your successes and challenges as a developmental literacy professor?

4. An idea that emerged from your individual interviews was mothering or nurturing your students. What do you see in your transcripts related to this pattern? Do you think we, as White female teachers tend to be more nurturing than say, a White male teacher? What are the benefits and risks of nurturing for you and your students?

5. We talked a lot about connections last week, so let’s briefly revisit that
   a. What does the relationship or connection between you and your students look like? How do you know when it exists? Who creates it?
   b. You also mentioned the importance of students asking for help and checking in with you. Where do you see that in your transcripts? What happens if students do not do this? Why do you think they do not do it?
   c. How about engagement? Where do you see that in your transcripts? Who is responsible for students’ engagement? How do you know when it happens? What does it look like when it’s not happening?

6. Another idea from your interviews was the idea of control and how you, as White women have learned to manage your classes. Can you talk about where you saw control in your transcripts or how you see control or classroom management affecting the decisions you make as you are planning your instruction?
7. Statistically, Black students are less successful in developmental literacy courses than any other demographic. Do you see a difference in student success in your developmental classrooms when you disaggregate by race? To what do you attribute those differences in success?

8. Statistically, Black male students are less successful in developmental literacy courses than any other demographic. Do you see a difference in student success in your developmental classrooms when you disaggregate by gender? To what do you attribute those differences in success?
APPENDIX C

FOCUS GROUP 2 PROTOCOL
Focus Group 2 Protocol

Thank you for agreeing to meet with me again for this fourth phase of my research. As you know, the purpose of my project is to investigate the ways that we, as White female developmental literacy professors, make decisions about texts and text-based assignments in our classes. My objective today is to talk about the main ideas that I learned from your second interviews. I recorded your interviews and made a transcript that you have reviewed. Today, I want you to reflect on some of the important ideas in your transcripts.

I need you (all) to help me interpret and understand the information you provided me, so I will be asking about some of the things that you mentioned in the previous interviews. This focus group is voluntary and you can withdraw from the study at any time. To protect your confidentiality, I will use pseudonyms in the transcripts. While I ask that the focus group participants maintain confidentiality regarding what is shared in the group, I realize that I cannot guarantee confidentiality. Please provide only the information that you are comfortable sharing.

1. **Instructor-Student connections:** We have talked a lot about the importance you place on connections between you and your students.
   a. What do you do to develop those connections?
   b. How do you plan for creating those connections in your class activities, texts, or assignments?
   c. What do you see in your transcripts that identifies how you facilitate connections between you and your students?

2. **Text Selection:**
   a. In discussing your criteria for text selection, I see you focusing on the following:
      i. Relevance of text to students’ lived experience or the current world/national circumstances
      ii. The extent to which students were engaged in the text in the past
      iii. The extent to which the text helped students connect with each other
      iv. Representation – how well the text or the authors reflect the demographic makeup of your classes.
      v. Convenience – what you know and what you have read, what you have already developed lessons for
      vi. How well does that analysis resonate with you? What would you add or amend? Where do you see those criteria in your transcripts?
b. WHY do you select texts that represent the students in your class? What are you trying to accomplish beyond engaging them?

c. Do you select texts that include other Englishes or that use code switching or code meshing? Why? How do you teach students to read these sorts of texts?

3. Conflict: I see differences in your approaches to conflict in students’ responses to texts both individually and in group contexts. Can you talk a bit about how you feel about and handle conflicting ideas or attitudes in your developmental literacy classes?

4. Cultural Competence
   a. I heard many instances of cultural competence. For instance,
      i. Awareness of the race and opportunity gap
      ii. Selection of culturally responsive texts
      iii. Assignments that allow for student choice
      iv. Awareness of culture as a lens for seeing the world
      v. Humility – You know that you don’t know everything
   b. When you look at your transcripts, where do you see instances of cultural competence? What would you add or amend in my list?
   c. Where does your cultural competence come from? What experiences, training, or informal learning have helped you to develop your cultural competence? What steps do you take to “curate” your learning beyond your own racialized and gendered position?

5. Informal Writing:
   a. Most of you indicated that you ask students to engage in reflective and informal writing including freewriting and journaling.
   b. Do all of your students complete these informal assignments? If not, which students tend not to complete them? Why do you think some do not?

6. Portrayal of Race:
   a. Please review your answer to my question about how race is portrayed in your texts (see interview 2 transcript).
   b. I see the following:
      i. The portrayal of race emphasizes universal human experience
      ii. The portrayal of race indirectly addresses social and economic inequities
      iii. The portrayal of race directly addresses social and economic inequities
      iv. Race is not portrayed in the text
   c. How well does that analysis resonate with you? Where do you see these themes of race portrayal in your transcript? What would you add or amend?
   d. How are White people portrayed in the texts you select for your developmental classes?

7. Academic/Informal Reading and Writing: Most of you made distinctions between “academic” and other kinds of student literacy (journals, reflective writing, novels, IM, etc.)
   a. I see the following:
      i. Informal writing is “most effective” with your developmental students
ii. Student voice and purpose are clearer and stronger in informal writing than in academic writing
iii. Texts that students enjoy outside of class can be used to bridge students to academic reading
iv. You teach academic reading and writing because it is what students need to succeed at the next level
v. There’s a level of tension for you between academic and informal writing

b. How well does that analysis resonate with you? What would you add or amend?

c. Can you define academic writing?
d. Can you define academic reading?
e. What stands out in your transcripts regarding academic reading and writing?

8. **Deflecting/Avoiding Race talk?** Does talking about race and racism make you uncomfortable?
   a. In your individual interviews, I heard you using the following concepts in place of race
      i. Economic differences/income/poverty
      ii. Ethnicity
      iii. Language learners/ESL
      iv. Culture
   b. Please review your transcripts for these concepts used in place of “race.”
   c. How do you understand your use of these concepts in place of “race?”
APPENDIX D

INITIAL CODE LIST
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Help Seeking</td>
<td>Teachers, expectation that students seek help and clarification of tasks</td>
<td>“She came to my office all the time”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>through questions and check ins” during class, after or before class,</td>
<td>“Asking for help is super hard.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>during office hours, or by email,</td>
<td>“She was always checking in, just to make sure she understood.”</td>
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<td>Helping/</td>
<td>Teachers’ orientation that their role is to help students</td>
<td>“It’s . . . connecting students with the resources they need . . .”</td>
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<td>Support</td>
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<tr>
<td>Relationships/Connections</td>
<td>Teachers place value on their relationships with students and their ability to facilitate relationships between students</td>
<td>“Those individual connections are really important to me.”</td>
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<td>“I try to keep them really engaged with each other”</td>
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<td>“Having a common bond made it easier to understand where the students were coming from.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Coaching/</td>
<td>Teaching style associated with encouragement and support</td>
<td>“you can do it!”</td>
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<td>Encouragement</td>
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<td>“How’s it going? What are you freaking out about?”</td>
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<td>Onlyness</td>
<td>Awareness of students or themselves as singular representation of a</td>
<td>“I realized no one looked like me.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>gender, race, or belief system</td>
<td>“he was the only one”</td>
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<td>“He had already been removed from the school system . . .”</td>
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<td>Control</td>
<td>Teachers’ efforts to manage the classroom and the behaviors/actions of</td>
<td>“My teaching was pretty rigid and prescribed . . . all planned out.”</td>
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<td>individual students in the class</td>
<td>“I felt like the teacher was the all-knowing power.”</td>
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<td>Code</td>
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<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Differentiating</td>
<td>Teachers’ efforts to provide individual instruction and support/ meet individual needs.</td>
<td>“each student working on different skills”</td>
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<td>“It’s not going to be one size fits all”</td>
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<td>Influence</td>
<td>How learning, class, teacher, and school impact students</td>
<td>“getting them to see the value of the class and how this is going to help them”</td>
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<td>“The concept of learning is not valued”</td>
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<td>Self-Doubt/Correction</td>
<td>Teachers’ concerns about their pedagogy and teachers’ adjustments to pedagogy</td>
<td>“I made a lot of mistakes in my first years of teaching.”</td>
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<td>“um... I don’t know if I can do this.”</td>
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<td>Teachers vs.</td>
<td>Teachers’ definition of teaching as different from what they do.</td>
<td>“I think of myself as a facilitator more than a teacher.”</td>
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<td>Facilitator/Other</td>
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<td>“I avoid lecture.”</td>
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<td>“I like to get them talking to each other.”</td>
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<td>Skills</td>
<td>Teaching of literacy skills</td>
<td>“promoting skills transfer “.</td>
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<td>“It’s important they build those skills”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“We need to get past that and focus on writing skills.”</td>
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<td>Behaviors</td>
<td>Teaching/coaching of academic behaviors. Discussion of student behaviors that impact student success</td>
<td>“teaching them to find balance”</td>
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<td>“not doing work on time”</td>
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<td>“Problems with attendance”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“They have perseverance”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>They set goals</td>
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<td>Definition</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Boundaries</td>
<td>Teachers’ discussion of how much or how little they share of their own lives and how much they engage with students’ lives</td>
<td>“So, I put my own experiences out there to help them.”</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>“We know a lot about their lives because they write about them”</td>
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<td>“I have had to become a bit more distant, less friendly”</td>
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<td>Student Lives</td>
<td>Teachers’ awareness and concern about the complexity of students’ lives and the challenge of incorporating school into them</td>
<td>“They have so many outside responsibilities”</td>
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<td>“knowing that they were trying to balance work and kids and family members”</td>
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<td>Work</td>
<td>Teachers’ value and efforts to instill in students the value of work, working hard,</td>
<td>“It’s hard work.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“They have a lot of perseverance”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“She worked so hard”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>Teachers’ understanding of what constitutes student commitment and dedication to their education and the course</td>
<td>“participating . . . doing what they’re supposed to be doing”</td>
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<td>Attendance</td>
<td>A possible measure of engagement, but also value of students’ attendance in class</td>
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<td>Text as Proxy/Touchstone</td>
<td>Teachers’ use of texts as a mediator to help students engage with complex issues</td>
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<td>We</td>
<td>Teachers’ use of first-person plural to discuss what happens in the class</td>
<td>“If we do breakout sessions . . .”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“When we discuss it . . .”</td>
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<td>Examples</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sexual/Bodily Awareness</td>
<td>Teachers’ awareness/concern about their bodies, their potential attractiveness, awareness of their sexuality</td>
<td>“he was flirty”</td>
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<td>Boundaries – maintaining professional and or student-teacher relationships.</td>
<td>“I was asked out by students”</td>
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<td>Fear/ Vulnerability</td>
<td>Teachers’ sense of their own fear and vulnerability and/or students’ fears and vulnerabilities</td>
<td>“If your family doesn’t value you being in college, you feel like you can’t be vulnerable about it because you don’t have that support.”</td>
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<td>Boundaries – when and how do teachers show weakness?</td>
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<td>Word Choice</td>
<td>Teachers’ concern and awareness of the impact of their word choices in class (or students’ word choice)</td>
<td>“Men can say things that women can’t”</td>
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<td>Boundaries?</td>
<td>“Can I use my own language”</td>
</tr>
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<td>Teacher Development</td>
<td>The teaching journey; intentional and unintentional progress in becoming a teacher</td>
<td>“I learned a lot in the process.”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>“It’s important to talk about teaching with other teachers</td>
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<td>Mothering/ Nurturing</td>
<td>Teachers’ use of mothering attitudes &amp; behaviors in working with students. Teachers’ awareness of the impact of their teaching on mothering and their mothering on teaching</td>
<td>“I am a nurturer.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<td>“They see me as motherly”</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“Like I tell my own kids. . .”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Due Dates</td>
<td>Teachers’ reflections on setting deadlines, enforcing deadlines, and students’ challenges meeting deadlines</td>
<td>“Be flexible about social-emotional and rigid about due dates”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“I mean, did it really matter if it was turned in that day or in three days?”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Code</td>
<td>Definition</td>
<td>Examples</td>
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<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Conflict Avoidance</td>
<td>Trying to smooth over disagreements or manage conversations to reduce discomfort for students or teacher</td>
<td>“I always go in wondering if there’s going to be some push back.”</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“They’re not comfortable talking about it all together.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Gender Differences</td>
<td>Instructors’ awareness of differences in students (or their) behaviors based on gender</td>
<td>“It’s the boys who don’t ask for help.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maturity</td>
<td>Success of more mature students, returning adults</td>
<td>“I love having returning adults in the class”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>“At a certain age, students develop more focus and drive”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
APPENDIX E

FOCUS GROUP 2 PREVIEW QUESTIONS
Focus Group 2 Preview Questions

6. **Instructor-Student connections:** We have talked a lot about the importance you place on connections between you and your students.
   a. What do you do to develop those connections?
   b. How do you plan for creating those connections in your class activities, texts, or assignments?
   c. What do you see in your transcripts that identifies how you facilitate connections between you and your students?

7. **Text Selection:**
   a. In discussing your criteria for text selection, I see you focusing on the following:
      i. Relevance of text to students’ lived experience or the current world/national circumstances
      ii. The extent to which students were engaged in the text in the past
      iii. The extent to which the text helped students connect with each other
      iv. Representation – how well the text or the authors reflect the demographic makeup of your classes.
      v. Convenience – what you know and what you have read, what you have already developed lessons for
   How well does that analysis resonate with you? What would you add or amend? Where do you see those criteria in your transcripts?
   b. WHY do you select texts that represent the students in your class? What are you trying to accomplish beyond engaging them?
   c. Do you select texts that include other Englishes or that use code switching or code meshing? Why? How do you teach students to read these sorts of texts?

8. **Conflict:** I see differences in your approaches to conflict in students’ responses to texts both individually and in group contexts. Can you talk a bit about how you feel about and handle conflicting ideas or attitudes in your developmental literacy classes?

9. **Cultural Competence**
   a. I heard many instances of cultural competence. For instance,
      i. Awareness of the race and opportunity gap
      ii. Selection of culturally responsive texts
      iii. Assignments that allow for student choice
      iv. Awareness of culture as a lens for seeing the world
      v. Humility – You know that you don’t know everything
   When you look at your transcripts, where do you see instances of cultural competence? What would you add or amend in my list?
   b. Where does your cultural competence come from? What experiences, training, or informal learning have helped you to develop your cultural competence? What steps do you take to “curate” your learning beyond your own racialized and gendered position?

10. **Informal Writing:**
    a. Most of you indicated that you ask students to engage in reflective and informal writing including freewriting and journaling.
b. Do all of your students complete these informal assignments? If not, which students tend not to complete them? Why do you think some do not?

11. **Portrayal of Race:**
   a. Please review your answer to my question about how race is portrayed in your texts (see interview 2 transcript).
   b. I see the following:
      i. The portrayal of race emphasizes universal human experience
      ii. The portrayal of race *indirectly* addresses social and economic inequities
      iii. The portrayal of race *directly* addresses social and economic inequities
      iv. Race is not portrayed in the text
   How well does that analysis resonate with you? Where do you see these themes of race portrayal in your transcript? What would you add or amend?

c. How are White people portrayed in the texts you select for your developmental classes?

12. **Academic/Informal Reading and Writing:** Most of you made distinctions between “academic” and other kinds of student literacy (journals, reflective writing, novels, IM, etc.)
   a. I see the following:
      i. Informal writing is “most effective” with your developmental students
      ii. Student voice and purpose are clearer and stronger in informal writing than in academic writing
      iii. Texts that students enjoy outside of class can be used to bridge students to academic reading
      iv. You teach academic reading and writing because it is what students need to succeed at the next level
      v. There’s a level of tension for you between academic and informal writing
   How well does that analysis resonate with you? What would you add or amend?

b. Can you define academic writing?
   c. Can you define academic reading?
   d. What stands out in your transcripts regarding academic reading and writing?

13. **Deflecting/Avoiding Race talk?** Does talking about race and racism make you uncomfortable?
   a. In your individual interviews, I heard you using the following concepts in place of race
      i. Economic differences/income/poverty
      ii. Ethnicity
      iii. Language learners/ESL
      iv. Culture
   b. Please review your transcripts for these concepts used in place of “race.”
   c. How do you understand your use of these concepts in place of “race?”
APPENDIX F

RBCC LITERACY COURSE OBJECTIVES
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Objectives</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| ENG. 098 | • Produce essays that demonstrate a clear thesis that focuses the essay for a specific audience.  
• Produce essays that demonstrate body paragraphs that support the thesis with personal observation and experience and/or outside source material.  
• Produce essays that demonstrate organized body paragraphs that support the thesis clearly.  
• Produce essays that demonstrate an appropriate tone and word choices for the specific audience.  
• Produce essays that demonstrate mechanically correct sentences and correct MLA manuscript format. |
| LTC. 099 | • Critically analyze complex texts by: (1) Identifying major and minor points that writers are communicating to readers; (2) Examining the impact of vocabulary, word choice, and sentence patterns to communicate readers’ and writers’ stance; (3) Analyzing the development of ideas and events throughout a text; and (4) Comparing themes from multiple texts.  
• Develop and support written and oral arguments in response to complex texts by: (1) Applying understanding of structure from diverse formats and media to their own writing; (2) Using structural patterns to organize major and minor points and demonstrate coherence and unity; and (3) Editing to demonstrate appropriate tone, word choice, and mechanically correct sentences, and APA and MLA citation format.  
• Develop and apply metacognitive strategies to literacy tasks by: (1) Applying strategies to improve comprehension of academic texts (i.e., background knowledge, schema, etc.) and (2) Reflecting on and evaluating strategies used in reading, writing thinking, speaking, and listening |
| RDG. 91 | • Assess, interpret, and distinguish word meanings to develop academic and advanced word knowledge.  
• Distinguish, apply and demonstrate disciplinary literacy strategies to comprehend college texts.  
• Apply the inquiry process to formulate questions, assess texts, and support conclusions.  
• Apply and evaluate personal reading and learning strategies to achieve academic success. |