

**Cultivating Educators of Color: The Role of School in Shaping Students of Color's  
Perceptions About Teaching**

A Dissertation

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## **Dedication**

Dedicated to Papa Becquer and Ms. Edith; their unwavering love and sacrifices throughout my life have made this opportunity possible.

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## **Abstract**

Seeking to enhance efforts toward diversity in the teaching profession, this study used a heuristic methodology to explore how the lived experiences of high school students of Color participating in an education pathways high school course shaped their perceptions of the teaching career. Critical race theory (CRT), critical whiteness studies, and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) and their interrelatedness provide an understanding of the role of race in K–12 education. There is an overlap that exists between CRP, CRT, and whiteness studies. CRT provides the lens to understand racism, and critical white studies unpack White privilege. Thus, CRT and critical whiteness studies contextualize CRP, enabling the means to examine how race has been used, institutionalized, and maintained in schools (Sleeter, 2017) and making them tools for isolating race and racism effects on education. The findings of this study reveal challenges and motivations shaping the aspirations of students of Color who are considering teaching careers. While students reported feeling excluded due to implicit biases and societal stigmas, they also found belonging through supportive teachers and diverse peers. Students expressed being driven by social justice to become teachers and were discouraged by the lack of support they experienced as students and the societal devaluation of the profession. Consequently, this study highlights the need for a diverse and supportive education system. Implementing culturally proficient practices, dismantling negative perceptions, and providing information about teaching careers can help students of Color change their perceptions of teaching as a career.

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## Chapter 1

Despite a rapidly diversifying student population, K—12 teachers in the United States are predominantly White women (Aud et al., 2010; R. M. Ingersoll et al., 2018; R. M. Ingersoll & May, 1987; Madkins, 2011; Taie & Goldring, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). The 2017 National Teacher and Principal Survey conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics (R. M. Ingersoll & May, 1987; Taie & Goldring, 2018) found that 79% of all schoolteachers identified as non-Hispanic White, while only 46% of public-school students identified as non-Hispanic White.

Substantial research has demonstrated the indispensable need for teachers of Color in schools to ensure all students fulfill their academic potential (Amico et al., 2017; Chen, 2019; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Farinde et al., 2015; Gershenson et al., 2016; Leech et al., 2019; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Studies have also indicated that students of Color<sup>1</sup> have better academic outcomes (Egalite & Kisida, 2018), fewer absences (Rasheed et al., 2020), higher graduation rates (Gershenson et al., 2016), and lower suspension rates (Lindsay & Hart, 2017) when there is an ethnic and/or demographic match between students and teachers in their schools.

This racial disproportionality within the educational system did not always exist. To fully examine the effect of a lack of teachers of Color in public schools, it is essential to consider the impact of public schools' desegregation. *Brown v. Board of Education* was a watershed

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<sup>1</sup> I capitalize Color in students/teachers of Color to acknowledge Color as a socially constructed term that references the racial identities of all groups other than Whites. As White and any other racial group identity would be capitalized, so should Color in reference to the amalgamation of all non-White racial groups.

moment for civil rights equality, and the underlying racialized assumptions that came with the statement that separate was not equal informed education policy development and how the subsequent desegregation was implemented (Amico et al., 2017; Ethridge, 1979; Fultz, 2004; Hooker, 1971; Lutz, 2017; Oakley et al., 2009; Ramsey, 2017). The desegregation process brought on by this landmark ruling resulted in a substantial, systematic reduction in the number of African American teachers employed in the Southern states (Fultz, 2004; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Thompson, 2019). Thus, an unintended consequence of the *Brown* decision was a significant decline in the number of working teachers of Color, ensuring a persistent gap between the proportion of minority teachers and minority students in public schools despite an increase in the number of licensed African American teachers over the past decade (R. M. Ingersoll et al., 2018; R. M. Ingersoll & May, 1987).

In Minnesota, more than 90% of school districts reported difficulties recruiting American Indian, Asian, Black, Hispanic, and other teachers of Color in 2018 (Wilder Research, 2019). This has resulted in a teaching force that is 96% non-Hispanic White, with 38% of the state's districts having no teachers of Color or Indigenous teachers (Wilder Research, 2019). The 2023 report on the Supply and Demand of Teachers in Minnesota (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2023) reported that 6% of all licensed teachers in Minnesota were teachers of Color, and 37% of all students were students of Color.

The underrepresentation of teachers of Color has been studied by many in the educational field, with researchers mainly scrutinizing the supply dynamics through a focus on the recruitment and retention of non-White teachers (Farinde et al., 2015) 2015; R. M. Ingersoll et al., 2018; R. M. Ingersoll & May, 1987; Villegas & Irvine, 2010; Wilder Research, 2019). As

such, the resulting policy initiatives center on the recruitment and retention of teachers, blind to the historical forces that led to the entrenchment of White dominance within education (Amico et al., 2017; Carver-Thomas, 2017; R. M. Ingersoll et al., 2018; R. M. Ingersoll & May, 1987; Irvine, 2018; Lutz, 2017). We cannot overcome this problem without first understanding how it came to be. The inevitable consequence of this narrow focus is that racial disproportionality between teachers and students persists (R. M. Ingersoll et al., 2018; Taie & Goldring, 2018; Wilder Research, 2019).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The state of Minnesota has a shortage of teachers of Color, creating significant racial disparity in the public school system. To be able to create policies that address this disparity, we must fully understand the factors that contribute to it, including the lack of students of Color pursuing teaching careers. Thus, it is necessary to understand the perceptions students of Color develop regarding teaching. Experiences in the classroom and with teachers can positively or negatively affect an individual's perceptions of teaching and their potential success, satisfaction, or acceptance in that career. (Blacksburg, 2000; Gordon, 1994, 2000, 2002, 2005; Graham, 1994). Findings from studies of school districts across the United States have demonstrated that students of Color experience greater rates of disciplinary action and suspension (Lindsay & Hart, 2017), are underrepresented in gifted programming (Grissom & Redding, 2016), and have less expected of them by White teachers (Cherng, 2017; Gershenson et al., 2016). These studies have also demonstrated that achievement and attendance increase in the presence of a racial demographic match between teachers and students (Cherng, 2017; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Gershenson et al., 2016). Within those studies examining the need for

the recruitment and retention of teachers of Color information on how a racialized school environment may affect marginalized students' perceptions and attitudes toward teaching as a profession is limited (Amico et al., 2017; Chen, 2019; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Farinde et al., 2015; Gershenson et al., 2016; Leech et al., 2019; Survey, 2020; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Thus, research has not sufficiently addressed why few American Indian, Asian, Black, and Hispanic students are choosing to pursue teaching careers (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Libassi, 2018; Thompson, 2019).

### **Purpose of the Study**

This study sought to explore how the perceptions of students of Color about teaching as a career are shaped by their experiences in a racialized schooling environment. The exploratory questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do persons of Color perceive and describe their K–12 academic experiences?
2. Why do students of Color want to become teachers? What factors from their K–12 education empower this decision?
3. What do students of Color perceive as barriers and challenges to other students of Color pursuing a career in education?

### **Definition of Terms**

For this inquiry, the following terms are defined here:

*Students of Color and minoritized students:* In this paper, these two terms are used interchangeably to mean students of non-White descent who do not belong to the dominant White American racial majority. The term minoritized recognizes the systemic oppression of individuals belonging to a racial–ethnic minority group (Sotto-Santiago, 2019).

*Whiteness*: Guided by critical race scholars such as Perez Huber (2010), I have chosen not to capitalize the term "whiteness" as part of a conscious effort to reject hegemonic White norms and empower communities of Color through language.

### **Theoretical Framework**

For this study, I used interdisciplinary approaches found in critical race theory, culturally relevant pedagogy, and critical whiteness studies to explore the structures and substructures of the K–12 school system that impact the educational experiences of students of Color.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical race theory (CRT) is a theoretical model that examines how race and racism are expressed by the dominant culture and experienced by the non-dominant culture. Legal scholars developed CRT in opposition to positivist views of civil rights (Crenshaw et al., 1996), as CRT recognizes that race and racism are prevalent in American society and acknowledges people of Color's experiential knowledge and efforts toward eliminating racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). The core premise of CRT is that racism is endemic and is the basis for social organization in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Sleeter, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). This study employed the CRT framework to examine how educational practices have subordinated minoritized groups (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). In education, CRT challenges dominant ideologies and deficit notions about students of Color through the exploration of five themes: "The centrality and intersectionality of race and racism, the challenge to the

dominant ideology, the commitment to social justice, the centrality of experiential knowledge, and the interdisciplinary perspective" (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001, pp. 2–3).

### ***Centrality and Intersectionality of Race and Racism***

This theme examines oppression and racism as multidimensional rather than unidirectional and explores how racial oppression intersects with other forms of subordination, including but not limited to classism, sexism, and ableism (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Consequently, race plays a central role in how schools are organized. In an exploration of CRT within education, Solórzano and Yasso (2001) identified four truths about racism: (a) there are micro and macro components, (b) racism exists on individual and institutional levels, (c) there are conscious and unconscious elements of racism, and (d) the impact on individuals and groups is cumulative. These truths are fundamental to understanding the centrality of racism.

### ***Challenging the Dominant Ideology***

Using CRT to examine education dismantles and challenges dominant narratives grounded in notions of color blindness, meritocracy, deficit thinking, and other forms of subordination (Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Scholars in CRT argue that claims of objectivity and meritocracy are covert means of protecting the power and privilege of the dominant culture (Lipsitz, 2009; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014).

### ***Commitment to Social Justice***

Dixson and Anderson (2018), employing ideas of CRT from legal literature, stated, "CRT in education agitates and advocates for meaningful outcomes to redress racial inequity. CRT



does not merely document disparities" (p. 122). Thus, CRT in the study of education is about dismantling oppressive schooling practices while empowering the voices of underrepresented, minoritized groups.

### ***The Centrality of Experiential Knowledge***

The lived experiences of students belonging to minoritized groups are often silenced or not represented within educational discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ledesma & Calderón, 2015; Sleeter, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Solórzano and Yosso (2002) observed that deficit-informed principles frequently silence and distort the lived experiences of minoritized populations. CRT in education recognizes this silencing and values counter stories. The experiential knowledge of people of Color is legitimized because CRT scholars "assume that those who understand racism best are not its perpetrators but rather those who are routinely victimized by it" (Sleeter, 2017, p.8).

### ***Interdisciplinary Perspective***

Solórzano and Yosso (2002) define critical race methodology in education as transdisciplinary with a knowledge base rooted in ethnic studies, women's studies, sociology, law, and history. This definition pushes back on the belief that race and racism are modern concepts and situates the analysis of race and racism within a historical and contemporary context (Horsford & D'Amico, 2015; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

These five themes of CRT provide a means for analyzing marginalized students' experiences within a dominant social structure and a framework for understanding how these experiences shape their attitudes and perceptions related to teaching as a profession.

In addition to being a tool for engaging in data analysis, CRT is also useful as a research methodology. In their analytical review of the CRT methodology, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) assert that traditional research epistemologies silence and distort people of Color's voices. They argue that a methodology grounded in CRT recognizes people of Color's experiences and knowledge by allowing them to compose counter stories. Counter storytelling "critically illuminates concepts, ideas, and experiences while using the elements of CRT" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 36). For these reasons, CRT was used to frame the study design and data analysis in this study.

### **Culturally Relevant Pedagogy**

Culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) is a construct that supports CRT and aids in the dismantling of dominant ideologies. CRP emerged from the literature on multicultural education and is defined as using the cultural knowledge and frames of reference of minoritized students to make learning more relevant and engaging (Evans & Leonard, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). For minoritized students, CRP can be validating, empowering, and emancipating (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b). By viewing all cultures as having capital (Yosso, 2005), CRP creates a space for students where ethnic forms of knowing are valued, respected, and share equal space with dominant white ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 1995a, 1995b).

Pierre Bourdieu, the renowned French psychologist who studied the dynamics of power in society, defined cultural capital as the social assets and knowledge of the White European middle and upper classes in a stratified society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). Based on this definition, the educational establishment assumed and continues to assume that people of Color lack cultural capital. Because of this lack of cultural capital, students of Color are viewed as

entering the school system at a disadvantage (Yosso, 2005). However, Yosso (2005), an adherent of CRT, argued that rather than viewing a student of color as deficient because their culture differs or does not match the dominant culture, a student of color's culture should be viewed as an asset in building new knowledge.

In her three-year study of African American teachers, Ladson-Billings (1995a, 1995b) sought to understand what methods made for "pedagogical excellence" in teachers of African American students. The study explored how the appropriate pedagogical framework can promote student success, even in situations where student "alienation and hostility characterize the school experience" (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, p.469). Her qualitative study identified the following traits in educators who prioritize culturally relevant pedagogies: they hold high academic expectations for every student, White and minoritized; they understand that the worldview they bring into the classroom may not align with that of their students; and they are aware of the sociopolitical racial climate and have a willingness to critique. These pedagogical steps are something that every teacher can systematically use to include the voices and cultures of students of Color in the process of learning.

### **CRP and Teacher Education: A Misunderstanding**

Sleeter (2012) asserted that CRP is misunderstood, arguing that the current understanding and conceptualization of CRP is simplistic and limited, focusing on cultural celebrations, trivialization, and substituting culture for political analysis of inequities. The tendency to separate CRP from academic achievement is common among educators. In 2017, Sleeter surveyed 1,275 teachers in two large urban school districts in the U.S. Southwest; 95% of the sample indicated that they were familiar with CRP practices. However, when asked to explain

why some of their students had low achievement, all responses selected in the survey were factors related to home and school policy. Overall, the teachers "attributed their students' academic difficulties to factors within the student and family rather than to pedagogical factors under educators' control" (Sleeter, 2017, p.3). Sleeter (2017) connected the lack of CRP implementation to three tenets of CRT: interest convergence challenges, the claim of neutrality and color blindness, and experiential knowledge. An analysis of these tenets and the intersection they have with CRP are explored in the following sections.

### ***Interest Convergence***

Milner (2008) argued that Whites advance the interests of people of Color only when the advancement of those interests also acts to further the interests of Whites. Milner (2008) described this as whiteness viewing interest convergence as a loss–gain binary: when students of Color gain equitable access to resources, power, and elevated social status, Whites lose power, privilege, social status, and the ability to reproduce these benefits. Teacher education programs maintain this loss–gain binary. An analysis of education course syllabi found that the syllabi in education classes stress the celebration of differences rather than system inequities (Gorski, 2009). In two qualitative studies with White preservice teachers, Warren and Hotchins (2015) found that assumptions made about the needs of students of Color led teachers to have "false empathy," which was comfortable for White teachers but did not challenge their beliefs about students of Color. Thus, reviewing interest convergence in education reveals that the content of teacher education programs tends to perpetuate the perspective that students of Color are at a deficit.

### ***Challenges to Claims of Neutrality and Color Blindness***

CRT challenges claims of neutrality, colorblindness, and meritocracy as practices that shape education formed by the dominant ideology of whiteness (Bonilla-Silva, 2005; Milner IV, 2008; Sleeter, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). Teacher education programs often fail to consider how race matters in education and how policies and practices continue to privilege whiteness in the classroom. Huber et al. (2006) evaluated California State Standards for racist and non-inclusive instructional content, revealing that the standards presented African Americans, Native Americans, Latinas/os, and Asians as marginal members of US history. By minimizing non-White cultures within the curriculum, whiteness is reinforced while the race and culture of students of Color are treated as inferior and insignificant (Huber et al., 2006). Dominant ideology attributes students' success to individualism and effort while attributing their failures to cultural practices, minimizing structural racial inequalities and inequities.

### ***Experiential Knowledge***

CRT values the stories of those who are not part of the dominant culture. Thus, Sleeter (2017) argued that if we want to understand racism in school, we must listen to students of Color's counter stories about teaching and teacher preparation programs. Marrun et al. (2019) surveyed 173 students of Color and completed follow-up focus interviews with 14 students. A key takeaway from the study was that students did not feel supported or affirmed in their racial, ethnic, linguistic, or cultural identity (Marrun et al., 2019). Overall, the students expressed feeling that teachers were ill-equipped or unwilling to confront race and racism in the classroom, that there was a lack of CRP, and that whiteness was persistent and pervasive. To define good

teaching and thus drive systemic change, experiential knowledge demands knowledge of whose voices are being heard and listened to.

**Conceptual Framework of CRP**

While Sleeter (2012, 2017) noted that current teacher programs fail to prepare teachers to use CRP in the classroom, Brown-Jeffy and Cooper (2011) provided a framework of teaching behaviors that builds upon Ladson-Billing's (1995a) findings on the traits prioritized by teachers who successfully used CRP. This framework groups teachers' behaviors into five categories: (a) identity and achievement, (b) equity and excellence, (c) developmental appropriateness, (d) teaching the whole child, and (e) student–teacher relationships (Figure 1). Each category includes specific behaviors and concepts that CRP-practicing teachers prioritize and develop in the classroom. This CRP framework is particularly beneficial because it is inclusive of CRT tenets and incorporates the significance of race and racism in the discussion of culture (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011).

The current study used this CRP framework to analyze students of color's experiences in the classroom.

**Table 1:** Framework of Teacher Behaviors Grounded in the Principles of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy

<b>Categories of CRP</b>	<b>Teacher Behaviors and Concepts Prioritized Within Category</b>
<b>Identity and Achievement</b>	Identity Development, Affirmations of Diversity, Cultural Heritage
<b>Equity and Excellence</b>	Equal Access, Diversity of Curriculum Content
<b>Developmental Appropriateness</b>	Cultural Variations in Motivation, Morale, Engagement, and Collaboration
<b>Teaching Whole Child</b>	Cultural Context, Empowering Students, Bridging Home, School, and Community.

(Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011)

### **Critical Whiteness Studies**

The study of critical whiteness is an interdisciplinary field that brings together the areas of legal studies, history, cultural studies, anthropology, and education (Doane, 2003). Doane (2003) asserted that what makes critical whiteness studies unique from other critical studies is the departure from a focus on race relations and the problems experienced by minoritized groups to the socially constructed nature of White identity and how it manifests in intergroup relations. Insights into whiteness as a social construct and a dominant ideology that permeates cultural understanding and institutional practices are provided by scholars such as Grosfoguel, Lipsitz, Omni and Winant, and McIntosh. Grosfoguel (2007) has written extensively about the development of white Western cultural knowledge as one that is privileged over other cultural knowledge, asserting that White European males were able to establish the dominance of Western thought by labeling all others as being soulless, inhuman, or of inferior quality. With these classifications, a sense of moral and cultural superiority was born that is manifested in modern Western society today, leading to whiteness being foundational in intergroup relations.

Lipsitz (2009) described whiteness as property, and as such, Whites feel compelled to protect and reproduce it. He argued that the investment in whiteness has seen multiple iterations with the same endpoint of preserving, protecting, and replicating it as the dominant ideology (Lipsitz, 1998). The modus operandi of White possessiveness is the establishment of public policies fueled by economics and deep cultural beliefs oppressing non-Whites while increasing

the social and political status of Whites. Throughout the 20th century, policies such as redlining, urban redevelopment, restrictive covenants, and highway development (Coates, 2024; Lipsitz, 2009; Sugrue, 2005) have created two Americas: one that is legitimized and supported by the government and privileges Whites, and another that promises "the American Dream" while the government, civic organizations, communities, schools, and citizens promote, intentionally and unintentionally, the disenfranchisement of minoritized groups.

In their seminal work *Racial Formation in the United States: Third Edition*, Omi and Winant (2014) explore the epistemological belief that White men are superior, and all other racial groups are inferior, establishing a foundation for the notion of racial projects. To Omi and Winant (2014), a racial project is:

A simultaneous interpretation, representation, or explanation for racial identities and meanings, and an effort to organize and distribute resources (economic, political, cultural) along particular racial lines. Racial projects connect what race means in a particular discursive and ideological practice and the ways in which both social structures and everyday experiences are racially organized based on that meaning. (p. 125)

Racial projects protect whiteness through informal and formal agreements based on the subordination of those who are not White (Grosfoguel, 2007; Mills, 1997; Quijano & Ennis, 2000). The contract always differentiates the privileging of Whites as a group with respect to non-Whites as a group. The hegemonic power established through the racial projects of the 17th and 18th centuries gives legitimacy to the racial projects of the 19th and 20th centuries. Within modern-day history, Jim Crow laws, redlining, urban redevelopment, the New Deal, restrictive covenants, and highway development (Sugrue, 2005; Coates, 2014; Lipsitz, 2009) have

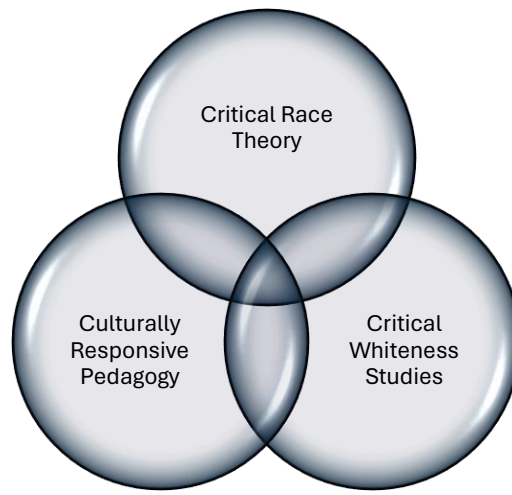


continued to enforce and protect the privileges of whiteness while oppressing non-Whites.

In her pioneering essay, *White privilege: Unpacking the invisible Knapsack*, Peggy McIntosh (1990) expounds on the multitude of ways that White privilege is taken for granted every day. This list is about acknowledging the privileges associated with being White and how our system is structured in a way that provides advantages to those who are White and disadvantages to individuals of Color. McIntosh asserted that invoking whiteness has a negative effect on minorities. Leonardo (2013) elaborated on McIntosh by noting that the upkeep of the privileged identity of whiteness becomes central to our "understanding of the daily and institutional maintenance of race" (p. 93).

Anderson (2003) identified three themes that emerge from whiteness studies: (a) whiteness as the invisible norm, (b) whiteness as a system of privilege, and (c) race as socially constructed. These themes can be used to analyze how the K–12 education system in America is a racialized system grounded in whiteness: the invisible norm of whiteness shapes policy decisions while White privilege informs the curriculum and race defines the student-teacher relationship. Leonardo (2013) warned that we must reframe our conversations around whiteness to begin with whiteness as an ideology or construct and not simply an identity. Continued ignorance prevents understanding of the pervasiveness of whiteness and the effects it has on our educational system.

## The Interconnectedness of Whiteness, Race, and Educational Pedagogy



**Figure 1** *The Relationship between Critical Whiteness Studies, CRT, and CRP in Understanding k-12 Educational Experiences for Students of Color*

Critical race theory (CRT), critical whiteness studies, and culturally relevant pedagogy (CRP) exist independently as theories and complement each other. CRT identifies how race and racism are woven into systems and policies. Critical whiteness studies examine whiteness as a social construct that benefits white people, and CRP puts theory into practice. Evidence shows that whiteness is pervasive: it is socially constructed, invisible, endemic, and shapes perceptions and cultural knowledge references within our schools (Andersen, 2003; Dixson & Anderson, 2018; Doane, 2003; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lipsitz, 2009; Milner IV, 2008). Critical whiteness studies emerged from CRT and identified whiteness as a lens through which we see relationships and make connections. They also determined how whiteness influences the ways in which the world acts around us. Critical whiteness studies help determine how the expression of whiteness becomes our frame of reference, reflecting how our knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors have been patterned (Jackson, 2011). CRT and critical whiteness studies reject a cultural deficit model of

thinking for students of Color and classify ways of knowing beyond whiteness. A key goal of CRT and critical whiteness studies is to identify, name, and transform the structural and cultural constraints that maintain societal inequities.

CRT and critical whiteness studies acknowledge the racialized power structure in society and in schools. There is an overlap that exists between CRP, CRT, and whiteness studies. CRP requires opposition to the status quo and is grounded in systemically elevating the voices of students of Color so that they are authorized and made equal to the voices representing whiteness (Ladson-Billings, 1995b). These goals are preceded by the knowledge gained through CRT and critical whiteness studies. CRT provides the lens to understand racism, and critical white studies unpack White privilege. Thus, CRT and critical whiteness studies contextualize CRP, enabling the means to examine how race has been used, institutionalized, and maintained in schools (Sleeter, 2017) and making them tools for isolating race and racism effects on education. Without the context provided by CRT and critical whiteness studies, CRP is misunderstood and misused, becoming an inconsequential practice focused on celebrating cultures rather than a tool for analyzing inequities in the education environment (Sleeter, 2012).

CRT, CRP, and critical whiteness studies are powerful tools for analyzing educational equity. In this study, the relationships between critical whiteness studies, CRT, and CRP informed the development and design of the research questions. These three frameworks were used to analyze coded data from interviews with students of Color, identify and interpret themes, provide clarity and context to those themes, and frame the study's findings.

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite extensive research on the recruitment and retention of teachers of Color, racial disparity between teachers and students of Color continues to exist. Currently, studies that focus on factors influencing whether students of Color choose to enter the teaching profession are based on a majoritarian White Eurocentric perspective. This study used the CRT methodology of counter narratives to highlight the voices of students of Color. Understanding how students of Color experience a racialized schooling environment and the role that experience plays in their perceptions of the teaching profession will enable school districts, educational administrators, and policy makers to create policies that will encourage students of Color to enter the teaching profession. Increasing the recruitment of teachers of Color begins with improving students' experiences in the classroom, which requires all teachers to be adequately trained in how to use CRP to deal with issues of pervasive White dominance that create an unfavorable educational experience for students of Color.

### **Research Methodology**

This qualitative study adopted a heuristic methodology pioneered by Moustakas (1990), which aligns with the phenomenological school of thought focusing on human experiences. Heuristic research integrates the researcher's personal experiences and perspectives into the inquiry process, facilitating both personal understanding and understanding of the studied phenomena. In heuristic research, participants are referred to as co-researchers, acknowledging their active involvement in the research through direct experience and knowledge of the research process. This collaborative approach values diverse perspectives and aims to co-create knowledge through shared dialogue and exploration of the topic of inquiry. For the primary researcher, the processes key to this approach include identifying with the focus of inquiry,

engaging in self-dialogue, and trusting personal intuition. This study employed the six phases of heuristic inquiry as outlined by Sultan (2019)—initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis—facilitating a holistic approach to investigation.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Data for this study were collected through semi-structured interviews with co-researchers. Reflexive thematic analysis, a systemic process of data coding, was used to identify themes within the data. Reflexive thematic analysis is a six-phase process that begins with familiarization with the dataset, followed by a rigorous and systematic initial coding of data and the exploration, development, and review of themes before refining themes for the presentation themes and interpretations. These phases, as well as the theoretical concepts of heuristic studies and thematic analysis, are elaborated on in Chapter 3.

### **Summary**

Despite increasing diversity in student populations, the teacher workforce in the United States remains predominantly White. This disparity is particularly pronounced in states such as Minnesota where a shortage of teachers of Color is exacerbating racial disparities in education. To address this issue, it is crucial to examine how students of Color perceive teaching as a career path. Utilizing a framework combining CRT, CRP, and critical whiteness studies, this research explored the perspectives of students of Color considering teaching careers, how their K–12 experiences shaped their motivations for pursuing teaching, and the barriers they perceived to be hindering other students of Color from entering the profession. Understanding these dynamics is necessary to foster greater diversity and inclusivity within the teaching profession, thereby addressing the educational needs of all students.

The next chapter presents a review, critique, and synthesis of the literature relevant to the living experiences of students of Color and how participating in a racialized school environment shapes their perceptions about teaching as a career choice. The studies reviewed address topics including teachers of Color in the United States pre- and post-*Brown v. Board of Education*, teachers of Color and the impact they have on all students, and factors affecting the choice of teaching as a career. In Chapter 3, the methods used in this study are described, and in Chapter 4, the heuristic data are presented in four different ways: through individual depictions, composite depictions, an exemplary depiction, and a creative synthesis. The final chapter summarizes the key findings and presents recommendations for increasing the number of students of Color considering teaching as a profession. The study concludes with a discussion of the practical implications of the findings and recommendations for future research.

## Chapter 2

### Literature Review

Because this study is in response to the racial disparity between students and teachers of Color, this review focuses on the literature seeking to understand leaks in the pipeline of teacher recruitment. To fully understand contemporary issues and their contexts, it is important to trace their historical beginnings. Thus, this chapter includes a historical review of the case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, to provide insight into how desegregation has had a lasting impact on teachers of Color within the United States. This is followed by an analysis of whiteness, including how whiteness manifests itself in our school system today. After the *Brown* decision, systemic policies and practices became embedded in the public school system, including those elevating the status of White students and lowering the status of students of Color. Whiteness continues to permeate education and exists as a muted substructure of how teachers and students engage in and experience school, creating an antagonistic environment for students of Color. This review also examines why the presence of teachers of Color in classrooms is essential to the deconstruction of whiteness and to creating environments that support students of Color in pursuing careers in education, highlighting the critical role teachers of Color play in changing the educational experiences of students. Finally, studies on the factors influencing the choice to become a teacher are examined. The themes from these studies are compared with the findings of studies on factors that influence students of Color not to choose to become teachers with the goal of understanding how students of Color's perceptions of the teaching profession develop.

## ***Brown v. Board of Education: The Historical Impact of Desegregation on Black Teachers***

In the article, “The Past as more than a Prologue: A Call for Historical Research”, Horsford and D'amico (2015) argue that to truly understand current educational issues, they must be examined within a broad context of time and space: without employing a historical lens to analyze present-day educational issues, it is difficult to see that they are the manifestation of a much larger, profound legacy of institutionalized racism (Horsford & D'Amico, 2015). The case of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) exemplifies this. Many researchers, and the broader public in general, see *Brown* as evidence that racial segregation within the school system no longer exists and is therefore an issue of the past (Amico et al., 2017; Ethridge, 1979; Fairclough, 2004; Fultz, 2004; Horsford & D'Amico, 2015). While this belief is valid in that the legalized social systems that segregate society no longer exist, the belief is also untrue because it does not take into account the unintended, damaging repercussions *Brown* has had on students and teachers of Color in contemporary times (Fairclough, 2004; Fultz, 2004; Haney, 1978; Hooker, 1971; Horsford & D'Amico, 2015; Hudson & Holmes, 1994).

### ***Two Systems: Separate but Not Equal***

Before 1954, a racially segregated, two-track education system existed in the Southern United States. In 1896, the *Plessey v. Ferguson* U.S. Supreme Court decision legalized segregation under the separate but equal doctrine, setting the stage for racial segregation throughout all aspects of life in the South (Thompson, 2019). Prior to *Brown*, laws in 17 states required racial segregation in public schools: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Missouri, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia. In the period between these two



rulings, schools in the Southern United States were segregated by race, and schools enrolling African American students were almost exclusively staffed by African American teachers (Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Thompson, 2019). This practice was unique to the South: in other regions of the US, schools enrolling predominately Black students were often staffed exclusively by White teachers. In 1954, the year of the supreme court decision regarding *Brown*, approximately 82,000 African American teachers were responsible for educating many of the country's African American students in public schools. Less than a decade later, 38,000 of those teachers and administrators had lost their positions (Ethridge, 1979; Hudson & Holmes, 1994). Thus, an unintended consequence of *Brown* was the depletion of African American teachers in the American public school system. The exact number of African American educators lost post-*Brown* is hard to ascertain because specific data were not accurately kept or prioritized, as displacement was often due to subtle dismissal tactics just short of outright termination (Ethridge, 1979; Fultz, 2004; Hooker, 1971).

### ***The Displacement of African American Teachers***

The *Brown* decision declared that racially segregated schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment's equal protection clause, declaring that separate was *not* equal. Segregated school districts were subsequently ordered to integrate (Ethridge, 1979; Thompson, 2019). However, one unintended message transmitted by the *Brown* decision was that the White education system was better than the Black education system. Schoolboard members and decision makers who were predominately White transformed the message that separate was not equal into the belief that White schools and White teachers were somehow superior, leading to the conclusion that Black teachers and schools were expendable in the name of desegregation (Hooker, 1971;

Hudson & Holmes, 1994). Because of these beliefs, the desegregation process—led by White school boards with White ideologies under the auspices of Southern White supremacy—displaced hundreds of Black teachers through both overt and covert policies and procedures:

"Displacement" became the phase which subsumed the many policies and practices of Southern school boards, school superintendents, and politicians which sought to undermine the employment and authority of African-American school staff: dismissals, demotions, forced resignations, "non-hiring," token promotions, reduced salaries, diminished responsibility, and coercion to teach subjects or grade levels other than those for which individuals were certified or had experience. (Fultz, 2004, p.14)

While the *Brown* decision was a seminal moment for the civil rights movement, as it mandated school integration, it did not account for faculty integration. A few years after the ban on segregation, the Race Relations Information Center (RRIC), in a survey of educators from 11 southern states, found discrepancies in the hiring of Black teachers (Hooker, 1971). While teaching positions became available in White schools, African American teachers were being hired less often than their White counterparts (Hooker, 1971). Thus, while the *Brown* decision led to student desegregation, the process damaged the legacy of Black representation in education.

Thus, studies in this strand of the literature demonstrate how the legal and political structure of desegregation was deeply rooted in White ideology and how desegregation had long-lasting repercussions for the Black teaching corps (Fultz, 2004; Hooker, 1971; Oakley et al., 2009; Thompson, 2019; Will, 2019).

### *Disruption of Institutional Knowledge*

Siddle Walker (2001), in her historiography of African American teaching in the segregated South from 1940–1960, asserted that desegregation displaced not only Black teachers but also institutional knowledge of good teaching practices for African American students. After reviewing archival and interview data from the RRIC and conducting interviews with Black teachers who had held roles in Georgia's public school system during the process of desegregation, Siddle Walker (2001) noted five pedagogical principles held by African American teachers in the mid-20th century:

- Teachers should develop relationships with the communities they serve.
- Teachers should commit to professional ideals. That is, teachers should be more committed to the education of children than to contract language or time schedules.
- Teachers should care about students. Not in the contemporary definition of caring, instead, holding high expectations for students' learning and for their moral and social development. A common description of African American teachers is that they had "a tenacity in working with students to be certain that everyone worked to his or her fullest"(p.770).
- Teachers should mold the curriculum to meet the needs of the students. Mid-century African American teachers went beyond the prescribed curriculum and supplemented with information about race and the African American experience in the United States.

- African American teachers also received community support at this time described as a "most often financial means of meeting classroom and school needs and a commitment to instilling respect for schooling at home" (p. 771).

These five principles of mid-century African American teaching make it clear that the advent of desegregation brought not only the loss of African American teachers but also the loss of an entire ethos of the teaching of African American children (Siddle Walker, 2001).

### ***Lasting Impact***

Many scholars have suggested that the persistence of the racial divide between teachers and students of Color can be traced to the aftermath of the *Brown* decision and the desegregation of schools (Hooker, 1971; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Oakley et al., 2009; Thompson, 2019; Will, 2019). Hooker (1971), in his pivotal study on the displacement of African American teachers in 11 Southern states after *Brown*, suggested that African Americans began to grow suspicious of the predominately White male infrastructure of education, and thus fewer African American students from Southern teaching schools decided to teach as a career (Hooker, 1971). These displacement measures had long-lasting ramifications: in the segregated South, Black students had almost all Black teachers, but as displacement removed more and more Black teachers from the profession, Black students' exposure to own-race teachers declined. It is logical to conclude that because of this decline in exposure to teachers and leaders of Color, students of Color had no role models in the teaching profession and, therefore, did not view teaching as the viable career choice it had once been. Without a doubt, desegregation changed the face of public school education in the United States, creating a legacy in primary and secondary education that poses both implicit and explicit barriers to reducing the racial disparity between teachers and students.

## **The Whiteness of Education**

Researchers on race commonly use the term "whiteness of education" when describing a post-*Brown* K-12 education system. Omi and Winant (2014), in their seminal work *Racial Formation in the United States*, argued that whiteness has been reproduced, perpetuated, and protected through the racial projects of the 19th and 20th centuries. Post-*Brown*, the education environment for students of Color transformed into a landscape where whiteness became the aspiration for every student regardless of race. Key scholars in the field of race, including Omi and Winant (2014), Mills (1997), Lipsitz (2009), Grosfoguel (2007), and CRT scholar Ladson-Billing (1998), have noted that race is a key component of social organization in the United States. Such scholars also point out that racism is endemic, institutional, and systemic as an organizing principle of domination (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Lipsitz, 2009; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 2014; Sleeter, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001) and that, as a critical organizing structure, White racial ideology is omnipresent in education (Miller & Endo, 2005; Milner & Howard, 2004). As a consequence of these truths, whiteness manifests itself both intentionally and unintentionally throughout the K–12 education system. By critically examining whiteness, we can reveal its role as a power structure in schools. Whiteness in schools benefits the dominant racial group by cloaking and protecting itself from discourse via the White hegemonic practices that safeguard and normalize White superiority at the expense of educational equity for students of Color.

### ***Defining Whiteness***

Race is a social construct, and what constitutes something as White or not-White is a product of this social context. Leonardo (2010) defined whiteness as having roots in the world's

historical stratification according to skin tone and posited that the White race asserted its superiority through slavery, segregation, and discrimination. DiAngelo (2006) furthered this definition by calling whiteness "a dimension of racism that serves White people over people of color" (p. 1983). In her qualitative study on the social construction of whiteness, Frankenberg (1993) called whiteness multidimensional: whiteness can be viewed as located in a place of structural advantage or race privilege, and, at the same time, whiteness is a vantage point that White people use to view themselves and others. Building on Frankenberg's definition of whiteness, DiAngelo (2006) identified whiteness as a set of practices that are unnamed and unmarked: "as socially produced dominance it must include dimensions that are less tangible and not necessarily seen, heard, or felt by those benefiting from them" (p. 1993). DiAngelo argued that this multi-faceted definition incorporating the dimensions of whiteness is important because it counters the dominant depiction of racism in education in which racism is perceived as something separate and constituted of disconnected incidents that some, but not all, may engage in. According to both Leonardo and Frankenberg, whiteness can be defined as an active force that shapes, defines, and privileges Whites through their individual and collective racialization.

### ***Protection of Whiteness through Niceness***

CRT scholars argue the permanence of race as a cultural concept. For whiteness, this means the continuous protection and reproduction of whiteness through systemic ways of thinking, such as "whiteness as property" and "niceness" (Castagno, 2019; Lipsitz, 2009). In his seminal work on race and whiteness, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, Lipsitz (2009) examined how race, initially constructed as a form of identity, evolved into a form of property. Race is a cultural construct defined through "conscious and deliberate actions [that] have

institutionalized group identity in the United States, not just through the dissemination of cultural stories, but also through systemic efforts from colonial times to the present to create economic advantages through the possessive investment for European Americans" (Lipsitz, 2009).

Whiteness, therefore, becomes property owned by Whites that provides advantages and must therefore be protected through conscious and unconscious actions.

Castagno (2008, 2019) identified "niceness" as one of the many ways that whiteness is protected in education settings. Niceness is about being pleasant and agreeable: nice people do not create controversy or discomfort (Castagno, 2008, 2019). Within this definition of niceness, oppressive actions and policies are not oppressive: they are simply hurtful (Castagno, 2019). Viewed through this frame of niceness, the system is not asserting institutional dominance or systemic oppression; individuals of the dominant culture who engage in racist behaviors are simply seen as making bad choices. Thus, niceness becomes a cloak protecting the pervasive whiteness that perpetuates educational inequities.

To explore the use of "niceness" to silence the discussion of race in schools, Castagno (2019) conducted a yearlong ethnographic study examining teachers' understanding of multicultural education. Through formal and informal interviews of teachers and administrators, attendance at school meetings, and classroom observations, she discovered that, in the name of niceness, staff intentionally did not discuss race. Instead, there was a racialized muteness to conversations about race. Staff avoided race conversations by using code words, such as "minority students," "refugee students," and "students on free and reduced lunch," or they simply did not address race and acted as though it did not exist. By silencing race through niceness,

whiteness in schools is further legitimized: White students are advantaged and students of Color are disadvantaged in the name of protecting whiteness.

### ***The Manifestation of Whiteness in Teacher Education Programs and Classrooms***

Sleeter (2017) comprehensively analyzed empirical studies about teacher preparation programs using three tenets of CRT: interest convergence, challenges to claims of both neutrality and colorblindness, and experiential knowledge. In her analysis, she found whiteness to be deeply embedded within teacher education, a hypothesis supported by data revealing the faculties of teacher education programs to be 78% White. With teacher education faculties lacking diversity, programs tend to reflect whiteness and to be Eurocentric and White-dominated (Sleeter, 2017). Sleeter concluded that White teachers "by and large are not well-equipped to offer racially/ethnically diverse students (now the majority) a strong and culturally responsive education" (2017, p. 9). These findings illustrate that whiteness continues to permeate classrooms, even though schools and teachers now teach a culturally and racially diverse student population.

DiAngelo (2006) conducted a qualitative study focusing on the production and operation of whiteness in classrooms by observing a diverse group of students in a college English class that met weekly for three hours over eight weeks. More than half of the students in the class were students of Color, with most being Asian international students. The goal of her study was to observe how Whites functioned in such a setting and "how privilege was produced and maintained in a common context: a White institution, with White faculty and a mixture of White and non-White students"(DiAngelo, 2006, p.1987). DiAngelo argued that her study was not of language learners but of the social structure of whiteness that is enacted and reproduced in



everyday social interactions (DiAngelo, 2006). Language learners who are also students of Color have a complex social identity that must be understood in reference to the larger dominant social structure of whiteness (DiAngelo, 2006).

The results of DiAngelo's study provide evidence that whiteness manifests itself unconsciously in classroom dynamics. White students were able to dominate course discussions because the learning approach was tailored to meet their needs, and their participation style was affirmed on all levels (DiAngelo, 2006). Thus, White students represented 50% of the class yet controlled 80% of the classroom discourse through their questions, comments, and interactions with the professor, while Asian students of Color contributed to 12% of the classroom discourse (DiAngelo, 2006). The White students and White professor did not have malevolent intent but failed to realize the dominance of voice created through the affirmation of whiteness. The voices and perspectives of the students of Color were silenced and relegated to a status deemed irrelevant. DiAngelo's findings demonstrate that whiteness permeates and dominates classroom practices, a situation which she implies could be mediated through the presence of teachers of Color and alternative ways of viewing and questioning the world.

### ***The Manifestation of Whiteness Through Colorblind Ideologies***

Another significant aspect of whiteness in education takes the form of colorblind ideologies. Bonilla-Silva (2005, 2020) described colorblind ideologies as the process of not seeing race. Before *Brown v. Board of Education*, Jim Crow laws allowed the overt practice of racism. These laws became illegal with the Civil Rights Act of 1954 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, and the open use of racial practices was no longer du jour. Subsequently, covert and unspoken practices, such as colorblindness, have taken their place. Colorblindness allows for the

protection and reproduction of whiteness through pretending that race does not exist by not naming those whom it punishes or rewards (Bonilla-Silva, 2005, 2020; Kohli et al., 2017; musModica, 2015; Mustian, 2016). Behaving in a colorblind way supports social inequities and creates a racialized environment under the banner of "niceness."

Several studies have demonstrated that colorblind ideologies legitimize racism in the classroom and construct hostile environments for students of Color (Castagno, 2008; Chapman, 2013; Cobb, 2017) In his qualitative study, Chapman (2013) interviewed 97 high school students of Color representing all racial categories and identified four ways in which colorblind ideologies play out in school environments.

The first of these is in the academic tracking of students of Color. Students of Color have greater representation in lower track classes, while "White students maintain the property of the curriculum by being over-represented in higher track classes" (Chapman, 2013, p. 620).

A second way is in how students of Color are given the role of racial authorities whenever race or racism is part of the formal curriculum. This designation creates a sense of the broader curriculum as White property because White students do not function as authorities when "White culture" is represented in class (Cobb, 2017; Modica, 2015; Mustian, 2016).

A third way is through double standards exemplified by students of Color speaking of their over-surveillance compared to White peers and receiving consequences that their White peers would not (Chapman, 2013; Cobb, 2017).

The fourth way in which colorblind ideologies play out in school environments is in race being seen as an unsafe conversation to engage in with Whites. Often, when students of Color ask White adults to address racism issues, they are ignored, which makes most students of Color

decide that it is best to remain silent and conform (Castagno, 2008; Chapman, 2013; Modica, 2015).

These themes identified across multiple studies provide strong evidence that colorblind ideologies legitimize whiteness and make school a racialized environment where Whites are advantaged and students of Color are disadvantaged. In this environment, students of Color may begin to feel marginalized and resentful of schooling and develop perceptions of school as an adverse environment with teachers aiding and abetting a racialized system.

### **Teachers of Color as Agents of Disruption to Whiteness**

Villegas and Irvine's (2010) extensive review of the literature on teacher diversity identified significant arguments for the need to diversify the teaching workforce. First, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse teachers serve as role models for all students by bringing more culturally proficient knowledge, skills, and experience to the job. The current ethnic and racial makeup of schools sends a message to all students about power and who can hold professional roles. When students fail to see ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse adults in professional roles in school while seeing an overrepresentation of these adults in non-professional positions (i.e., custodians, lunch servers, and bus drivers), they implicitly learn that White people are better suited for positions of power and authority (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). School is a place where values are shaped by experiences, and a teaching force comprised primarily of White women sends a strong message about who can be a teacher in American school systems. (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). As role models, teachers of Color can disrupt how all students view people of Color in authority positions and dispel myths of racial inferiority that continue to be perpetuated and reproduced by whiteness.

### ***Cultural Capital***

A second argument for diversifying the teacher workforce is that teachers of ethnic and linguistic diversity bring a deeper understanding of the cultural experiences of students of Color (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). By having experiences like those of the students, members of a diverse teacher workforce can act as cultural brokers and help create congruence between the traditionally White schooling experience and home life (Villegas & Irvine, 2010). This insight is particularly important because other studies have shown that when students experience such congruence, they have better academic outcomes (Egalite & Kisida, 2018), higher graduation rates (Gershenson et al., 2016), and lower suspension rates (Lindsay & Hart, 2017).

Teachers of Color are also more likely than White teachers to approach student learning from a cultural wealth mindset (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) defined a mindset of cultural wealth as a shift away from the traditional view of communities of Color as places of cultural poverty and disadvantage. Instead, it focuses on the skills, abilities, and insights that often go unrecognized and unacknowledged by mainstream White society.

In a review of the Education Longitudinal Study of 2002 (ELS:2002), a nationally representative study of high school sophomores, Cherng (2017) found that White teachers are more likely than teachers of Color to perceive students of Color as lacking or having limited academic abilities or school skills that could aid in their success. The study confirmed the presence of racial stereotyping of Black and Latino students, with teachers underestimating their abilities compared to their White peers and, in contrast, viewing Asian American students as a model minority stereotype, describing Asians as more talented than other minority groups. This

deficit perspective for Black and Latino students influences how they perceive school, their academic abilities, and their motivations for succeeding in an educational setting (Cherng, 2017).

Cherng and Halpin (2016) used quantitative methods to investigate marginalized students' perceptions of teachers of Color compared to White teachers. The study analyzed data from the Measures of Effective Teaching (MET) Longitudinal Database and found that students viewed teachers from an ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse background as more likely to approach them with a cultural capital mindset in which their strengths and abilities, which are often invisible in traditional White mainstream schooling, were not only visible but identified as assets (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). In addition to acting as cultural brokers for students of Color, minority teachers were generally perceived more favorably by minority students (Cherng & Halpin, 2016). They were viewed as being more sensitive to students' cultural needs and having a greater understanding of the cultural capital that students of Color bring to school (Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001).

These studies demonstrate how essential teachers of Color are in deconstructing and dismantling the system of whiteness present in the educational sphere, creating spaces where the voices of students of Color become elevated, heard, and celebrated for the benefit of all students.

### **Factors Influencing the Choice of Teaching as a Career**

As concern continues to grow regarding the worldwide shortage of teachers, several international studies have explored the motivations for choosing teaching as a career (Avgousti, 2017; Saban, 2003; Thomson et al., 2012; Watt & Richardson, 2012). Fray and Gore (2018) performed a structured overview of 70 international empirical studies published from 2007–2016 focusing on the factors that influence people to consider teaching careers. Study participants

were school students, preservice teachers, and student teachers before graduation. The studies were qualitative and quantitative and represented over 20,000 interview or survey participants. Heinz(2015) conducted a similar review of 41 international empirical studies exploring teachers' motivations to teach, focusing on studies of preservice teachers. The reviewed studies were qualitative and quantitative, representing over 10,000 interview and survey participants.

Both of these reviews found that individuals choose the teaching profession because of individual and societal factors, with intrinsic and altruistic motivations as key influencers (Fray & Gore, 2018; Heinz, 2015). Within these study reviews, altruistic reasons are defined as a desire to help, make a difference for students, and contribute to society (Fray & Gore, 2018; Heinz, 2015). Intrinsic motivations stem from a passion for teaching, interest in the subject matter, feeling accomplished in a specific subject, or believing oneself suited for the career (Fray & Gore, 2018; Heinz, 2015). In addition to intrinsic and altruistic motivations, the studies also identified extrinsic motivations influencing the choice to teach, noting that the impact of extrinsic motivation differs by country. For many Western countries, extrinsic motivators were identified as work hours, pay, and secure job conditions. However, these factors did not carry the same influence as intrinsic and altruistic motivations (Fray & Gore, 2018).

In recent years, a limitation of international studies in this area has been an overemphasis on quantitative analyses using the factors influencing teaching as a career choice scale (the FIT-Choice scale; Watt & Richardson, 2007). The FIT-Choice scale was developed to address gaps in the education literature about motivating factors for choosing the career of teaching. Prior to the development of the FIT-Choice scale, the systematic use of motivational theory had not been applied to the career choice of teaching. The FIT-Choice scale is grounded in the expectancy-

value theoretical framework, which regards individuals' confidence in performing well and the value they place on a subject as major determinates of motivation for academic choices (Watt & Richardson, 2007).

While the FIT-Choice scale has been invaluable for identifying factors that influence the choice to pursue a teaching career, it is grounded within the dominant ideology: it seeks only to understand the motivation to teach, not how the motivations are developed. The FIT-Choice scale highlights the importance of intrinsic value and ability beliefs, factors previously not identified in the education literature. However, the FIT-Choice scale does not provide insight into how individuals develop perceptions about teaching as a career, nor does it account for ideological whiteness being the foundation of the American schooling system and the effects of a racialized schooling environment on the motivation or demotivation of students of Color's decisions to pursue teaching as a career.

### ***Factors Influencing Why Students of Color Choose to Teach***

Several studies have focused on students of Color and why they choose to enter the teaching profession. Leech et al. (2019) used the FIT-Choice scale with 86 students of Color in an Introduction to Urban Education course to test whether the results would align with the previous factors identified in international studies. They found that what motivated students of Color to teach was similar to what motivated students in international studies, falling into the three key categories of intrinsic, altruistic, and extrinsic motivations. However, one important deviation was that students of Color were less intrinsically connected or committed to the career (Bianco et al., 2011; Leech et al., 2019). For students of Color, one of the most significant factors motivating them to teach was their respect for the proficiency that it takes to be a "good"

teacher (Leech et al., 2019). The findings of a phenomenological study of preservice teachers of Color completed by Miller and Endo (2005) a decade earlier aligned with those of the Leech et al. (2019) study but identified two additional factors. The first was that students identified teachers, regardless of race, who were caring and seemed to enjoy their job as influential in their choice to teach. The second was that a strong bond with a teacher was significant in students' positive perceptions about teaching. Through this bond with a teacher, students developed a greater respect for teachers and their occupation (Miller & Endo, 2005). As with the international studies, a limitation of these studies is the focus on student motivations with no reference to the impact a racialized environment has on a student's experience.

The most comprehensive study on why students of Color choose to go into teaching was completed by Gordon (1994), who interviewed over 200 teachers of Color in urban school districts across the United States. Her research focused not on understanding the factors that motivate students of Color to choose to teach but on understanding why students of Color do not choose teaching as a career. She was able to identify the following seven themes outlining why teachers of Color believed students of Color were not entering the profession: a) a lack of respect for the job, b) negative school experiences, c) a lack of academic support, d) a lack of support in college, e) discrimination based on accent and racism, f) a lack of encouragement, and g) racelessness. Gordon's (1994) study is particularly significant because it contributed to our understanding of how we can begin to bring students of Color into the teaching profession by acknowledging that recruitment starts with students' experiences in school.

Like Gordon (1994), Marrun et al. (2019) wanted to explore why students of Color did not choose teaching as a career. In their qualitative study of college students from a minority-



serving institution, Marrun et al. (2019) used focus groups to interview students, asking them open-ended questions about their schooling experiences and perceptions of the teaching profession. Similar to Gordan (2005), Marrun et al. (2019) did not explore the factors leading students of Color to choose to teach but rather why they and/or other students were not pursuing teaching as a career. The study uncovered three main themes:

(1) underpaid and undervalued by society, which highlights Students of Colors' understanding of, and observations about, teachers being underpaid and undervalued by their peers and society; (2) underrepresentation and negative representations of Teachers of Color in media and popular culture; and (3) the cumulative effect of racial microaggressions experienced by Students of Color in their primary and secondary school classrooms and how those experiences discourage them from pursuing teaching as a career. (p. 845)

Marrun et al.(2019)and Gordon's (1994) findings demonstrate that the perceptions students of Color develop regarding teaching are based on the attitudes and beliefs surrounding them. These attitudes, manifested as whiteness, shape the schooling experience of students of Color. These studies assert that the current view of why students of Color are not entering teaching is from a majoritarian perspective of the world grounded in whitenesses. To understand why students of Color are not going into teaching, we need to listen to them as they describe their schooling experiences and how they impact perceptions about teaching as a career.

## **Conclusion**

The need to explore the educational pipeline for students of Color has never been more urgent, as research has proven that a diversified workforce positively impacts all students

(Cherng, 2017; Cherng & Halpin, 2016; Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Gershenson et al., 2016; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). A limitation of past studies is a focus on the factors that influence a student's choice of a teaching career. One of the factors not explored in depth is the effects of being educated in a racialized environment and how this may play a role in students' perceptions of the career of teaching. Gordon's (1994) qualitative study identified negative experiences in school as one reason students of Color were not entering the field. The findings from Miller and Endo's (2005) qualitative study of preservice teachers corroborated Gordon's (1994), with the addition of having had a caring teacher, regardless of race, who seemed to enjoy their job and having a bonding experience with such a teacher increases a student's respect for the teaching profession. The educational environment created for students plays an essential role in the recruitment of teachers of Color. More in-depth knowledge of how students of Color experience school and how this experience shapes their perceptions about teaching allows for the better preparation of all teachers, creating an open educational environment that supports individuals of Color in developing a commitment to teaching.

In summary, the teacher–student parity gap has deep roots in public policy and cultural practices dating back to *Brown v. Board of Education*. Despite being an attempt to remedy educational discrepancies, the *Brown* decision created and exacerbated employment disparities by not integrating workforces at the same time as integrating student populations, while White ideologies interpreted the *Brown* decision in a fashion that stigmatized Black educators and Black schools as being inferior to White educators and White schools. Teachers of Color were pushed out of the profession, and whiteness ideologies became the dominant paradigm within the educational system. The subsequent racialized school system created an environment for students

of Color that feels hostile and unsupportive. While much research has examined the factors influencing the decision to undertake a career in teaching, there remains a scarcity of information about how the racialized educational environment that students of Color experience affects their perceptions of teaching as a career.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methodology**

This chapter introduces the research methodology used for this qualitative heuristic study on the lived experiences of students of Color in racialized school environments and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of teaching as a career. The applicability of heuristic inquiry and a critical constructivist approach to this subject are also discussed in this chapter. An overview of the critical issue, ethical considerations, theoretical frameworks used for locating and analyzing literature, co-researcher selection, data collection, and analysis is also provided.

#### **Critical Issue**

Schools in Minnesota and nationwide face a persistent challenge: a lack of diversity among teachers compared to the increasingly diverse student body. While classrooms are becoming more diverse, the teaching profession remains largely White, particularly White women (Aud et al., 2010; Ingersoll et al., 2018b; Ingersoll & May, 1987b; Madkins, 2011; Taie & Goldring, 2018; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). In the state of Minnesota, 6% of all licensed teachers are individuals of color, and 37% of students are individuals of Color (Minnesota Professional Educator Licensing and Standards Board, 2023). The low number of teachers of Color—especially male teachers of Color—perpetuates students' belief that teaching is a profession exclusively for White women.

Research consistently shows a link between the lack of teachers of Color and unequal academic outcomes for students (Amico et al., 2017; Chen, 2019; Cherng, 2017; Farinde et al., 2015; Gershenson et al., 2016; Leech et al., 2019; Villegas & Irvine, 2010). Black and Hispanic students, for example, are more likely to be suspended and score lower on standardized tests

compared to White students. Studies have also indicated that students of Color who have a racial, ethnic, or cultural match with their teacher have lower suspension rates (Lindsay & Hart, 2017) and better academic outcomes (Egalite & Kisida, 2018) than those who do not. In addition, studies have found that teachers of ethnic, cultural, and linguistic diversity bring greater cultural competence to the classroom, and having teachers of Color can change the way students perceive people of Color in positions of authority within the K–12 educational system (Egalite & Kisida, 2018; Figlio, 2020; Gershenson et al., 2016; Lindsay & Hart, 2017; Rasheed et al., 2020). Thus, the presence of teachers of Color in public schools may dispel myths of racial inferiority and change the perceptions of students of Color about pursuing a career in education.

To better understand the cause of the underrepresentation of teachers of Color in the K–12 educational setting, research has focused on their recruitment and retainment. In the report *Diversifying the Teaching Profession: How to Recruit and Retain Teachers of Color* (Carver-Thomas, 2017), several barriers to teacher recruitment and retention are identified, including a lack of support for new teachers, inadequate training for teachers who enter through alternative routes and are teaching during training, and teaching exams that disproportionately exclude teachers of Color despite the lack of evidence that performance on such tests predicts teacher effectiveness. However, a focus on recruiting and retaining teachers of Color takes for granted the presence of a pool of undergraduate students of Color who wish to pursue a career in teaching.

Recent studies, such as those conducted by Gordan (2000) and Leech et al. (2019), sought to understand what motivates students of Color to choose or not choose a career in teaching. These two studies begin to address a significant gap in the literature by shifting the

focus of research from college graduates to younger students of Color and the development of their perceptions about teaching as a career. Students of Color may develop negative perceptions of teaching as a result of their disenfranchisement and negative experiences in their formative years of schooling. Studying the experiences and beliefs that shape the perceptions students of Color have about teaching as a career may provide information that can be used to change these perceptions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

An interdisciplinary approach incorporating CRT, CRP, and critical whiteness studies was used to situate the research questions, guide the literature review, and illuminate themes from co-researchers' interviews about their living experiences within a racialized schooling system.

CRT's core premise is that racial bias is a fundamental component of social organization (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Sleeter, 2017; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). CRT recognizes that racial bias and racism are pervasive in American society and acknowledges the lived experiences of people of Color and efforts to end racial oppression (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Solorzano & Yosso, 2001). In education, CRT challenges deficit notions of students of Color while highlighting the voices of students of Color, centering on their experiential knowledge to contest dominant ideologies.

Within education, CRP is a construct used to aid in dismantling dominant ideologies and in uplifting the voices of students of Color. CRP refers to a set of classroom practices that create equal space for all students. In CRP classrooms, all ways of knowing are valued, respected, and share equal space with dominant White ideologies (Ladson-Billings, 1995b, 1995a). CRP

respects students' experiential knowledge and situates learning within the lives of minoritized students.

Critical whiteness studies provide insights into how whiteness emerged as a social construct and dominant ideology. In an examination of critical whiteness studies (Andersen, 2003), three themes emerged: (a) whiteness as the invisible norm, (b) whiteness as a system of privilege, and (c) race as a social construct. These three themes can be used to examine the ways in which the K–12 education system in the United States is racialized. If we remain ignorant of whiteness as an identity, we cannot comprehend the pervasiveness of whiteness and the effects it has on students' living experiences within the K–12 education system.

### **Purpose**

This study aimed to explore how participating in a racialized schooling environment shapes the perceptions students of Color have of teaching as a career. The following exploratory questions guided this study:

1. How do students of Color perceive and describe their K–12 academic experiences?
2. Why do students of Color want to become teachers? What factors from their K–12 education empower this decision?
3. What do students of Color perceive as barriers and challenges to other students of Color pursuing a career in education?

### **Study Design**

The philosophical assumption that guides this research is a critical constructive paradigm. Whereas positivism asserts one singular reality, critical constructivism posits that reality is multifaceted and perceived from various perspectives (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Quantitative

research guided by the philosophical assumptions of positivism is based on a belief in a single, correct reality that is observable, stable, and measurable. In quantitative analysis, the purpose of a study is to predict and generalize objective truths (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Qualitative research is rooted in the philosophical underpinnings of constructivism, which begins with the belief that individuals socially construct (creating meaning through shared beliefs and practices within society) reality as they seek to understand the world in which they live and work. Research grounded in a constructivist paradigm begins with the assumption that multiple perceptions of a single event exist: researchers do not find knowledge but rather co-construct it with research participants as they learn about their lived experiences and beliefs (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

For this study, I chose to pair the epistemological perspectives of constructivism with critical theory because while I agree with constructivism's fundamental tenet that the world is an interpretation of individuals' experiences, I also believe that knowledge and phenomena are socially constructed (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Critical theory acknowledges multiple realities resulting from political, social, and cultural contexts wherein one reality is privileged (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The critical theory perspective is concerned with the empowerment of human beings to transcend the racial, socio-economic, and gender limitations imposed on them by society (Cresswell & Poth, 2018). Ultimately, this research project aimed to understand how students of Color describe their experience of being educated in a racialized school system and how these experiences shaped their perceptions of teaching as a career. As a critical constructivist, I approached this study seeking to understand how social–



historic dynamics have influenced and shaped the perceptions of students of Color of education as a career.

### **Heuristic Methodology**

This critical constructivist qualitative study used a heuristic methodology. Moustakas (1990), the originator of heuristic research, characterized it as a qualitative, social constructivist, and phenomenologically aligned method of inquiry. The phenomenological school of philosophy, associated with Edmond Husserl, focuses on the human experience and how it is reflected in consciousness (Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016). Phenomenology is the study of how people conceptualize their experiences, and the task of the researcher is to depict the essence of these experiences (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Mirriam & Tisdell, 2016; Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019).

The phenomenologically aligned heuristic methodology was introduced as an organized and systematic form of investigating human experience in a research publication by Moustakas in 1961. In heuristic research, the researcher does not bracket themselves—that is, they set aside their own experiences as an investigator to assume a fresh perspective on the phenomenon being examined. Thus, the researcher is an integral part of the search for answers. The focus of inquiry in a heuristic study is distinct in that it must be based on autobiographical experience (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019); the question being asked should be a personal source of challenge in the researcher's quest to understand themselves and the world around them (Moustakas, 1990).

The following heuristic inquiry processes are key to the researcher gaining a deep understanding of the phenomenon being explored: identifying with the focus of inquiry,

engaging in self-dialogue, acknowledging and identifying the tacit knowing the researcher brings to the topic, and trusting the researcher's intuition as a guide to understanding the implicit∞explicit<sup>2</sup> experience. Researchers engaging in heuristic research also use indwelling—the process of directing one's gaze inward—to tap into the tacit (implied without being stated), intuitive (what one feels to be true without conscious reasoning), and explicit dimensions of an experience. Heuristic inquiry is an empirical qualitative methodology focused on unraveling the essential nature of human experience. The heuristic researcher enters the research journey with both a hypothesis that steers the research and a desire for an open search for the essence or meaning of the phenomenon (Sultan, 2019). Using heuristic inquiry processes, a researcher can comprehend a topic more deeply by entering the question, becoming one with the question, and living with the question (Moustakas, 1990; Sultan 2019).

Sultan's (2019) work on understanding heuristic inquiry formed the foundation for this study, providing counsel on how heuristic inquiry processes help facilitate the implementation of six phases of work—initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis—that are unique to heuristic inquiry and highlight the importance of a holistic approach to investigation. A heuristic methodology is process-oriented and facilitates dialogical exchanges between preexisting knowledge and new information from research partners' connections. Sultan (2019) also outlined the tenets of data collection, organization, and analysis, beginning with theme illumination and identification and leading to theme explication. Together, the procedural steps of heuristic inquiry aided me in understanding how students of Color describe their experiences within a racialized schooling system and how these experiences have

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<sup>2</sup> The infinity symbol is used here to represent a nondual, interdependent fluid relationship (Sultan, 2019).

shaped their perceptions of teaching. Table 2 summarizes the phases of the heuristic process and the research activities completed in each phase.

**Table 2** *Heuristic Research Phases (Sultan, 2019) and the Research Activities Conducted in Each Phase*

<b>Phases</b>	<b>Research Activities</b>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Initial engagement:</b> The beginning stages of intense interest in a specific phenomenon</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identification of research questions</li> <li>• General reading and literature review</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Immersion:</b> Becoming intimately acquainted with the question of inquiry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gathering data through interviews</li> <li>• Familiarization with data through reading and rereading transcripts</li> <li>• Initial coding</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Incubation:</b> A period for new understanding by withdrawal from the initial question to allow new knowledge to develop</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Creation of individual depictions for all co-researchers</li> <li>• Generation of initial themes</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Illumination:</b> New knowledge is developed, often altering perceptions of the initial inquiry</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Review and defining of themes</li> <li>• Generating theme names</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Explication:</b> Exploration of core themes and preparation for creative synthesis</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of composite depictions</li> <li>• Evaluation of themes and return to data for fit</li> <li>• Development of an exemplary composite</li> </ul>
<p style="text-align: center;"><b>Synthesis:</b> Use of findings to generate an interpretation representing the essence of the inquiry question</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Development of a critical synthesis and an interpretive amalgamation of themes</li> </ul>

While I have summarized the heuristic process as linear, I experienced the phases as cyclical and overlapping, without clear endings or starting points; I often found myself mentally straddling two phases. For example, I experienced multiple moments of moving between incubation and illumination due to the need to step away from the data to make room for enlightenment. As Sulton (2019) noted, heuristic inquiry should not be limited by the constructs of time because it is the process of an integrated tapestry of finding connections between internal∞external and subjective∞objective realms of exploration.

### **Researcher**

As a Black Latina educator, I have a deep personal interest in the lack of individuals of Color in teaching positions. As a teacher for almost 25 years, I have always been one of a few educators of Color in the schools I have worked in. Because of my personal experiences in the K–12 system, I can understand why other people of Color may not be interested in entering the profession. Among my earliest memories of education is a story that my mother told me. At the time, my mother, a scientist, would drop my brothers and I off at a home daycare before going to work. When she tried to register my brother at the elementary school near the daycare provider, she was told that my brother could not attend because the school had reached its quota for Black students. Subsequently, my family was welcomed with open arms by the Ascension Church, a local church in North Minneapolis. It is for this reason that we attended the Ascension Church and why my brothers and I attended the Ascension Elementary School. My academic career was profoundly influenced by this story, as I began my education knowing that the system was racialized and judged me based on my skin color and that I would have or be denied access to opportunities based on my race.

I had another defining educational experience in high school. Based on our positive experiences at the Ascension school, my parents chose to send us to a Catholic high school because they thought that the public schools would fail to treat us well. I was one of the few brown students in my school. In my senior year, each student and their family was required to meet with a counselor to discuss the student's future plans. At this meeting, my mother was told not to send me to a four-year college. Both my parents are college-educated, and both my brothers had graduated from college after attending a different Catholic high school. It is a testament to my mother that she stopped the conversation and told the counselor that I would apply wherever I wanted to apply, and, if I got in, I would go wherever I wanted to go. Having excellent ACT scores, decent grades, and a genuine desire to attend a four-year college, there was no reason for the counselor to make such a statement.

My K–12 experience was largely racialized, and at times I wonder why I even went into teaching given that the education system itself was working to dissuade me from considering the career. Nonetheless, I went into education despite my experiences. It is important to note that I did not go into education for altruistic reasons but because I was angry at the system and wanted to blow it up from the inside.

### **Co-researchers**

In heuristic studies, the term *participant* is replaced with the term *co-researchers*, representing a shift in the perception of participation. The heuristic methodology does not view participants as passive subjects but as active co-researchers. As Sultan (2019) stated, study participants "are partners in a contextually embedded exploratory process of inquiry marked by

genuineness and intersubjectivity, hence in interest of how we contextualize our shared journey, the term participants is replaced with co-researchers" (p. xv).

The inclusion criteria for the co-researchers in this study were as follows: (a) identify as a student of Color, (b) have declared or will declare education as a major, (c) have an awareness of the racial/ethnic and cultural incongruence between students and teachers, (d) are willing and able to describe their personal educational experiences with whiteness, and (e) are willing to have their interview recorded and transcribed.

In heuristic studies, the number of co-researchers is determined by the study; raw data from each co-researcher is analyzed before data collection from another co-researcher begins. Sultan (2019) suggested that borrowing another qualitative methodology to determine sample size is logical because of the nature of collecting and analyzing heuristic data. Sultan (2019) asserted that borrowing the term *saturation*—a concept describing the point at which no new insights come from the data—from grounded theory makes sense for determining sample size. Thus, the point of saturation was used to determine the sample size in this study.

The first three interviews I conducted produced similar themes, and after the fifth interview, there was a clear consensus among the responses given by co-researchers, with all the answers to one of the questions being unique only in terms of the wording used. After the fifth interview, I determined that I had reached saturation and could begin the process of data analysis.

## **Setting**

Co-researchers were recruited from students who had taken or were enrolled in the Introduction to Urban Education and Reflective Teaching course and/or the Multicultural

Education course offered at a high school located in a suburb of the Twin Cities of Minnesota. The two courses are part of a Grow Your Own initiative in the state of Minnesota. The initiative's primary focus is on increasing the number of teachers of Color through two different pathways. The first is through providing support to educational assistants who are working in districts to pursue their teaching degree, and the latter is increasing educational career pathway options within high schools for students of Color. At the time of the interview, three of the co-researchers were taking the class, which was the total number of students of Color enrolled in the class in the 2023-24 school year; two had previously taken that course and have since graduated and are in their first year of college. The district serves over 8,000 students and has a minority enrollment of 70%. Previous year's enrollment in the education pathway courses saw racial demographics in the course that more closely matched the school, with forty to fifty percent of students of Color. The 2023-24 school year saw a dip in representation and the school is rethinking recruitment efforts for the course moving into the 2024-24 school year.

### **Data Collection Methods**

Data collection in heuristic research is about immersing oneself in the topic through dialogue with oneself and with others who share an interest in the subject (Sultan, 2019). The current study used an in-depth phenomenological interview protocol. In his book *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*, Seidman (2019) defined in-depth phenomenologically based interviewing as a process that combines life-history interviewing and focused in-depth interviewing informed by phenomenological assumptions. In interviews conducted using in-depth phenomenology, the questions are primarily open-ended. Seidman (2019) also identified the following three key parts of in-depth

phenomenologically based interviewing: a focus on life histories, the gathering of detailed life experiences, and a reflection on the meaning of lived experiences. Seidman (2019) suggested a procedure of three separate interviews, each focusing on a key area, noting that modifications to the three separate interviews might be needed and suggesting alternative processes utilizing one or two interviews instead.

This study used a modified version of Seidman's (2019) protocol. Co-researchers were interviewed once, and interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes. Each interview addressed the three key parts of in-depth phenomenological interviewing identified by Seidman (2019). Each interview was conducted in person, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Per the heuristic data collection process, each interview was read and reread to identify significant statements and emerging themes before the next co-researcher was interviewed. After each interview, researcher memos were created as a form of reflective and reflexive processing of the interview and the lived experience being explored (Sultan, 2019).

### **Data Analysis**

Heuristic studies are intuitive; therefore, data analysis demands a holistic approach. Heuristic data analysis emphasizes what emerges within the dialogue rather than how frequently it occurs (Sultan, 2019). In alignment with the six phases of heuristic inquiry methodology, reflexive thematic analysis—a systemic process of data coding—was used to identify themes across the co-researcher interviews. Braun and Clarke (2022) described reflexivity as critically examining our actions, motivations, and their effects on our research. This concept is central to reflexive thematic analysis within qualitative research, highlighting the researcher's active role in interpreting data and the influence of their own biases on analysis. Thus, reflexivity emphasizes



the importance of researchers being aware of their assumptions and how they can impact the analysis process. The six-phase process of reflexive thematic analysis is elaborated on in Table 3.

**Table 3** *Six Phases of Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022)*

Phase	Description
Data Familiarization	Transcribing the data Reading and rereading data
Generate Initial Codes	Initial coding of the data Collating data and codes
Search for Themes	Generating initial themes Connecting themes to coded extracts
Review Potential Themes	Checking themes for validity Creation of a thematic map
Define and Name the Themes	Refinement of themes Creating theme definitions
Produce a Report	Producing a report and presenting interpretations of themes

### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

Four representation methods—individual depictions, composite depictions, exemplary portraits, and creative synthesis—are used in heuristic studies to explicate themes (Sultan, 2019). The heuristic presentation of data begins with an individual depiction that highlights the unique experiences of each co-researcher. As Sultan (2019) stated, the depiction of each co-researcher's unique experiences "serves to circumvent the potential loss of the individual's singular, unique experience within the unified gestalt/whole" (p. 151). Upon completion of the individual depictions, a group/composite depiction is presented. This depiction systematically analyzes the data as a whole to illuminate the principal themes that emerge from the collective experiences of the co-researchers. Subsequently, the data are developed through an exemplary depiction of an individual co-researcher(s) using additional autobiographical or demographic information. This thumbnail depiction reflects the co-researchers' experiences, highlighting the individuality and

universality of the phenomenon. Finally, the data are presented through a creative synthesis wherein individual and universal themes are woven together to provide a fresh interpretation of the data and present the phenomena in a new light.

### **Trustworthiness**

The assurance of trustworthiness of the results of this study was based on the framework of rigor and trustworthiness for qualitative studies developed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) in which the trustworthiness of study results is established by focusing on credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. One way in which credibility and transferability were ensured in the current study was by allowing co-researchers to review the transcript of their interview. This collaboration enhanced authenticity and ensured the accuracy of the results, including theme interpretation and meaning-making. Thick descriptions and clear communication of the research process and findings strengthened the transparency of the study and enriched its credibility, transferability, and confirmability. Likewise, data triangulation increased confirmability, transferability, credibility, and dependability throughout this study. Trustworthiness was also supported using multiple sources of information from the literature review, employing an interdisciplinary approach incorporating multiple social and educational theories to develop a theoretical framework, and designing the study using two epistemological perspectives.

### **Limitations**

The limitations of this study stem from the chosen methodology. When I first began this project, committee members encouraged me to include my own story because I had experience with the phenomenon I was trying to understand. As I considered the study's design, I kept

running into roadblocks, as each possible methodology would have required bracketing my experience out of the research. Thus, one of the biggest challenges was deciding upon a methodology that would allow me to use my experience with the topic. I knew I wanted to use phenomenology and, upon significant examination of the literature, realized that interpretations existed within the methodology, and heuristics was one such interpretation.

In a heuristic study, the researcher must have solid knowledge of the epistemological roots of the methodology. Heuristics is unique because it is positioned between an autobiographical study and a phenomenological study. Once I decided upon the heuristic methodology, I engaged in a lengthy learning process about its guiding philosophy (Cresswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1990; Sultan, 2019). Exploring the philosophical tenets of heuristics allowed me to incorporate my own story into the research as a valuable part of the process.

Another limitation of the heuristic methodology is its emphasis on the subjective experience of a phenomenon. Heuristic methodologies rely heavily on the researcher's interpretation to determine the meaning and essence of a phenomenon, and thus, the researcher's direct experience with the phenomenon they study may affect their interpretations and theories. Likewise, the researcher's bias can affect which co-researchers are selected, in that a researcher may choose only those who confirm their own experiences of a phenomenon. To control for this potential limitation, I developed the unbiased co-researcher selection process described previously.

A third potential limitation of the heuristic methodology is that the researcher must have direct experience with the topic they are exploring. Since the co-researchers and I had similar experiences of attending school in a racialized environment as students of Color, there was the

potential for informality within the interviews and loss of control over the direction of the conversation. To counter this, I employed an interview protocol and followed a semi-structured script, remaining mindful to avoid going off-topic and sharing more of my own story than necessary to build rapport with the co-researcher. I maintained a reflexive journal throughout the process, enabling me to continually check in on my own biases and how they might reveal themselves.

### **Summary**

This chapter provides a detailed discussion of the research design process for this study of inquiry, including the study design and methodology, an introduction to my living experience as a student of Color, the selection of co-researchers, data collection, and how the data were analyzed. A discussion of the study's trustworthiness and limitations is also included.

The following chapter describes the results of the data analysis. In keeping with the principles of heuristic inquiry, the results are presented in the form of individual depictions, composite depictions, exemplar depictions, and creative synthesis. Subsequently, Chapter 5 presents a summary and discussion of the key findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future study.

## Chapter 4

### Presentation of the Data

The purpose of this study was to explore how the perceptions of students of Color about teaching as a career are shaped by participating in a racialized schooling environment. The exploratory questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do persons of Color perceive and describe their K–12 academic experiences?
2. Why do students of Color want to become teachers? What factors from their K–12 education empower this decision?
3. What do students of Color perceive as barriers and challenges to other students of Color pursuing a career in education?

Data collection consisted of in-person interviews with each co-researcher during which demographic and historical K–12 information was collected. During these interviews, I shared information about my current profession and why I was interested in learning more about their perspectives while developing rapport. During the first part of each meeting, I took notes by hand while co-researchers answered demographic questions and questions on how they characterize the racial make-up of teachers and students in their K-12 schooling. Co-researchers later reviewed these notes for accuracy. After this introductory conversation, we transitioned to a semi-structured interview that was recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

This chapter begins with the demographics of each co-researcher to provide context for their experiences. In heuristics, each co-researcher's experience is presented as an individual depiction, followed by the identification of common themes presented as a group depiction. Heuristic research also calls for developing an exemplary portrait in which one co-researcher is

selected to expand on details about their experiences that were not presented in the individual or composite depictions. I conclude the chapter with a creative synthesis. Within the heuristic framework, the researcher transforms the data into a creative illumination of the essence of the phenomenon being explored.

### **The Co-researchers**

Each co-researcher was chosen because they met the following criteria: (a) identify as a student of Color, (b) were participating or had participated in the education pathway courses at the recruitment site, (c) have an awareness of the racial/ethnic and cultural incongruence between students and teachers, (d) were willing and able to describe their personal educational experiences with whiteness, and (e) were willing to have their interview recorded and transcribed. Basic demographic information about each co-researcher is summarized in Table 3.

In the heuristic process, the presentation of data involves four methods of representation: individual depictions, composite depictions, exemplary depictions, and creative synthesis. This variety of data adds depth and rigor to the study. Following the heuristic inquiry process, I began with individual depictions of each co-researcher that highlight the individual's unique experience. As Sultan (2019) noted, the individual presentation of each co-researcher "serves to circumvent the potential loss of the individual's singular, unique experience within the unified gestalt/whole" (p. 151).

**Table 4** *Co-Researchers' Demographic Data*

<b>Name<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>J</b>	<b>Gerardo</b>	<b>Margo</b>	<b>Nimco</b>	<b>Gabby</b>
<b>Age</b>	18	18	17	18	18
<b>Ethnicity</b>	African American	Latino	Khmer	Somali	African American
<b>Grade</b>	Senior HS	Senior HS	Senior HS	Freshmen college	Freshmen college
<b>Preferred pronouns</b>	He/Him	He/Him	She/Her	She/Her	She/Her

I organize the individual written descriptions around two of the three guiding questions: Why do they want to become a teacher? How do they describe their K–12 education experience? All five co-researchers spoke of their experiences with race in school and the racialized schooling experiences they have lived. In the individual depictions, I focus on how the co-researchers defined and described their living experiences within a racialized K–12 educational system.

### **Meet Gabby**

Gabby is an 18-year-old college freshman. She participated in education pathway classes in high school and had declared education as her college major. When asked why she wanted to go into teaching, she quickly replied that she was motivated by both a love for children and by the lack of teachers of Color in the public school system:

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms chosen by the co-researchers.

So, I am a college student right now, and the reason why I wanted to go, potentially go into teaching, is because I do love children, but also just growing up, I never had a teacher of Color.

She elaborated on the experience of completing practicum hours as part of the education course and described the reaction a student had to her in class:

I had [dread] locs [in my hair] in the classroom, and one of the students said, "Oh, she looks like me. She has the same hair texture as me." So, I think that also told me, yeah, this is something that I really want to do because I want kids to have someone that looks like them. So that is why I want to go into teaching.

### ***Living Experiences and Reflections on a K–12 Racialized Experience***

When Gabby talks about her school experiences, she explains that, in elementary school, she was one of the few Black children, which had a profound effect on her:

I know I did go through a phase of, like, oh, I am proud to be Black, but then this phase of, like, sometimes I did wish I was not Black, so it was, like, you are the only one of Color there, and it is, like, you get thoughts in your head.

She discussed how, in middle and high school, this feeling of racial isolation changed as she attended more diverse schools:

I think, like, the hallway. I would not feel like, that it was, like, you would see everyone and, like, I would have friends. I would have White friends; I had Black friends; like, I had a mix of friends, like in the hallway. I think it changed, and I was like, okay, I see people like me. This is you; you are good. Like, I am proud to be Black.



Gabby noted that in high school, she felt as though she belonged when she joined the Black Girl Magic (BGM) affinity group:

I mean, it was a group for Black girls. You can imagine, like, Black women, you know, and just having that sisterhood and having someone that in the heart, like . . . oh, hi, like, just having someone that looked like me.

### ***Summary of Gabby's Depiction***

Gabby wants to become a teacher to fill the gap she felt as a student by not having had any teachers of Color. As a result, she felt so strongly that she didn't belong in the system that she tried to change her looks to appear more like her White peers. She spoke about wanting to change the experience for students of Color, so they would have teachers who look like them and thus a different experience than she had in school. Throughout her educational experience, Gabby was able to identify the value of being in diverse settings with individuals who look like her among both her peers and her teachers and how it increased her feelings of belonging and worth.

### **Meet Nimco**

Nimco is an 18-year-old college freshman. She participated in education pathway classes in high school and is participating at a community college in the Elementary Education Foundations Transfer Pathway. Students in the program complete 60 credits and receive an Associate of Science degree; their course credits transfer directly to designated elementary education bachelor's degree programs at Minnesota State universities. When asked why she wanted to go into teaching, she stated that she had actually never thought about becoming a teacher and wanted to be a doctor or lawyer until she began working in a day care center.

Initially, she was uninterested turned off from teaching as a career because she did not like teachers:

Well, I mean, at first, I did not want to. I think it is not the choice that I would, at first, I wanted to be a doctor because, like, when I grew up, I was, like, I am going to be a doctor; I would be the best doctor ever. I would pick everybody up. And it was not until junior year, until I started my job as, like, at a day care, that I thought, like, hey, do I really want to be a doctor? Do I really like that? And my family was, like, "Wait. Who are you right now? You never talked like this before." Because I do not like teachers, if I am going to be honest.

Through her experiences on the job, she began to realize that teaching was a career she would like to consider:

And then, as I got older, I grew to like it. It is . . . I am good at it. Yeah, I did not like it at first; it is something I grew into. And I remember the moment that I was thinking about it. I was, like, I do not want to do this. I do not want to, like, and then, once I started to pursue it more and more, it started to grow on me even more and more. So now I am at a point where I am just like, yeah, I know exactly what I want to do.

When recalling whether she had had any African American teachers, she reflected on an experience with a student from the preschool she teaches at and how similar interactions empowered her to consider education as a career:

Like, in the place I work at now, there are some kids who ask questions; like, do you have a question about why you have that [henna] on your hand? And I was. I think that is

interesting because, like, they need that. They need to be exposed to stuff [henna and hijabs, non-western ways of dressing] in reference to like that.

Prior to her job at a daycare, Nimco had not considered teaching, and it was her job and the education classes she took that helped her perception shift to believing that education is a valued career:

I remember in my Intro to Ed class, we were always, like, having these debates on certain things, and it is just, like, a teacher is important. They see that a student sees you more than anybody else. Yeah, like you are a constant in a person's life.

### ***Living Experiences and Reflections on a K–12 Racialized Experience***

Nimco also noted a seminal schooling experience that set the tone for her feeling different from her peers that occurred when she was placed in English as a second language classes:

Yeah. Whenever I think about elementary school, I always feel like it was so weird because they automatically put me in ESL, even though I was born here. So, I think there are things like that, and I am just, like, I do not think I really needed it.

When talking about school, she had clear memories of looking different from her peers and celebrating holidays differently than they did and how this made her feel like she did not belong:

Whenever I think about elementary school, I always think of my third-grade teacher, because she was very . . . it was hard because, like, I would literally be the only one that looked different in that entire [class], so, like, when certain things were being taught about or when certain things were happening, like, if it was Christmas—something like

that. It was hard for me, but also at Christmas. So . . . and there was a teacher that kind of never made me feel included, and she was very much . . . like she was really hard on everybody, mostly me, because I think she really jumped [to conclusions], like my home situation is so much different than a lot of people's and when I could not do certain things or there are certain times that I was, like, it is not possible for me to do this, there was no way I could do it.

### ***Summary of Nimco's Depiction***

Initially, Nimco did not view teaching as a career that she wanted to pursue because of her experiences with teachers and the feeling of being an outsider in school, where she did not see herself represented in her peers and teachers. However, when she started taking education classes and working in a preschool, her attitude toward teaching changed, and she began to see the profession's value and the importance of representation to students.

### **Meet Margo**

Margo is a 17-year-old high school senior currently in education pathway classes. When asked why she wanted to become a teacher, she replied that she wished to create equity through teaching and, as she became more politically aware, she realized the most effective way to change the system is through education:

It is because I care about equity, and teaching is very grassroots, and I know it is the way that you can make direct change. I know there are other options, like government, but government is really . . . I do not have a word. I think I started, like, considering education because, after, like, I started being more politically aware, and I think that education is liberation, and that is like how you, like, look, like, through yourself.

When I asked her, "Who, specifically, are you trying to liberate?" she replied, "I think really anyone, but mostly people of Color."

### *Living Experiences and Reflections on a K–12 Racialized Experience*

Margo remembers going to a diverse elementary school and being surrounded by many other students of Color. Overall, she reported that it felt like a positive experience:

In elementary school, I think I was, like, pretty comfortable because I was surrounded by a lot of other students of Color, and I did not really have like any run-ins with racism or anything. And even though, like, all my teachers were White, they were really good teachers.

When she got to middle school, she began to identify experiences that were racialized, and she began to feel different from her peers:

This is just, like, a microaggression and, like, she did not realize it, but my sixth-grade honors English teacher was getting to know us. It was, like, the first week of school, and she was asking everyone what elementary school they went to, and most of the kids in my class were from, like, [x school], which is, like, very White, and it is around the nicer neighborhoods. And I said that I went to [x school], and then she was kind of shocked because, like, kids from [x school] are known for having bad behavior.

In high school, Margo became even more aware of the racial differences between her and her peers and more conscious of micro- and macroaggressions:

It was, like, kids in my class. I think I was used to taking, like, the higher-level classes and being with a bunch of White people, and I guess, and that is when, like, I started having, like, run-ins with, like, White kids and, like, actually started experiencing, like,

more, like, microaggressions. I will not even call, like, some of them microaggressions—some of them were, like, more serious. I think the biggest one was in my AP Human Geo [Advance Placement Human Geography]. My teacher was gone that day, and I was sitting next to this kid and, like, he—I do not know why—he decided to say this, but he was, like, "Is casual racism okay?" That is a random question. And I was, like, no. And then I do not . . . this was freshman year, so my memory is kind of blurry, but for some reason, like, the conversation shifted to "Can you be racist to White people?" And I said no, and I, like, explained how, like, oppression works. But then, like, that conversation started, like, attracting a bunch of other kids in my class. So then, like, I was having, like . . . I ended up, like, arguing with a bunch of White kids in my class about how you cannot be racist to White people and, like, they were being really, like, disrespectful. Like, every time I tried explaining a concept to them, they, like, just . . . it, like, went through one ear and out the other.

### ***Summary of Margo's Depiction***

Margo's motivation for going into teaching is based on the transformative, liberating nature of the profession. She believes that the world is a place that needs to change for individuals of Color, and the way to create this change is not through politics but education. She is aware of the micro- and macroaggressions that occur daily in schools and how this makes schooling challenging for many students, and she believes that teachers have the ability to make direct changes to the system of education for students.

### **Meet J**

J is a 17-year-old high school senior who is currently in education pathway classes. When asked why he wanted to become a teacher, he shared that it had been an idea in his mind since he was young. However, through the encouragement of teachers and having never had teachers of Color himself, he began to desire change toward a wider representation of cultures in schools.

So, throughout elementary and middle school, I think I have always enjoyed the idea of education and, like, learning and teaching people things. But I never really saw people like me represented in the people who taught me. So it was never really in my mind up until a couple of years ago, even. And once I got to high school, you know, that thought came up even more. But there are also, like, a lot of staff members that pushed me into the direction of education, on top of it always being a thing that was in the back of my mind. But I think it is just a lack of representation in the schools, where there are just not people of Color, and that is really kind of what made me want to go in. Because I wanted to make a difference, yeah.

### ***Living Experiences and Reflections on a K–12 Racialized Experience***

J was aware of being different from other students early in elementary school because of the experience of having been placed in an English as a second language class:

So, for elementary school, especially, I think it was kind of interesting. I have had issues where there have been times where it is, like, why am I doing this certain thing? Like, I was in ESL for three years of my life from what I remember, and English is my first and only language. And I do not speak another language at home. I do not know why they thought I did. It might have been because of my last name or because maybe they heard

my mom talk and then, obviously, she might have had an accent, so I was like, oh, maybe this person needs it.

In middle school, J felt that school became easier because he had more diverse classmates and several teachers of Color with whom he felt he could connect on a different level than he could with other teachers:

In middle school, it was a little bit easier because I had, like . . . there were more people of Color there, for sure. Even though my elementary school was a little bit diverse, it was still pretty White, generally. The school I went to, the middle school I went to was pretty diverse, but there still were not a lot of teachers of Color, so that kind of created a little bit of a disconnect. All the teachers I had the closest relations with were teachers of Color. And they were huge influences, I think, also for the path that I now want to go into.

J explained that in high school, one of the things that helped him feel included was membership in affinity groups, which offset the lack of inclusion he felt in his classes:

I got to go back to these community groups again because I think that is the one biggest thing that helped me feel this sense of inclusion. It gave me a place where I felt like I belonged at the high school. It helped me find and connect with people who were passionate about things that I was passionate about. And you know, that is one time where I especially, I think, I felt included, but it was never in the general education sense, like. In classes, it was not really, there was not really . . . I cannot really think of more than one time I ever felt included.



### ***Summary of J's Depiction***

J had always been drawn to the career of teaching, and, as best he can remember, it was through teachers' support that his interest in teaching was cultivated. J is also drawn to the profession because he sees a lack of representation in the teaching field and wants to be part of the positive impact a diverse teaching staff has on students. J described his educational experience as one in which he often felt immediately identified as different from his peers. Those moments that he felt most included occurred when he was around a diverse group of peers or experienced spaces of affinity.

### **Meet Gerardo**

Gerardo is an 18-year-old high school senior who moved to the United States from Mexico in high school, where, at the time of the interview, he was enrolled in education pathway classes. When asked why he wanted to become a teacher, he said he wanted to pursue teaching to disrupt the segregation that happens in schools for students of Color. As an English learner, he feels that representation matters for Latino students and that more Latino teachers in schools would disrupt the self-segregation among his Latino peers:

So, why do I want to be a teacher? I want to be a teacher because, specifically, here, if you look at the, like, at the groups, we have an EL class for chemistry. And we have a chemistry class, for example, and then 99% of the Latinos who can take chemistry are taking the EL. And the EL sees like 10% of the total curriculum that the regular class

actually sees. And why do the Latinos not take the regular class is because no one takes it.

### *Living Experiences and Reflections on a K–12 Racialized Experience*

Gerardo's experience is unique in that he had moved to the United States as a teenager, and in elementary and middle school, he had a racial match with the majority of his teachers. When discussing his high school experience, Gerardo spoke of sensing feelings of indifference from those around him because of his perception that he was being judged because of his accent:

And maybe because like I talk, I think people understand me, but my conversation could be very . . . my conversations could be very, like, short, so people get bored, and I feel like people do not try to include me. So, I do not feel exclusion; I do not feel inclusion. I just feel, like, indifference.

It is like I participate in class, and everyone is, like, seeing those, like, [looking] sideways, and I am, like, guys, I promise I am smart in Spanish.

Gerardo also spoke of navigating the transition from being a student in English language support classes to a student in general education classes and the sense of isolation from his Latino peers that this brought him:

I feel like some sort of . . . I do not know how to say this in English, but this kind of separation from, like, the male Latino group here because a lot of Latinos just come here to hear the classes and do nothing else. So, I am not that kind of a student, but at the same time, when I came here, I did not know any English, so they were my first friends. And I started to separate from them and then, like, some sort of . . . I do not know, like bad things from there started to happen to me. So, I tried to ignore them, but then it is hard,

because you left, like, the Latino classes, and you go to—I do not know—mainstream classes, and then you realize why not one Latino left Latino classes. Because there are no Latinos there, or the Latinos there do not even speak Spanish. So, you, well, I found that I will be some sort of alone, and I am actually in my classes. I am, like, isolated.

### ***Summary of Gerardo's Depiction***

Gerardo wants to be a teacher so that he can bridge the gap between teachers and students like him. He is driven by the goal of helping create a more equitable and inclusive environment for students of Color and believes that through more access to teachers of Color, students would have greater access to the full curriculum. Gerardo characterizes his high school experience as one of indifference and isolation: indifference because he perceives himself to be judged by his accent and isolation because when he moved beyond the English support classes, there was no Latino representation in his classes.

### **Group Depiction**

In keeping with the heuristic process outlined by Moustakas (1990), I now move from an individual examination of the co-researchers' experiences to a group depiction. The group depiction includes a systematic analysis of all three exploratory questions that guided the study. and illuminates the principal themes that emerged from the collective experiences of the co-researchers. Individual perspectives feature prominently through direct quotations from interviews used to capture the essence of the themes. While individual voices are in the foreground as direct quotes, they are also a part of the whole, simultaneously expressing the diversity and commonality of the living experiences that elucidate the intricate interplay of these experiences as they shape perceptions of a teaching career. Thus, to demonstrate the

commonality of experience, quotes used in the individual depictions are used and grouped together to illuminate themes. Three overarching categories: (1) misunderstood: navigating bias and finding belonging, (2) empowering diversity, shaping futures: motivations of future educators and unveiling barriers: student voices on education, teaching, and (3) the hesitations of pursuing a career in education among students of Color encompass the thematic elements that provide meaning to the co-researchers' living experiences.

### **Misunderstood: Navigating Bias and Finding Belonging**

The co-researchers' reflections on their K-12 experiences provide a subcurrent of meaning to the themes in all three categories. In this step in the interviews co-researchers reflected on their past experiences and considered how these living experiences contributed to a feeling of belonging, not belonging, not being understood, and being judged based on their race. These experiences significantly influenced the co-researchers and reflection on them revealed to them that, beyond academics, many of their needs went unmet and are at the root of why they want to pursue education as a career. The three themes contributing to this category are moments of feeling misunderstood, negative feelings based on bias, and moments of finding belonging.

#### ***Feeling Misunderstood and Isolated***

Co-researchers spoke of moments in school where they did not feel understood by their White teachers. In these moments of misunderstanding, co-researchers felt uncomfortable and unconnected to the school. Nimco shared how she felt her teachers had assumptions about her about her because her home life as a Somali Muslim differed from that of her peers: "I think she really jumped [to conclusions] like my home situation was so different from that of a lot of other people." She elaborated on how teachers reacted to her: "Some of them did not really understand

and have never seen any folks like me." The co-researchers also spoke of moments of isolation from their White peers: "Being the only person of Color in the room and then not having someone to relate to or someone I can talk about problems with" (Gabby). "Pretty much all honors classes I have taken, I have felt excluded. Quite often those classes are segregated, and it is very visible" (J). Margo shared how, since taking Advanced Placement Geography in the ninth grade, she has grown weary of her White classmates and has separated herself: "I like . . . completely removed myself and like stopped associating with kids in that class, and I am still like really wary about any kids in my classes."

The co-researchers' narratives expose the reality of a school environment where they often felt misunderstood and isolated due to their racial identities through experiences such as Nimco's, where teachers made assumptions based on her home life, or Gabby's, where the lack of peers to relate to fueled feelings of exclusion and a system lacking cultural understanding and inclusivity. Additionally, J's and Margo's experiences with perceived segregation in advanced classes highlight the potential for racial bias to manifest in a racialized environment. These experiences reinforced the co-researchers' belief that they were being judged and excluded by their White teachers and peers based on perceived bias.

### ***Negative Feeling Originating from Bias***

The co-researchers also shared experiences of feeling excluded in school due to perceived biases held by White teachers and peers, citing experiences involving automatic assumptions and negative stereotypes. Nimco shared a story about having an assignment her parents were required to sign to acknowledge their child's work. Her father chose not to sign, but Nimco had been completing the work.

He just told me to sign it, so I would sign it. I would sign it, and she [the teacher] was always like, I can tell this is not your dad. She said she could tell that I was signing them. She just assumed automatically that I was not doing the reading; she did not really ask me what happened. She never talked to me. She just went straight, I am going to have a talk with your parents, and you are going to have to redo everything like all of this. And I was just like, I am doing it. I could tell you exactly what I read about. But every time I think about that, it is like she already had a perception that I was not willing to do the assignment, and she did not really; she never really talked that way to anybody else.

Gabby shared her beliefs about teachers having negative biases about students of Color and her feeling that these biases were directed toward her: "I know the stigma that we have with persons of Color that like, oh, you are not good at reading or like, you cannot do this, like there was always like that stigma that they had with me." Gerardo shared experiences of feeling that people were judging his intelligence because he spoke with an accent. "Yeah, I know that feeling. It is like I participate in class, I'm like . . . seeing those sideways [looks], and I am like, guys, I promise I am smart in Spanish."

The co-researchers' narratives reveal a pervasive sense of exclusion within the school environment stemming from their perceptions of implicit biases held by White teachers and peers. These biases manifested in various ways, including unfair assumptions and negative stereotypes, ultimately leading to feelings of marginalization.

### ***Finding Belonging***

The K–12 journeys of the co-researchers were not solely defined by isolation and misunderstanding but were also marked by moments of belonging and connection. As said in the

individual depictions, every co-researcher could recall instances where they felt accepted and understood by their peers and teachers, highlighting the multifaceted nature of their experiences and suggesting a complex and nuanced reality. As stated in her individual depiction Gabby felt belonging when she transitioned from elementary to middle school, noting that the middle school had a more diverse student population: "You would see everyone [in the hallways] like I would have friends, I would have White friends, I have Black friends like . . . I had a mix of a friends." This mix of peers who looked like her had a profound effect on her self-confidence: "I was like okay, I see people like me, and I was like okay, you are good like... I'm proud to be Black." She also talked about the impact of being part of an affinity group in high school that met weekly: "It was more like a sisterhood, the community, the family that we have, and it was just amazing to have that in school." As stated in his individual depiction, J also spoke about the importance of affinity groups in creating a community and helping him find belonging: "I think that is the one biggest thing that helped me feel this sense of inclusion. It gave me a place where I felt like I belonged in high school." Similarly, as mentioned in her individual depiction, Margo mentioned affinity groups and how she felt supported by the group's advisor: "There are a lot of good teachers like Mr. [redacted], for example. He is our ASA [Asian Student Association] advisor."

The co-researchers also experienced moments of belonging associated with teachers. Nimco shared how she felt a sense of belonging in relation to her 5th-grade teacher; while the teacher was viewed as an "evil Matilda" by many, Nimco appreciated what this teacher did because she believed in all the students. "She was strict because like . . . she was like, hey, you guys, like . . . this is what you need to be doing." The teacher would tell students, "This is not where your story stops. You are going to keep on doing things, and I know that you are." As she

continued to reflect on her experiences with the teacher, Nimco stated, "She treated us like humans."

J spoke of his experience in an African American studies class, and one of the reasons he felt included was because of the small class size. The teacher organized the class work based on discussions, allowing his voice to be heard: "The teacher was really cool, like . . . my classmates were cool, the discussions we had were really interesting. But that is about it in like traditional academic sense that is, like, pretty much the only time I have ever felt included."

While the co-researchers faced challenges of isolation and misunderstanding in their K–12 education, their experiences were not solely defined by these negatives. Many found moments of belonging and connection with diverse peers, supportive teachers, and empowering affinity groups. Gabby discovered confidence in a more diverse middle school, J valued the inclusive discussions in his African American studies class, and Margo found community in her affinity group and supportive advisor, Mr. [redacted]. Even within challenging situations, Nimco appreciated her 5th grade teacher's belief in all students. These diverse experiences highlight the complex and multifaceted nature of belonging.

### **Empowering Diversity, Shaping Futures: Motivations of Future Educators**

Driven by a desire to empower diversity and shape inclusive futures, the co-researchers chose the career of teaching based on a transformative vision: they wanted to contribute to creating an education system that unlocks the potential of students of Color. Thus, they are driven to close the diversity gap in education and become relatable role models who truly "get"



their students. The following three themes arose from this category: exploring the impact of educators on students of Color, empowering change, and nurturing educators.

### ***Exploring the Impact of Diverse Educators on Students of Color***

Central to each co-researcher's decision to pursue teaching as a career was their strong belief in the positive impacts diverse teachers can have on students of Color. Margo felt the role of teachers of Color was beyond simply being role models: "Students are more, like, more willing to learn and pay attention if they could connect to their teacher." She elaborated, "I think that teachers of Color would help students of Color feel more motivated." Gabby noted that she had felt a greater connection her teacher of Color than she had to other teachers: "I could relate to her more, like there are certain things that like we had in common, and we could relate to." J felt that his teachers of Color had advocated for him and held him more accountable: "Like, they really pushed me, and you know, held me accountable when I did stuff." He did not feel that he had this same support from White teachers. For the co-researchers, the transformative potential of diverse educators was a core motivation. They expressed the belief that diverse teachers go beyond mere role models, fostering deeper connections, igniting motivation, and holding students accountable in ways that empower them to reach their full potential.

### ***Empowering Change: Choosing Teaching to Champion Diverse Futures***

Most of the co-researchers were pursuing a career in teaching because they want to make a difference in the lives of young people who must navigate a racialized educational system, just as they had to themselves. For example, Gabby as stated in her individual depiction attributed

her desire to be a teacher to her drive to help build confidence in students of Color by seeing others who looked like them in the role of teacher:

So, I think it is just like building the confidence of the kids and knowing that they can have someone that looks like them that they can have that just having someone that they can come up to come to talk to. And have someone who they can relate to as well.

Similarly, J described wanting to go into teaching because of the lack of representation of teachers of Color: "But I think it is just a lack of representation in the schools where there are just not people of Color, and that is really kind of what made me want to go in. Because I wanted to make a difference, yeah." As stated in her individual depiction, Margo spoke about the concept of equity in education and that education is the way to liberate people of Color: "It is because I care about equity and teaching is very grassroots, and I know it is the way that you can make a direct change . . . and I think that education is liberation."

The co-researchers expressed choosing teaching as their path based on the drive to create positive change and empower future generations. They see themselves not just as educators but as role models and advocates for students of Color navigating a racialized educational system. They envision a future where diverse educators empower students of Color to reach their full potential, shaping a more inclusive and equitable educational experience.

### ***Nurturing Educators: The Seeds of Inspiration***

While the co-researchers' desires to empower students of Color and create a more inclusive future constitute the primary motivation for their career choice, they also recognized

the significant influence of supportive environments and early exposure to the teaching profession.

Gabby shared how exposure to students during classroom visits required to complete the education class helped solidify her career choice:

I [dread] had locs in [my hair], and one of the students had said, oh, she looks like me she has the same hair texture as me. So, I think that also just told me, yeah, this is something that I really want to do because I want kids to have someone that looks like them.

J shared that he had been given support from several staff members; while he had considered a career in teaching, he did not take the possibility seriously until after receiving encouragement from teachers. "There are also like a lot of staff members that pushed me into the direction of education on top of it always being a thing that was in the back of my mind." Margo noted that being part of the education pathway class and her discussions and learning with her classmates inspired her to consider teaching as a career.

We watched a documentary in my, like, education class. It was about the Rosso Studies program in Arizona and, like, the teachers who taught it were, like, Hispanic, or like Chicano like the students, majority of the students in their class, and you could see, like, such a huge difference it made to them [in terms of how they felt in school and their academic performances].

The co-researchers made it clear that empowering students of Color and building a more inclusive future are central motivators. Their journey to considering education as a career highlights the importance of supportive environments and early exposure to the career of teaching through classes and conversations about the positive aspects of the career with teachers.

Their influences highlight the multifaceted nature of career inspiration, with personal desires, supportive environments, and early exposure playing crucial roles in shaping future educators.

### **Unveiling Barriers: Student Voices on Education, Teaching, and the Hesitations of Pursuing a Career in Education Among Students of Color**

After reflecting on their K–12 educational experience and what motivated them to consider teaching as a career, the co-researchers reflected on why the other students of Color among their peers may be less likely to consider a career in teaching. Through introspective reflections on their own educational journeys and their understanding of the teaching profession, the co-researchers identified reasons that can be grouped into two themes: a lack of support for individuals in the system and the devaluing of the career in ways from the low salary paid to teachers to society's perception of teachers.

#### ***A Lack of Support for Individuals of Color***

A significant barrier to their peers choosing to become teachers identified by the co-researchers was the lack of support they perceived teachers of Color to receive. When asked why she thought students of Color did not choose teaching as a career choice, Margo suggested that the students may have had a traumatizing school experience: "I think a lot of students of Color have like a traumatizing experience with like school, or like they had like a dysfunctional one." J echoed this sentiment, stating that he felt his peers did not want to go into teaching because of their K–12 experience: "A lot of students of color just have like a dysfunctional relationship with education."

J also expressed a general lack of support for teachers, noting that teachers of Color faced even greater challenges in this regard:

I think there is just there might be like a lack of acceptance for people of color in that field already. People are abused as teachers, and you know, even, I mean, if white teachers are going to get abused, it is almost guaranteed black teachers are going to get abused ten times worse; that is just kind of how it goes.

The abuse J references in this statement is emotional abuse and a lack of respect. Gabby reiterated this thinking, stating that the teachers of Color she saw in school did not receive the same support as other teachers: "I think teachers of Color are not given support." Gabby's experience involves a small sample size, as she had few teachers of Color over her years in public schools but it sheds light on a concerning trend: the disproportionate impact of "last hired, first fired" contract provisions on teachers of Color.

These perspectives paint a concerning picture of the challenges faced by teachers of color in the education system. The lack of support the co-researchers perceive for teachers of Color may discourage current and future generations from pursuing a career.

### ***Recognition and Worth as Barriers to Teaching as a Career Choice***

As aspiring educators, the co-researchers identified a disheartening challenge: the perception that teaching lacks societal recognition and value. This sense of diminished appreciation, coupled with cultural stereotypes that influence career choices, constitutes a significant barrier for those considering a path in education. Nimco shared that she believed the lack of teachers of Color in classrooms contributed to why her peers were less likely to view teaching as a potential career choice: "You all grew up, you did not see teachers of color. So, I feel like we do not see anything [like that]. When I did not see it, I did not feel like I could have

done it." J added that there is a preconceived notion of what teachers look like in society, affecting all students' views about the career, not only students of Color:

There is a preconceived notion of what a teacher should look like, and it is not a person of color, and it is not even a man. It is a white woman, and that is why it is almost all white women that teach. So, I think it is just a lot of it is just societal norms and this idea that oh, you know women teach, that is what they do.

Gerardo expressed the belief that the lack of representation of Latino teachers in classrooms, combined with societal expectations associated with their ethnicity, could be discouraging Latinos from considering teaching as a career option:

Because they see that that is impossible for someone like them. For example, if you see how many, I do not know how many, people working in construction in Minnesota, you will see almost 80, 70% are Latinos. And then, if you see how many researchers are in Minnesota, you will see one person Latino. And then, if you go to, I do not know, people working in fast food in Minnesota, 50% will be Latino. And then teachers in Minnesota, I do not know if 1% or 2% are Latino.

Nimco shared feeling empathy for students of Asian descent, suggesting that the lack of representation is because the career is not valued as much as other careers: "I especially do not see, like, Asian teachers. I think it has to do with just like our culture and like trying to, like most Asian people, like, go into like law or like medical." This highlights a critical point: the underrepresentation of Asian teachers likely stems from cultural pressures that prioritize high-prestige careers, such as law or medicine, over teaching.

Thus, the co-researchers' experiences reveal another concerning reality: the teaching profession lacks societal recognition and value. This, combined with cultural stereotypes and deeply ingrained societal norms regarding who "should" be teachers, creates a significant obstacle for individuals considering a path in education.

### ***The Salary Challenge***

The perception that low salaries are associated with educational careers was highlighted by the co-researchers as a significant challenge to students of Color choosing a career in education. The co-researchers explored the reasons behind this perception from various perspectives. Nimco highlighted the financial aspect, stating, "Teachers do not really get paid that much." This aligns with Margo's observation regarding Asian students, who often prioritize the "American dream" and financial security in career choices. Teaching, in her view, falls short in that regard: "Asian Americans are . . . obsessed with . . . achieving the American dream. And like teaching does not, like, give the best pay."

J emphasized the workload discrepancy, stating that teachers are not adequately compensated for the demanding nature of the job: "Teachers are not being paid a livable wage for all the work they do in and outside the classroom." He acknowledged the efforts of teacher unions in addressing this issue, citing their fight for "good wages" and fair compensation for the additional work teachers undertake beyond their regular schedules.

These insights reveal the interconnected issues contributing to the perception of low teacher salaries among students of Color. Cultural emphasis on financial success and the demanding nature of the job, coupled with the perception of inadequate compensation, create a significant barrier to the consideration of teaching as a viable career option by students of Color.

## **Exemplary Depiction**

An exemplary depiction is the development of an individual co-researcher's depiction using additional autobiographical or demographic information. This thumbnail depiction reflects the chosen co-researchers' experience with the phenomenon, highlighting the individuality and universality of the phenomenon. In this study, Gerardo's reflection on his K–12 experience and how it has shaped his thoughts about teaching as a career provided an exemplary depiction. Gerardo immigrated to the United States with his family during high school; thus, his experience is unique in that he received schooling in two different systems in Mexico before coming to the United States. Gerardo recalled having gone to an American preschool where all the teachers spoke English and were White women:

My career started up in pre-kindergarten. I went there, and actually, that was like an American school because they taught in English. So I was taught in English because my mom worked and my dad worked. And so, there were just White teachers there.

Gerardo went on to say that, at some point in elementary school, he switched to the Mexican school system. There, everyone looked like him and no one looked different: "In Mexico, I never saw a single person different than me; I think, like, the foreigners were, like, from cities, two hours away." The foreigners referred to in this statement were still Mexican. He went on to elaborate that he felt the students had strong connections with the teachers in Mexico because the teachers were part of the community:

Well, I think teachers in Mexico were a little bit more interested in, like, what is happening, or I mean a little bit more aware of the situation of their kids. For example, my teachers live, I do not know, a mile away from my home [referencing Mexico].



Everyone lived in the same town, and everyone's family knew each other. And so, for example, if something happened to a kid, the teachers knew much before he [shared the information]. So, I think the connections between teachers and students were stronger.

When comparing his experiences with teachers in Mexico with his experiences with teachers in the United States, Gerardo noted a big difference. He felt more supported by the teachers in Mexico and that his relationships with teachers in the United States were transactional and lacked connection, describing it as impersonal as learning a challenging topic via video:

I do not feel the same connection with most of my teachers. Like I just feel like the things you feel with a YouTube video when you see a YouTube video about, I do not know calculus, you just hope to learn. You just need to take the content that they [referencing teachers in the United States] are trying to teach you and get that.

Gerardo's narrative showcases how shared or contrasting cultural backgrounds between students and teachers can shape the K–12 educational experience. Gerardo's experience in Mexico included strong teacher–student connections due to cultural similarities. In contrast, his experience in the US school system was characterized as impersonal. His depiction highlights the individuality of his experience of going to school in two different countries and of experiencing a racial match with his teachers. It also highlights the universality of the theme of belonging in the experiences of all the co-researchers and how students of Color at times struggle to find belonging in classrooms due to racial mismatches with their teachers.

## Creative Synthesis

Heuristic analysis culminates in a creative synthesis in which individual and universal themes are woven together to provide a fresh interpretation of the data and examine the phenomena from a different perspective.

I come from a culture that makes sense of the world through story, so when I considered the data and how it could be understood from a different perspective, I was reminded of the Fable of the Eagle and the Chicken. Teachers are similar to the chicken farmer in the story, who knows how to raise beautiful and healthy chickens but when confronted with raising a different bird, an eagle, continues to use the same strategies. The eagle comes to believe that they are a chicken and does all the things the chickens do, until one day, someone new comes in and says this is not a chicken but an eagle. The eagle begins to see their true self, and this realization allows them to soar. Like the eagle in this fable, students of Color need to be seen and allowed to rise to their full potential.

*A fable is told about an eagle that thought he was a chicken. When the eagle was very small, he fell from the safety of his nest. A chicken farmer found the eagle, brought him to the farm, and raised him in a chicken coop among his many chickens. The eagle grew up doing what chickens do, living like a chicken, and believing he was a chicken. A naturalist came to the chicken farm to see if what he had heard about an eagle acting like a chicken was really true. He knew that an eagle is king of the sky. He was surprised to see the eagle strutting around the chicken coop, pecking at the ground, and acting very much like a chicken. The farmer explained to the naturalist that this bird was no longer an eagle. He was now a chicken because he had been trained to be a chicken and he*

*believed that he was a chicken. The naturalist knew there was more to this great bird than his actions showed as he "pretended" to be a chicken. He was born an eagle and had the heart of an eagle, and nothing could change that. The man lifted the eagle onto the fence surrounding the chicken coop and said, "Eagle, thou art an eagle. Stretch forth thy wings and fly." The eagle moved slightly, only to look at the man; then he glanced down at his home among the chickens in the chicken coop where he was comfortable. He jumped off the fence and continued doing what chickens do. The farmer was satisfied. "I told you it was a chicken," he said. The naturalist returned the next day and tried again to convince the farmer and the eagle that the eagle was born for something greater. He took the eagle to the top of the farmhouse and spoke to him: "Eagle, thou art an eagle. Thou dost belong to the sky and not to the earth. Stretch forth thy wings and fly." The large bird looked at the man, then again down into the chicken coop. He jumped from the man's arm onto the roof of the farmhouse. Knowing what eagles are really about, the naturalist asked the farmer to let him try one more time. He would return the next day and prove that this bird was an eagle. The farmer, convinced otherwise, said, "It is a chicken." The naturalist returned the next morning to the chicken farm and took the eagle and the farmer some distance away to the foot of a high mountain. They could not see the farm nor the chicken coop from this new setting. The man held the eagle on his arm and pointed high into the sky where the bright sun was beckoning above. He spoke: "Eagle, thou art an eagle! Thou dost belong to the sky and not to the earth. Stretch forth thy wings and fly." This time the eagle stared skyward into the bright sun, straightened his*

*large body, and stretched his massive wings. His wings moved, slowly at first, then surely and powerfully. With the mighty screech of an eagle, he flew.*

(Fable of the Eagle and the Chicken, n.d.)

## **Chapter 5**

### **Key Findings, Conclusions, Implications for Practice, and Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study are summarized and discussed in this chapter. The purpose of this study was to heuristically investigate how the perceptions of students of Color about teaching as a career are shaped by participating in a racialized schooling environment. The exploratory questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How do persons of Color perceive and describe their K–12 academic experience?
2. Why do students of Color want to become teachers? What factors from their K–12 education empower this decision?
3. What do students of Color perceive as barriers and challenges to other students of Color pursuing a career in education?

The study employed a critical constructivist qualitative approach utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather open-ended responses from co-researchers. Using inductive open coding allowed for a comprehensive understanding of the co-researchers' perceptions within the context of their living experiences. This coding strategy aligns with the goal of heuristic exploration, which is to uncover the beliefs and attitudes of students of Color, allowing their experiences to emerge organically. Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, a flexible approach that involves six key phases that acknowledge the researcher's role in interpreting data. This approach is a cyclical process of revisiting and analyzing the data as themes emerge. The reflexive thematic analysis in this study resulted in findings presented through a heuristic framework and encompassing individual depictions of the co-researchers, a composite depiction

capturing commonalities, an exemplary portrait showcasing a specific co-researcher, and a creative synthesis that integrates all these elements.

In this chapter, I summarize the key findings taken from the data within the context of the theoretical framework described in Chapter 1 and the literature in Chapter 2. Subsequently, I propose practical methods for increasing the number of students of Color choosing a career in teaching that can be implemented in a K-12 educational setting. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the study's limitations and recommendations for future research.

### **Key Findings**

The study's data were analyzed through the conceptual framework (Figure 3) used to guide the study and the literature review. The conceptual framework clarifies how CRT, CRP, and critical whiteness studies interrelate to explain the role race plays in K–12 public education. In the United States, whiteness is a pervasive background that shapes educational experiences. CRT sits within the conceptual framework of whiteness as a tool for analyzing how race impacts K-12 education. CRP, focused on empowering students, requires a CRT context to be fully effective. An analysis of co-researcher interviews revealed the following themes: feelings of exclusion, finding belonging, motivations to teach, and barriers to teaching as a career.

### **Feelings of Exclusion Rooted in Bias**

The co-researchers' narratives highlighted a feeling of exclusion in school fueled by their belief that White teachers and peers held implicit biases. The co-researchers identified a broad societal stigma against students of Color, those with accents, and, for one co-researcher, wearing a hijab. They felt that this stigma reinforced the implicit biases of those around them. The co-researchers' experiences reflect the enduring influence of racial and cultural bias within

educational institutions. This bias is rooted in the historical and ongoing dominance of "whiteness" as the cultural norm. Whiteness as the dominant culture within education is a byproduct of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) and the decision to desegregate schools. Post-*Brown*, over 80,000 Black teachers (Hooker, 1971) were displaced from the field of education, and a predominantly White infrastructure began to shape education in the United States. CRT asserts that race is a prominent component of school organization (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Sleeter, 2017; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001), and critical whiteness studies have identified whiteness as a social construct and a dominant ideology that permeates cultural understanding and instructional practices (Doane, 2003). Likewise, the co-researchers in this study shared experiences of teachers making unfair assumptions about their home lives based on race and cultural differences.

Scholars have argued that since *Brown v. Board*, the education system has reflected and reinforced a "White" perspective (Hooker, 1971; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Oakley et al., 2009; Thompson, 2019; Will, 2019). This concept builds on the work of Omi and Winant (2014), who discussed the enduring legacy of whiteness in the United States. In their seminal work, *Racial Formation in the United States*, Omi and Winant (2014) argued that whiteness was reproduced, perpetuated, and protected in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. As a critical organizing structure, White racial ideology is omnipresent in education (Miller & Endo, 2005; Milner & Howard, 2004). Analyzed through the lens of CRT and critical whiteness studies, the co-researchers' experiences expose how implicit racial and cultural biases rooted in dominant white cultural norms create a challenging environment for students of Color. These biases manifest as unfair assumptions and negative stereotypes, ultimately leading to feelings of marginalization and exclusion.

## **Finding Belonging in School**

The co-researchers' experiences included moments of discovering a sense of belonging in school. Supportive teachers who believed in them, diverse peers they could connect with, and even affinity groups that provided a strong network fostered moments of connection. This sense of belonging was not just about feeling accepted but also about the positive interactions and support found within the educational environment. These moments of belonging align with the principles of the CRP framework for teaching that emphasizes incorporating students' cultural backgrounds and experiences into the learning process (Ladson-Billing 1995a, 1995b). Thus, the core CRP principles of building relationships and affirming diversity directly fostered a sense of belonging in the co-researchers' K–12 experiences (Brown-Jeffy & Cooper, 2011). Supportive teachers who believed in them (building relationships) and classrooms that celebrated differences or reflected their cultures (affirming diversity) replaced feelings of isolation with a sense of connection and belonging. In these moments the co-researchers felt valued, respected, and seen within the K–12 environment.

## **Motivations to Teach for Students of Color**

The co-researchers' aspirations to become teachers were fueled by a desire to empower students of Color and build a more equitable educational landscape. Having navigated a racialized system themselves gave them an awareness of the profound impact of having relatable role models. Two key themes were identified from their motivations: the need for diverse educators and the drive to empower future generations of students of Color.

Several international studies have explored why people become teachers, identifying intrinsic (enjoyment of teaching), altruistic (desire to help others), and extrinsic (work–life



balance, pay) motivations (Avgousti, 2017; Saban, 2003; Thomson et al., 2012; Watt & Richardson, 2007). Students of Color share these motivations with White students, but research suggests that they have a less intrinsic connection and more altruistic connection to the career (Bianco et al., 2011; Leech et al., 2019). Students of Color value the skills required for good teaching and are motivated by positive relationships with caring teachers (Leech et al., 2019). Driven by a deep desire to have a positive impact, the co-researchers expressed altruistic motivations for becoming teachers. Each implied that their goal is not simply to have a career but rather to transform the educational system to ensure students of Color are able to thrive.

### **Barriers to Teaching as a Career: Image, Respect, Support**

Drawing on their own K–12 experiences and reflections on the teaching profession, the co-researchers identified two key themes for why students of Color may not view teaching as a viable career: a lack of support for educators within the system and a general devaluation of the teaching profession in terms of salary, societal perception, and representation. While a lack of support discourages all aspiring teachers, the co-researchers observed teachers of Color facing even greater challenges due to a perceived lack of specific support for their needs and experiences.

The perceptions of the co-researchers align with those in national studies about why students of color do not pursue teaching careers. For example, evidence from studies by Gordon (2005) and Marrun et al. (2019) supports these concerns. Gordon (2005) found that students of Color are uninterested in becoming teachers due to an absence of respect for the profession, negative school experiences, and a lack of encouragement. Similarly, Marrun et al. (2019)

identified low teacher salaries, lack of representation of teachers of Color in media, and the negative impact of racial microaggressions as deterrents.

## **Conclusions**

This section presents the conclusions drawn from the exploratory questions that guided this study.

### ***How do students of Color perceive and describe their K–12 academic experiences?***

The co-researchers' experiences illuminate the challenges within educational institutions that are the result of persistent racial and cultural bias. Rooted in the historical dominance of "whiteness," these biases manifest as implicit assumptions and stereotypes, leading to feelings of exclusion among students of Color. However, supportive teachers, diverse peers, and affinity groups offer pockets of belonging. This highlights the importance of fostering inclusive environments through practices such as CRP, which values student backgrounds and experiences. By dismantling the dominance of "whiteness" and embracing diversity, educational institutions can create a sense of belonging for all students.

### ***Why do students of Color want to become teachers? What factors from their K–12 education empower this decision?***

The co-researchers' aspirations to become teachers transcend a mere career choice. Their experiences navigating a racialized educational system ignited a powerful desire to empower future students of Color. Fueled by altruism, they seek to dismantle the barriers they encountered in the K–12 educational system, believing that by becoming relatable role models, they can pave the way for a more equitable educational landscape where all students, particularly students of Color, can thrive.

*What do students of Color perceive as barriers and challenges to other students of Color pursuing a career in education?*

The co-researchers' interviews revealed two barriers preventing students of Color from choosing to enter the teaching profession: a lack of systemic support and a general devaluation of the career itself. This devaluation encompasses low salaries, negative societal perceptions, and a lack of role models. Negative social attitudes and a lack of positive narratives from educators themselves create the perception among students of Color that teaching lacks support and value. Thus, to cultivate a diverse and thriving teaching workforce, a more supportive and representative environment that showcases the positive aspects of the profession should be fostered.

**Implications for Practice**

Drawing on the insights drawn from the co-researchers' interviews, this section offers recommendations for making the teaching profession more attractive to students of Color, a crucial step toward diversifying the teaching workforce. First, professional development in culturally competent practices should be prioritized to equip educators to create inclusive classrooms, benefiting all students and fostering a welcoming environment for aspiring teachers of Color. Second, negative perceptions held by students of Color about teaching careers must be dismantled. This can be achieved by providing early learning experiences, such as those that come from increased teach-student interaction and improved classroom dynamics, that expose students of Color to the positive aspects of teaching and by fostering a belief in the potential of students of Color to excel. By fostering a more supportive school environment and providing

role models, we can encourage students of Color to see teaching as a fulfilling and viable career path.

Studies have shown that culturally proficient schools benefit students of Color (Byrd, 2016; Ladson-Billings 1995a, 1996b; Larson et al., 2018). This is achieved through teacher–student interactions, valuing student cultures, and creating inclusive classrooms. Educators can create welcoming environments for aspiring teachers of Color by prioritizing professional development for district leadership and teachers in these practices. In addition to professional development, equity audits of policies and practices need to be regularly conducted to ensure that culturally competent practices are being incorporated into the system. High expectations, cultural awareness, and recognition of societal inequities are key to decreasing feelings of marginalization and increasing feelings of belonging for students of Color. By incorporating culturally competent practices, school systems can create a more inclusive learning environment that empowers students of Color.

Combating negative perceptions of the teaching profession is crucial to attracting students of Color. Early exposure to the positive aspects, such as those that come from increased teacher–student interactions and improved classroom dynamics, can be achieved through programs that introduce students of Color to the profession. Furthermore, nurturing a belief in the ability of students of Color to thrive in education and providing supportive role model relationships with current teachers of Color can dismantle stereotypes and empower these students to see themselves as future educators. Research by Miller and Endo (2005) gave evidence supporting this position, highlighting the influence of caring and passionate teachers, regardless of race, on students' career choices. Strong student-teacher bonds further contribute to

positive perceptions of teaching (Miller & Endo, 2005). Likewise, educators can play a proactive role by integrating college-bound and career exploration strategies into their K–12 curricula. Relating their own journeys to becoming teachers to students, especially to students of Color, can be particularly inspiring. Marrun et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of increasing awareness of the practicalities of teaching careers among students of Color. This includes providing information about the cost of teacher education, time commitment, coursework, licensure requirements, salary, benefits, and potential career paths.

### **Study Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research**

While the results of this study offer valuable insights, the study's limitations warrant consideration. The relatively small sample size of five students limits the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the focus on a geographic area with a significant student–teacher racial mismatch may not fully reflect the experiences of students of Color in other regions. Furthermore, the heuristic nature of the research, in which the initial question arose from a pre-existing concern, could have introduced some researcher bias.

Future research could address these limitations by

- Expanding the sample size and including students of Color from diverse geographical locations;
- Expanding the sample size and including students of Color from diverse geographical locations;
- Exploring the experiences of students of Color who have had teachers of Color compared to those who have not. This could provide valuable insights into the impact of positive role models on career aspirations.

By addressing these limitations and pursuing further research avenues, scholars can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by aspiring teachers of Color and develop effective strategies for creating a more diverse and inclusive teaching workforce.

## **Summary**

This study explored how a racialized K–12 environment shapes how students of Color perceive teaching careers through their experiences and views of the barriers faced by other students of Color. This research is grounded in a historical examination of the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and its enduring impact on the racial composition of K–12 educators. Additionally, the concept of "whiteness" and its manifestation in schools was analyzed, highlighting how it disadvantages students of Color. Finally, research on the motivations for becoming a teacher was compared to research on why students of Color may choose the career and an examination of the societal and institutional barriers that may dissuade students of Color from choosing teaching as a career.

This study employed a rigorous reflexive thematic analysis of data gathered through in-person, semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in a high school education class. To ensure open and honest responses, the researcher prioritized building rapport during interviews. These meetings served a dual purpose: collecting background information and fostering trust between the primary researcher and the participants. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim for a thorough analysis.

The key findings of this study include that both challenges and motivations shape the aspirations of students of Color considering teaching careers. While some students reported

feeling excluded due to implicit biases and societal stigmas, others found belonging through supportive teachers and diverse peers. This underscores the ongoing influence of racial bias within schools and the importance of fostering inclusive environments. Students of Color who aspire to become teachers are motivated by a desire to empower future generations and create a more equitable educational landscape. However, a lack of support for educators, societal devaluation of the profession, and the perception of limited support for their specific needs act as deterrents. These findings align with those of existing research and emphasize the need for a more diverse and supportive educational system to encourage students of Color to become teachers.

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**Appendix A**  
**Demographic Form**

Pseudonym: \_\_\_\_\_

Age: \_\_\_\_\_

Gender: \_\_\_\_\_

Race and Ethnicity: \_\_\_\_\_

Where you attended elementary school: \_\_\_\_\_

Where you attended Middle school: \_\_\_\_\_

Where you attended High School: \_\_\_\_\_

Describe the student and teacher demographic make-up of each level of schooling. If you attended more than one school average

Please circle the best description

Elementary School	Students mostly students of Color	Teachers mostly teachers of Color
	Students mostly White	Teachers mostly white
Middle School	Students mostly students of Color	Teachers mostly teachers of Color
	Students mostly White	Teachers mostly white
High School	Students mostly students of Color	Teachers mostly teachers of Color
	Students mostly White	Teachers mostly white

## Appendix B

### Interview Protocol

1. Start recording device.
2. Welcome participants to interview.
3. Review informed consent form and make sure participants have signed, review and answer any questions.
4. Review Demographic form and confirm participants have completed.
5. Thank participants for participation interview and review the central purpose.

*The following questions will ask you to reflect on your K-12 educational experiences in a racialized schooling environment and consider how your perceptions of teaching as a career were formed.*

*This interview should take approximately 60 minutes. Your answers from the interview will be kept strictly confidential and never associated with your name.*

*Your thoughts and opinions will help to inform recommendations on increasing the number of teachers of Color.*

#### 6. Begin Interview

Questions	Open-ended relational probes and prompts
1. Tell me about yourself and the area of study you think you will pursue? <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Follow up: Why did you choose this area of study?</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• This is what I heard you say in your answer to question ---- [repeat back what was heard] do you want to add or elaborate anything?</li><li>• Tell me more about</li><li>• How so – Tell me more.</li><li>• You talked about --- Could you tell me more about that?</li><li>• Can you please elaborate</li></ul>
2. Tell me about your K-12 educational experience?	
3. Can you share about your experiences with teachers?	
4. Can you tell me about a time you felt included during your k-12 educational experience?	
5. Can you tell me about a time when you felt excluded during your k-12 experience?	

<p>6. Why do you want to go into teaching? [If not mentioned before in question 1]</p> <p>7. Did the fact you are a person of color impact your choice to be a teacher? [Reference Q1 or Q2 if brought up and ask to elaborate]</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow up: Why? Can you please elaborate?</li> </ul> <p>8. If you could change something about teachers so they are better at meeting the needs of students of color what would it be?</p> <p>8. Why do you believe there is a shortage of teachers of Color?</p> <p>9. Do you believe k-12 students of color view teaching as a viable career option, and can you please elaborate on these thoughts?</p> <p>10. Is there anything else you would like to share that we have not discussed.</p>	
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**7. Thank participants for volunteering.**

*I appreciate your openness and willingness to share your experiences with me. I have learned a lot from you that will contribute to my study and understanding of how students of Color develop their perceptions about teaching.*