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### **Black Students, White Schools, and Racism: Exploring the experiences, challenges, and resilience of Black students at private K-12 predominantly white institutions (PWIs) through adult reflections**

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University of San Francisco

# **Black Students, White Schools, and Racism**

Exploring the experiences, challenges, and resilience of  
Black students at private K-12 predominantly white  
institutions (PWIs) through adult reflections.

A Field Project Proposal Presented to  
The Faculty of the School of Education  
International and Multicultural Education Department

In Partial Fulfillment  
Of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts in International and Multicultural Education

By  
Sade Ojuola  
May 2020

# **Black Students, White Schools, and Racism**

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

in

INTERNATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL EDUCATION

by  
Sade Ojuola  
May 2020

UNIVERSITY OF SAN FRANCISCO

Under the guidance and approval of the committee, and approval by all the members, this field project (or thesis) has been accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree.

Approved:

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Instructor/Chairperson

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Date

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To my loved ones, my peers and educators in the IME Department,  
and to Black students everywhere.

Young women, young men of color,  
we add our voices to the voices of your ancestors  
who speak to you over ancient seas  
and across impossible mountain tops.

Come up from the gloom of national neglect,  
you have already been paid for.

Come out of the shadow of irrational prejudice,  
you owe no racial debt to history.

The blood of our bodies  
and the prayers of our souls  
have bought you a future free  
from shame and bright beyond the telling of it.

We pledge ourselves and our resources  
to seek for you clean and well-furnished schools,  
safe and non-threatening streets,  
employment which makes use of your talents, but does not degrade your dignity.

You are the best we have.  
You are all we have.  
You are what we have become.

We pledge you our whole hearts from this day forward.

- Maya Angelou, *A Pledge to Rescue Our Youth*, 2006

## **ABSTRACT**

This project examines the challenging racialized experiences of Black students who attended private predominantly white institutions (PWIs) during their K-12 education, with a particular focus on the long-term impact of those experiences. The existing literature contains valuable data about the experiences of Black students in predominantly white private schools. However, an important gap in the literature exists regarding the reflections and understandings developed over time by Black adults who attended predominantly white private schools. This field project aims to explore the beliefs that were borne of those experiences and how those experiences ultimately become interwoven into a Black student's identity formation, using narrative research informed by Critical Race Theory. The findings from this research are synthesized and presented in a CRT-informed handbook for Black students and their educators at private K-12 PWIs.

## CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

Within private K-12 education in the United States, Black students often find themselves in the campus minority. American private schools have become increasingly segregated by income, with the enrollment of middle- and lower-class families declining rapidly while the enrollment of wealthy families remains steady (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018). With the majority of Black American families residing in the middle or lower socioeconomic classes, this contributes in part to the declining rates of racial diversity on private K-12 campuses (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018). American private schools remain overwhelmingly white and statistical trends suggest this segregation is growing, not shrinking. For Black students attending private K-12 schools, this may exacerbate an already challenging educational experience.

The challenges Black students experience as racial minorities at private schools are well-documented (Fordham, 1985; Schneider & Shouse, 1992; Beady & Beady, 1993; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Feelings of isolation, pressures to assimilate or renounce their cultural identity, the constant endurance of microaggressions, and navigating unequal treatment in classroom discipline are a few examples of common experiences for Black students in private K-12 predominantly white institutions (*PWIs*) (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; DeCuir & Dixon, 2007; Scruggs, 2010). Researchers on this topic often seek to explore the variance and complexity of Black students' experiences in private K-12 *PWIs* (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Sometimes researchers on this topic focus on the achievement or engagement levels of Black students themselves, exploring the reasons behind their achievement behaviors or lack thereof with the hope that examples of positive engagement can be mimicked across the board (Fordham, 1985;

DeCuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). However, such research runs the risk of placing the problem of school achievement solely on Black students, misrepresenting them as either inherently achievement-driven or inherently achievement-averse (Beady & Beady, 1993). These explorations rarely account for the ways campus norms and culture can affect Black students' achievement (Fordham, 1985).

In more recent years, research on this topic has trended away from examining Black students as the source of their own discontent in private K-12 PWIs. Researchers have instead begun to examine the schools themselves by focusing on the programmatic, curricular, and cultural adjustments schools can make to better support Black students (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; DeCuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). Overall, most research on this topic is solution-oriented, seeking to improve the Black student experience in PWIs in the immediate, short-term. However, there remains limited research about the long-term impact of these experiences for Black students who attend private K-12 PWIs

### **Statement of the Problem**

The United States is in the midst of a growing national conversation around diversity and inclusion. The Google Trends search term report for 'diversity and inclusion' within the 'Jobs & Education' category indicates that this term is twenty times more popular today than it was just ten years ago (Google trends: "diversity and inclusion," n.d.). As this dialogue continues to expand, schools of all kinds are increasingly motivated to include diversity and inclusion in their mission statements and enrollment goals (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018). Thus, there is an increasing need to understand the experiences of those students whose racial presence



is in part solicited, and simultaneously viscerally disruptive to the white normativity of private K-12 PWIs (DiAngelo, 2018).

Black students experience unique challenges in these spaces and have been vocal about the barriers to inclusion and belonging that exist for them. Research conducted by Schneider and Shouse (1992) found that Black students in predominantly white private schools are often perceived more negatively by their teachers in regards to their academic performance or classroom behavior, even when there is no measurable difference between theirs and that of other races. Black students are often able to perceive this unfair treatment, with some developing a sense of *academic futility* in response to their awareness of having little control over how they are perceived (Beady & Beady, 1993). Alternatively, some Black students choose low achievement for identity reasons, often being uniquely pressured with suggestions that academic success is misaligned with their Black identity (Fordham, 1985; Datnow & Cooper, 1997). Some students simply take on a ‘chameleon complex’ (Scruggs, 2010), learning to shift their identities for different people and contexts.

Some schools have responded to findings regarding the emotional toll of such experiences by providing students with affinity groups and culturally relevant curricula, intentionally seeking opportunities to improve the learning environment for Black students (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; DeCuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). Nonetheless, Jackson’s (2001) theory of Black identity development suggests that these experiences of isolation, racial invalidation, group membership navigation, and the juggling of numerous ‘selves’ may negatively impact the racial identity formation of Black youth, and the adults they become, who attended private K-12 PWIs.

While researchers have largely identified the challenges Black students face in predominantly white private schools, one area of research that has gone unexplored is an examination of the long-term impact of those experiences on the lives of such students. Without exploring all of the usual topics of interest through the reflections of Black adults who attended private K-12 PWIs, the body of research on Black students' experiences remains incomplete. Research is needed to understand how these experiences go on to impact the lives and identities of such students into adulthood, as well as to explore what meaning they ultimately went on to draw from these experiences. Through these firsthand adult reflections, there is also a unique opportunity to understand the needs of Black students living the experience today.

### **Background and Need**

Despite the fact that the American population is becoming increasingly racially diverse as a whole, this diversity does not translate to the country's private schools (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018). With income inequality increasing nationwide, the foundation has been set for an even greater decline in racial diversity at private K-12 schools. The need for this research arises in anticipation of these declines in campus diversity. As U.S. private schools become more segregated than they have ever been post-integration, it is important that educators understand how to support those students that may experience isolation within their educational spaces (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018).

This is especially true for predominantly white K-12 schools aiming to support Black students. The legacy of racism in the United States creates uncomfortable challenges around the positive

racial identity formation of Black students, particularly in settings where they are the racial minority and white students are the racial majority (Jackson, 2001). According to Critical Race Theory (CRT) these challenges exist because racism remains central and inherent to American society, and by extension, the American educational system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1998). The application of Critical Race Theory onto education becomes particularly useful for examining Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs, because it critiques many of the cultural, curricular, and programmatic elements of 'diversity and inclusion' that have been accepted as productive within the dominant ideology (Ladson-Billings, 2010). CRT asserts that racism and inequity must be treated as inherent, not incidental, within even the most well-meaning educational spaces. It is only in doing so that experiences for Black students can meaningfully improve, particularly in private K-12 PWIs.

However, research on this topic must go beyond attempts to provide solutions to the challenges Black students face within these spaces. As modern researchers in multicultural education discuss decolonizing education, Critical Race Theory calls for researchers to go a step further by amplifying the voices of Black students and adults (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1998). This field project represents my effort to bring Black voices to the forefront of the conversation around diversity and inclusion in private K-12 PWIs.

### **Purpose of the Project**

The purpose of this field project is to conduct a narrative inquiry into the experiences of Black adults who attended private PWIs during their K-12 education, in order to create a handbook synthesizing their insights and reflections. The purpose of this handbook is to offer an additional layer of understanding to Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs, beyond the usual

solutions for improving their experiences in the short-term. I also wish to use this project to amplify Black voices in the conversation around campus diversity and inclusion.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This field project will primarily use a critical race theory of education, as articulated by Ladson-Billings (2016) and Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). Ladson-Billings and Tate's concept of a critical race theory of education asserts that racism and inequity are central components of American society and the educational system (1995). These arguments stem from the field of critical legal studies, which asserts that racism is endemic to American society and the legal system is inherently unjust. By applying these concepts to education, Ladson-Billings and Tate offer a critical race theory of education as a framework for examining the intersections of race, property, and education reform (1995). Further, a critical race theory of education is an appropriate framework for this research because it troubles generally accepted liberal assertions that multiculturalism and colorblindness are best practices that serve Black students (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 2010).

This field project will employ the concepts of *microaggressions* and marginality, as articulated by Sue (2010). These concepts will be explored through a critical race theoretical framework to examine the impact of Black students' racialized experiences in predominantly white private schools. Sue's (2010) concept of microaggressions and marginality is particularly relevant to the impact component of my research. It is understood that Black students experience challenges to belonging and inclusion at predominantly white private schools. However, my research aims to explore the long-term impact of said challenges on the identity and perceptions of such Black

students in adulthood. Sue's concept of microaggressions and marginality is useful in illustrating the psychological impact of microaggressions on the lived experience of Black students, and can be used as a foundation for exploring the potential long-term effects of Black students being relegated to a position on the margins within their day-to-day experience in school (2010).

### **Methodology**

This field project will be based on narrative research informed by Critical Race Theory. The methods used will include two interviews with Black adults who attended predominantly white private schools in their youth. The data gathered will be coded according to theme and then used to inform the creation of a synthesizing handbook for Black students navigating private K-12 PWIs and their educators. The plan for protecting the human subjects in this study includes utilizing participant consent forms as a requirement of participating in the interviews, as well as using pseudonyms for all participants of this study. In the case of video recording or interview transcription, all data will be encrypted on a password-protected device.

### **Significance of the Project**

Data from this study has the potential to positively impact Black students who attend private K-12 PWIs. The shared experiences and validations provided by Black adults who lived the same experience in their youth may contribute to a lessened sense of isolation for Black students attending such schools. Similarly, it may provide such students with productive tools for managing the complexity of their experiences, along with a deeper understanding of how these experiences are reflective of a greater system and ought not be internalized. This understanding

has the potential to uniquely improve the experiences of Black students who attend private K-12 PWIs, by providing them with a blueprint from those who have already completed the journey.

Such preparation and early understanding of the experiences they face gives Black students a newfound opportunity to begin processing their experiences from a space of wisdom and optimism, instead of the usual lens of concern and despair. Similarly, it offers Black students a unique tool for enduring their isolation. Private school enrollment is not projected to increase in racial diversity anytime soon, meaning that Black students may not be able to hope for a critical mass of peers in their racial peer group to alleviate their isolation (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018). Therefore, educators and researchers must be creative in the solutions we provide to Black students within these spaces. The wisdom and reflections of Black adults who have processed their childhood experiences in predominantly white schools will be useful for understanding and supporting Black students currently within these contexts. The ultimate goal of my research is to enable Black students in private K-12 PWIs to begin building meaning out of their experiences in a productive and forward-thinking manner, while discouraging the internalization of their oppression that we see all too commonly instead.

In addition, data from this study may have the positive effect of generating greater urgency among educators within private K-12 PWIs. As the primary educators of American youth, and Black youth by extension, white educators are particularly essential to reforming America's racist education system. Without a critical understanding of the impact racialized school experiences have on Black students' lives long-term, teachers may make the mistake of trivializing students' calls for inclusion and more equitable campus norms. It is my hope that

urgency may be bred from understanding, and that the data from this research may arm teachers with an increased understanding on the long-term impact of their Black students' experiences in school.

Finally, this project is significant in that it offers an alternative perspective for examining Black students' experiences in predominantly white private schools—the perspective of these students in adulthood. In examining Black student experiences from the longitudinal lens of such students themselves, this data will engage in the liberatory practice of amplifying the marginalized voices of those who are central to the research. In doing so, this project contributes to the field of research that seeks to decolonize education by centering those whose narratives are typically left on the margins.

### **Definition of Terms**

- **Academic futility** – “Student academic futility is the feeling, on the part of some students, that the academic ‘deck of life’ is stacked against them and that there is relatively little they can do to overcome this situation” (Beady & Beady, 1993, p. 5).
- **Burden of acting white** – *The burden of acting white* describes “the contradictory nature of schooling for Black children, and their concurrent embracement and rejection of those behaviors” (Fordham, 1985, p. 4). *Acting white* describes the phenomena in which certain behaviors “are likely to be negatively sanctioned and therefore avoided by a large number of [Black] students” (Fordham, 1985, p. 4).

- **Microaggressions** – “Microaggressions can be defined as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights, invalidations, and insults to an individual or group because of their marginalized status in society” (Sue, 2010).
- **PWI** - Predominantly white institution; in the case of this research, private predominantly white K-12 schools.



## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

There is extensive research on the barriers to inclusion and belonging experienced by Black students who attend private K-12 predominantly white institutions (PWIs) (Beady & Beady, 1993), (Decuir-Gunby, 2007), (Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). Such research typically explores the challenges Black students face within these PWIs, the cultural norms that affect Black student inclusion and achievement, as well as possible solutions to improving the campus experiences of Black students within these spaces. While these are all important topics of exploration, the body of research remains incomplete, particularly in regard to the long-term impact of these experiences. A gap in the literature exists regarding how these experiences affect Black students into adulthood, specifically in terms of the meaning they go on to make from those experiences and how those experiences shape their personal and racial identities.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an important framework for radically evaluating—and ultimately transforming—the experiences of Black students in private K-12 PWIs. In support of this claim, the following chapter will be organized by theme, with each theme reflecting one of the five tenets of Critical Race Theory. These themes include (a) the centrality of racism, as illustrated by the racialized experiences of Black students at private K-12 PWIs (b) the social construction of race, with intersectionality being an appropriate lens for analyzing the ways microaggressions are experienced at private K-12 PWIs (c) a commitment to social justice, actualized by identifying the ways interest convergence is at play in private K-12 PWIs' recruitment of Black students (d) troubling widely accepted fallacies of progress and challenging the neoliberal ideologies within PWI culture by describing how it perpetuates the same racism it claims to

dismantle (e) recentering the experiential knowledge of Black students from PWIs, by collecting their reflections and counter-stories. Side by Side reasoning is used to connect these claims because the literature includes different authors, theorists, experts, and studies that address the centrality of race to Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs.

### **Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) asserts that race and racism are at the center of dominant culture in America. This section includes a brief history of CRT, which includes (a) original scholarship by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) that proposes the need for a critical race theory (b) the work of Haney Lopez (2000) which describes the social construction of race (c) a revisitation of prior work by Ladson-Billings (2016) in which she articulates exactly what CRT is and how it can be applied to education (d) the work of Bell (2016) in which he uses the Bell Curve theory to explore racism as a manifestation of white fear and power, as well as the ways CRT threatens the white desire for power and status. This progression of thought is important because it demonstrates the social construction of race and describes the tangible effects of race on society and the education system, while also articulating the resistance to the use of critical race theory in education.

The foundational works that articulate CRT include that of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995), in which the authors declare the need for a critical race theoretical perspective in addressing the persistent issue of racism in American schooling. The authors acknowledge the precedence of a 'multicultural' paradigm in education and argue that although racial differences may be hollowly addressed within this paradigm, it is ultimately a false narrative serving the same dominant

ideologies that reproduce inequities. A critical race theory of education, according to Ladson-Billings and Tate, would offer a radical critique of the dominant frameworks and thus disrupt the system of racial oppression in schools. Further, the authors argue that CRT intersects with education to produce three central beliefs, which they label as key features of a critical race theory of education. The first is the belief that racism is endemic to the American context, rather than a historical aberration. The second is that social and political gains for people of color are achieved only when there is benefit also for white people, which is a concept known as *interest convergence*. The third belief is the assertion that reality is constructed through personal narratives and counter-stories, and oppressed groups must have a hand in their own liberation. This original scholarship is important because it challenges the dominant ideologies that attempt to erase and dismiss the existence of racism in society and in schools.

Many authors have built on this foundation. For example, Haney Lopez (2000) articulates the social construction of race and asserts that race is inconsistent and volitional. This is related to the work of Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) because it demonstrates how race and racism are in fact central to American society. This addition to the field of CRT is important because it articulates in clear terms the ways that race is not natural, nor inevitable, but fabricated for a purpose (Haney Lopez, 2000). This purpose, according to CRT, is to oppress people of color while maintaining white supremacy. Building on Haney Lopez, and her own prior work with Tate, recent work by Ladson-Billings (2016) further clarifies how CRT applies to education. Central to this updated work by Ladson-Billings is her caution against the potential for misappropriation of CRT in education, and the need for ongoing professional development for educators situated to use CRT. This addition to the field of CRT is important because it

articulates the increasingly common efforts to distort CRT in ways that perpetuate white supremacy and dominant ideologies.

A final defining important work in this field of thought is presented by Bell (2016) who illustrates the commitment of whiteness to racism and white supremacy through an exploration of the Bell Curve theory. Specifically, Bell explores why Herrnstein and Murray, (1994) would choose to publish already-rejected theories of white intellectual superiority. Bell concluded that white people are afraid of CRT. According to Bell, CRT threatens the dominant group's sense of superiority and their belief in a just world of privilege. This addition to the field is important because it draws conclusions as to why there is pushback against CRT in education: CRT brings to life the greatest fear of the dominant group, which is a loss of status and power.

In summary, CRT claims that race and racism are central to American society and all the systems within it. Related to this is a body of research that demonstrates the practical application of CRT by applying it to Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs. The following sections describe this research and justify the claim that CRT is a useful and necessary tool for critically evaluating private K-12 PWIs and the potential long-term effects of these spaces on Black students.

### **The Centrality of Racism**

Research demonstrates that racism is endemic in predominantly white private school settings, despite the societal assertions claiming otherwise. This racism uniquely affects Black students' academic achievement and sense of belonging. Evidence of this can be found in the work of

Schneider and Shouse (1992), which illustrates that Black students are more likely to be misperceived by their teachers as misbehaving for the same behaviors that go unpunished when exhibited by their white peers. Further, Black students internalize this sense of being judged more severely for their behavior, causing tensions between them and their white teachers.

Similarly, Beady and Beady (1993) coined the term *academic futility* to describe the phenomenon in which Black students respond to their awareness of unequal treatment at school by withdrawing from the pursuit of academic achievement, instead resigning to the ‘futility’ of being entangled in an education system with more barriers to success than aids. Decuir and Dixon (2004), reference a quote from a Black student attending a PWI, who quipped that racism is so pervasive and steeped into campus culture that “when it comes out, [white students and faculty] aren’t that surprised that it is there” (p. 26). The authors assert that if racism is so insidious as to be unsurprising in these spaces, educational researchers must intentionally explore the role of race in the educational experiences of Black students.

Related to this, research illustrates that there are a number of ways Black students make meaning of their experiences with racism at PWIs. For example, Decuir-Gunby, Martin, and Cooper (2012) found that there is a deep complexity to the relationship between school environment, parental or familial involvement, and Black students’ racial identity development when attending private K-12 PWIs. Their research found that, if guided by the messaging of the school alone, Black students were likely to experience isolation and struggle to have positive regard for their racial identity. However, the impact of positive racial messaging and affinity group support from family and community could often counter these negative messages and experiences in school

(Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). Further, the authors found that the challenging racial climate of PWIs can occasionally have certain positive effects on Black students. Some students in their study reported that their racialized experiences in school heightened their understanding of the complexities of racism, creating a deepened sense of racial pride and solidarity.

A final body of research claims that the centrality of racism and experiences with racism are so impactful that they contribute to shaping the racial identity development of Black Americans. In his updated iteration of his theory of Black Identity Development, Jackson (2001, 1976) details the five stages of Black Identity Development with the additional inclusion of exit and entry phases at each stage. These stages are (1) Naive, characterized by an absence of social consciousness or identity; (2) Passive or Active Acceptance, characterized by consciously accepting (Active) or accepting without examining (Passive) the descriptions of and perceived value of Black people by the white, dominant culture; (3) Passive or Active Resistance, characterized by the rejection of the aforementioned dominant beliefs about Black people in a similar critical (Active) or non-critical (Passive) fashion; (4) Redefinition, in which Black people rename, reaffirm, and reclaim their racial identities; and, (5) Internalization, at which point a personally-redefined racial identity becomes integrated into all areas of one's self-identity (Jackson, 2001). Jackson was inclined to update his original theory in acknowledgement of the points of entry, adoption, and exit phases he observed in the lived experiences of many Black people. Rooted in Jackson's theory of Black Identity Development is the centrality of racism, in which interactions with racism directly affect a Black person's placement along the spectrum of racial identity formation. As such, Jackson's theory is well-applied to the experiences of Black students navigating private K-12 PWIs.

In all of the above research, racism is central to the experiences of Black people, and especially to Black students in predominantly white private schools. Taken together, this body of research justifies the claim that CRT and its related tenets are necessary tools for radically analyzing the experiences of Black students in private K-12 PWIs. The usefulness of CRT in understanding Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs is further evidenced by the applicability of an intersectional perspective when analyzing the ways microaggressions are experienced differently from student to student.

### **Analyzing Student Experiences Through an Intersectional Perspective**

Similar to the importance of acknowledging the centrality of racism to the experiences of Black students in private K-12 PWIs, research demonstrates that it is necessary to consider how an individual's intersecting identities uniquely affects their experiences with racial microaggressions. Microaggressions are defined as brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, which communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative slights, invalidations, and insults to an individual or group because of their marginalized status in society (Sue, 2010).

The relationship between microaggressions and intersectionality has been illustrated by research that demonstrates the ways classroom discipline and student perceptions of discipline vary by race (Schneider & Shouse, 1992). It is also highlighted by research that articulates a unique microaggression experienced by Black students in private K-12 PWIs. Some students report being ostracized by their peers for achieving academically, through labels that erase their Black

racial identity and instead encumber them with “the burden of acting white” (Fordham, 1985). Further, the importance of an intersectional perspective is evidenced by research that illustrates a unique response to racial microaggressions known as “academic futility” (Beady & Beady, 1993). Finally, the importance of an intersectional perspective is supported by research that claims Black students report feeling “doubly marginalized” in private K-12 PWIs; they struggle to find acceptance from both their racial peer group and the majority population of white students (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). Taken together, this body of research is important because it illustrates the ways a student’s racial identity can affect their experiences in school.

To begin, research illustrates that a tension and lack of shared perspective regarding classroom behaviors and discipline exists between Black students and their teachers at predominantly white private schools. Evidence of this can be found in Schneider and Shouse (1992), who analyzed data from the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988. Their data analysis revealed inconsistencies in teacher reports, compared to student reports, in respect to Black students’ academic ability, motivation, and interest. According to the teachers sampled, Black students were more disruptive, less engaged, and completed assignments with less consistency compared to white students. In contrast, according to students, teachers singled them out for punishments and expected less achievement from them compared to white students. These inconsistencies did not exist between the perceptions of white students and their teachers. The authors believe these mismatches of perception may have a negative impact on Black students’ school performance, sense of belonging, and the student-teacher relationship. In sum, this research articulates that students’ race intersects with achievement and treatment in the classroom, and will affect their experiences.



Related to this, research articulates that a tension also exists between Black students who achieve academically in private K-12 PWIs and those who reject academic achievement. Evidence of this can be found in research by Fordham (1985), who wished to more closely examine the experiences and motivations of Black students in predominantly white private schools.

Fordham's study illuminated a phenomenon in which Black students who choose to behave in ways their Black peers define as 'acting white' are disparaged amongst those Black students who self-manage their behavior in school to be aligned with those that are accepted by their racial group. The students in the former category find themselves with what Fordham coined the *burden of acting white*, and those in the latter category often resist school success in order to gain acceptance amongst their Black peers (Fordham, 1985). This research further illustrates the importance of considering a student's intersecting identities—and the similarly intersecting role expectations—by illustrating the ways in which Black students can be marginalized within private K-12 PWIs when their academic and racial identities are perceived to be in conflict with one another.

Additionally, research suggests that students' engagement in school may be affected by their intersecting identities. Evidence of this can be found in research by Beady and Beady (1993), who coined the term *academic futility*. This term describes a unique behavior Black students employ in response to systematic school-based oppression. Whereas some Black students focus on high academic achievement in private K-12 PWIs, risking the loss of acceptance from their Black peers, others reject academic achievement. This response can be understood as a form of individual agency and rebellion against an oppressive educational system (Beady & Beady,

1993; Fordham, 1985). For Black students in private K-12 PWIs, academic futility is one response to the unique barriers to achievement and inclusion associated with their intersecting academic and racial identities.

A final body of research claims that an intersectional perspective is key to understanding the *double marginalization* of Black students in predominantly white private schools. Datnow and Cooper (1997), define double marginalization as a unique experience in which Black students within predominantly white private schools experience marginalization both at school and at home. They struggle to fit in at school amidst white culture, as well as in their home contexts among their Black family, friends, and community members. This research illustrates that students at private K-12 PWIs can be negatively impacted by their complex and intersecting racial and academic identities.

In summary, research demonstrates that intersecting identities must be considered, as they will uniquely affect a person's experiences with racism and racial microaggressions. This is true particularly for Black students in private K-12 PWIs. This includes research that illustrates how teacher perceptions of classroom behavior can vary depending on the racial identity of a student, as well as a similar variance in perception of classroom discipline depending on the racial identity of a student (Schneider & Shouse, 1992), research that articulates the unique *burden of acting white* that Black students experience in school based on their racial identity (Fordham, 1985), research that illustrates an alternate response by Black students to the unique racial microaggressions they experience in school, known as *academic futility* (Beady & Beady, 1993), and research claiming that Black students experience double-marginalization within

predominantly white private schools based on the ways their racial and other identities intersect both in and out of the classroom (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). Taken together, this body of research justifies the claim that CRT and its related tenets are useful tools for understanding the experiences of Black students at private K-12 PWIs. The third tenet of CRT is similarly applicable, in which a commitment to social justice is demonstrated through the critical examination of interest convergence within these educational spaces.

### **Committing to Justice by Illuminating False Gains**

Similar to the applicability of an intersectional perspective, a commitment to social justice is warranted when analyzing Black students' experiences at predominantly white private schools. Maintaining a commitment to social justice demands the critique of the inequitable distribution of power and privilege. In the case of private K-12 PWIs, research demonstrates that interest convergence occurs when gains for school administrators, and the education system as a whole, are passed off as beneficial to Black students. (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018). This research explores the implications of segregation on the interests and admissions decisions of elite, predominantly white private schools. It also highlights the harmful experiences of isolation as well as *the burden of acting white* experienced by Black students (Fordham, 1985). In the case of private K-12 PWIs, a CRT frame may be used to radically transform Black students' experiences by exploring the factors of interest convergence, segregation, and isolation.

To begin, research illustrates that predominantly white private schools are incentivized to recruit Black students in an effort to maintain at least a bare minimum of diversity within the student body. Evidence of this can be found in the work of Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, Preeya, and

Lamb (2018), who analyzed almost 50 years of trends related to private school attendance in the United States. The authors illustrate how societal factors and socioeconomic trends hinder the formation of a critical mass of Black students on predominantly white private school campuses, often requiring schools to be intentional in their recruitment of Black students if they wish to have any at all. This research suggests that self-interest, not equity or inclusion, is likely at play when private K-12 PWIs recruit Black students. According to Fordham (1985) Black students at predominantly white private schools infer that they should be grateful to attend them. However, it is the schools that benefit from positive perceptions of diversity in their student population, often with little effort on their part to support their Black students.

Further, Black students often experience actual harm within private K-12 PWIs. This is evidenced by Fordham's (1985) research on intergroup relations among Black students at a private K-12 PWI. Fordham's concept of *the burden of acting white* illuminates the ways in which Black students are often placed between a rock and a hard place in a predominantly white school. Fordham's research demonstrates that academic achievement can mar Black students' reputation with their peers, and cause harm to their sense of self. This research suggests that Black students at predominantly white private schools grapple with conflicting narratives. The institutional message often positions Black students as the beneficiaries of the gift of an elite educational experience. However, the lived experiences of Black students within these spaces are complex and can include factors such as isolation from Black peers on campus, alienation from family members, and a compromised sense of self. The benefits of their attendance are more directly enjoyed by the school as an institution and among administration.

In summary, research demonstrates that in order to transform Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs, it is essential to critique the narrative that these spaces are a gift to Black students. This includes research that illustrates the incentives behind private K-12 PWIs' recruitment of Black students (Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, & Lamb, 2018), and research that articulates the ways PWIs can actually harm Black students who enroll. Taken together, this body of research justifies the research claim that CRT can be used to understand and transform the experiences of Black students at private K-12 PWIs.

### **Challenging the Dominant Ideology**

Similar to the necessity of maintaining a commitment to social justice, research demonstrates that the fourth tenet of CRT, the critique of liberalism, is a necessary tool for exploring the experiences of Black students at private K-12 PWIs. It is important to challenge the ways that the liberal ideals of private school culture fail Black students, while perpetuating the white dominant ideologies they claim to dismantle. This section includes research that illustrates the ways Black students struggle to navigate the culture of elitism at predominantly white private schools, as well as the challenges to positive racial identity development Black students experience (Decuir-Gunby, 2007), (Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). It also includes research suggesting that in some cases, Black students manage to improve their own experiences within these educational spaces by redefining success in ways that both prize academic achievement and honor their cultural identity (Datnow & Cooper, 1997). It ends with a discussion of how CRT can be used to critique education systems and their lack of responses to the needs and experiences of Black children (Decuir & Dixon, 2004). This is important because in order to transform Black students' experiences within private K-12 PWIs, researchers must

challenge the widely accepted multicultural and colorblind ideologies prevalent within private K-12 PWIs.

Research illustrates that Black students often have difficulty navigating the colorblind ideology, which claims race does not matter, common at predominantly white private schools (Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). Decuir-Gunby (2007) found that Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs deviated greatly from the dominant belief in colorblindness. Contrary to the school's belief in colorblindness, Black students in this study had an internalized sense that they were unable or unpermitted to participate in the school's elite culture; they felt excluded as they struggled to navigate the 'bubble' of whiteness created by such a culture. Related to this, Decuir-Gunby, Martin, and Cooper (2012) claim that there is a disparity between the high quality of education available and the low quality of social integration available to Black students at predominantly white private schools. The authors' findings suggest that private K-12 PWIs can harm the positive racial identity of Black students. Further, they assert that a positive racial identity must be cultivated through the combined efforts of parents, affirming interpersonal interactions at school, culturally relevant school programs and curricula, and the positive racial affirmation of all adults at school and at home. In sum, Black students must have their racial identities actively affirmed, if they are to have a positive school experience (Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). This stands in direct conflict with the colorblind ideology typically adopted at private K-12 PWIs.

Further, researchers must critique the dominant narrative that Black students are less interested in, or capable of, academic achievement. This is evidenced by research from Datnow and Cooper

(1997) which demonstrates the ways Black students at a particular PWI were able to redefine popularity and peer group success. According to the authors, the students did this in ways that both prized academic achievement and honored their cultural identity, such as creating an academic accountability group within their tight-knit campus club for Black students. The dominant ideology often places Black students at a deficit in terms of academic ability or achievement. Through their CRT-informed research study, Datnow and Cooper illuminate an alternate reality in which Black students can and do succeed in these spaces by affirming themselves and each other.

Similarly, Decuir and Dixon (2004) demonstrate the applicability of CRT to the study of the experiences of Black students at predominantly white schools. Through their case study of two Black students' experiences within such a setting, Decuir and Dixon (2004) found that racism was so insidious as to be unsurprising. At the schools included in this study, the dominant ideology insisted that racism no longer existed on campus. While the schools attempted to erase racism with an illusion of colorblindness, the students in the case study articulated a different narrative. According to the students, when racist incidents occurred on campus their white peers and teachers are unsurprised. Thus, the authors assert that if racism is so insidious as to be unsurprising in PWIs, educational researchers must intentionally explore the role of race in the educational experiences of Black students.

In summary, research demonstrates that challenges to the dominant ideology are essential to understanding the ways in which these ideologies are maintained and reproduced to the detriment of Black students. This includes research that illustrates the ways Black students

struggle to navigate the dominant culture and their own identity development within private K-12 PWIs (Datnow & Cooper, 1997; Decuir-Gunby, 2007; Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012). It also includes research that illuminates the presence of racism at private K-12 PWIs, despite institutional narratives that insist otherwise (Decuir & Dixon, 2004). Taken together, this body of research justifies the claim that CRT is a useful and necessary tool for critically evaluating—and ultimately transforming—the experiences of Black students at predominantly white private schools.

### **Recentering the Experiential Knowledge of Black Students**

Similarly, centering the experiential knowledge of Black students -- which also decenters dominant ideologies -- has empowering and potentially liberatory effects for Black students navigating private K-12 PWIs. This includes research on (a) curricula that addresses academic futility, (b) the power of affinity groups, (c) the importance of soliciting and privileging the stories and experiences of Black students (Beady & Beady, 1993; Decuir-Gunby, 2007; Parsons & Ridley, 2012). This is important because in order to transform the experiences of Black students at predominantly white private schools, researchers must not only critique systems of oppression, but also examine existing avenues of liberation and positive identity formation.

To begin, research illustrates that *academic futility*, or the resignation of academic achievement observed in some Black students at PWIs, is not innate and can be transformed (Beady & Beady, 1993). Evidence of this can be found in Beady and Beady's research demonstrating that Black students' motivation levels can transform through their engagement with drawing, writing, the arts, and a dedicated curriculum that addresses academic futility and builds the student-teacher



relationship. As students gather evidence that their educators are invested in them and their curriculum reflects their experience, their engagement levels markedly improve (Beady & Beady). The findings illustrate that academic futility is not innate and can in fact be transformed through simple interventions.

Related to this, research articulates that affinity spaces can have transformative effects on Black students who attend private K-12 PWIs. Evidence of this can be found in the work of Parsons and Ridley (2012) who explore how students of color often struggle to make sense of their experiences and feelings as racial minorities in their PWIs. The authors argue for the importance of providing students of color with affinity spaces that allow the students to process their feelings and have their experiences validated. The findings of this study suggest that students may see tangible increases in academic success, and considerable improvement to their emotional well-being, if they are able to participate in an affinity space (Parsons & Ridley, 2012). In sum, this research illustrates that racial affinity groups are meaningful not only for the social belonging of Black students but may also contribute to their emotional well-being and academic achievement within private K-12 PWIs.

A final related study explores how Black students struggle to permeate the ‘bubble’ of white culture at private K-12 PWIs. The term ‘bubble’ is used by Decuir-Gunby (2007) to describe “an atmosphere that promoted white racial/cultural hegemony” that feels separate from the “real world” Black students experience outside of school (35). DiAngelo (2018) describes this marginality Black students feel in relation to the bubble through her concept of white normativity, which “[defines] whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a

deviation from that norm” (25). Decuir-Guby suggests that the bubble can be disrupted by injecting and amplifying the experiences and stories of the Black students on campus. Affirming the presence and voices of Black students in private K-12 PWIs can begin to shift the culture of these spaces, if and when these stories and experiences are sought after and respected. Such engagement, Decuir-Gunby argues, may help Black students to navigate the bubble of white culture and may ultimately disrupt the cycle of Black student exclusion in private K-12 PWIs.

In summary, research demonstrates that affirming the experiential knowledge of Black students can be used to transform the dominant culture at PWIs. This includes research that illustrates the transformative power of art and culturally relevant curricula (Beady & Beady, 1993). It also includes research that articulates the liberatory power of affinity groups for Black students within private K-12 PWIs, as well as the potential for disrupting dominant ideologies by giving a voice to Black students (Decuir-Gunby, 2007; Parsons & Ridley, 2012). Taken together, this body of research justifies the research claim that CRT is an important framework for transforming the lived experiences of Black students at private K-12 PWIs.

### **Summary**

This literature review claims that CRT is an effective framework for radically evaluating, and ultimately transforming, the experiences of belonging and inclusion for Black students in predominantly white private schools. Evidence that supports this claim includes research that explores the centrality of racism within private K-12 PWIs (Schneider & Shouse, 1992; Beady & Beady, 1993; DeCuir-Gunby, Martin & Cooper, 2012; Decuir & Dixon, 2004; Jackson III, 2001). It also includes a body of research that articulates the necessity of an intersectional lens

when analyzing Black students' experiences within these spaces (Schneider & Shouse, 1992; Fordham, 1985; Beady & Beady, 1993; Datnow & Cooper, 1997). A third set of studies supports this claim by demonstrating the importance of maintaining a social justice lens by acknowledging the interest convergence that exists in PWIs (Fordham, 1985; Murnane, Reardon, Mbekeani, Preeya, & Lamb, 2018). A fourth set of studies explores the necessity of challenging the dominant ideologies that conflict with Black students' lived experiences (Decuir-Gunby, 2007; Decuir-Gunby, Martin, & Cooper, 2012; Datnow & Cooper, 1997; DeCuir & Dixon, 2004). Related to this, a final body of research illustrates the power and liberatory potential of centering the experiential knowledge of Black students as they attempt to navigate the 'bubble' of white culture that exists at PWIs (Beady & Beady, 1993; Parsons & Ridley, 2012).

This claim and body of evidence address the unique challenges and barriers experienced by Black students in private K-12 PWIs by offering CRT as a framework for critical evaluation and radical transformation. Within the existing literature there is valuable data about the experiences of Black students in private K-12 PWIs. An important gap in the literature, however, is the lack of reflections and understandings developed over time by Black adults who attended private K-12 PWIs. This gap in the literature is important because in order to understand the full significance of Black students' experiences in private K-12 PWIs, research must explore the long-term effects and beliefs that were borne of those experiences. This can only happen by gathering and analyzing the reflections and narratives of Black adults who formerly attended private K-12 PWIs.

For my field project, I interviewed two Black adults who attended private K-12 PWIs in their youth. I conducted individual interviews with the goal of better understanding their racialized experiences at PWIs, and how they went on to make sense of those experiences within the greater narrative of their lives and personal identities. I will present my findings in the form of a CRT-informed handbook, synthesizing thoughts from the adults I interview to provide insights and recommendations to current Black students and their educators at private K-12 PWIs. As an admissions officer and affinity group facilitator, I have seen firsthand the power that knowledge of self and a space to share stories and experiences can have on Black youth in private K-12 PWIs. This field project adds to a body of literature further amplifying Black voices and informing the educators of Black youth.

## **CHAPTER III**

### **THE PROJECT AND ITS DEVELOPMENT**

#### **Brief Description of the Project**

This field project is a Critical Race Theory (CRT)-informed handbook that synthesizes thoughts from the two Black adults I interviewed with CRT analysis. The purpose of this handbook is to provide insights and recommendations to current Black students and their educators at private K-12 predominantly white institutions (PWIs). I developed this project with the goal of gaining insight into the long-term effects of racialized experiences at private K-12 PWIs on Black students, how Black students go on to make sense of those experiences into adulthood, and how those experiences shaped their personal narratives and racial identities. This handbook provides Black students currently navigating private K-12 PWIs with solidarity, validation of their experience, and information about the greater, historical systems that factor into their daily experiences at school. This handbook is also a useful tool for educators that work with Black students at private K-12 PWIs, by offering a) firsthand descriptions from adults who can speak to the experience from a place wisdom, distance, and expanded context; b) a clear overview of CRT, with descriptions of each tenet as applied to the specific private K-12 PWI context; c) a critique, and perhaps deepened understanding, about the inequities and burdens placed up Black students in their schools.

The handbook is organized into four different sections. The first section, titled “An Introduction to Critical Race Theory”, includes a brief introduction to CRT and its foundational scholars. This

section will begin by defining CRT, introducing its seminal scholars, and discussing its beginnings. This will be followed by an overview of the five key tenets of CRT. This section of the handbook serves as an introduction to the framework guiding my project. The goal of this section is to help familiarize the reader with key concepts guiding the project, and to begin initiating them into the context of the findings presented in the forthcoming sections.

In the second section of the handbook, titled “Experiences with Racial Microaggressions at private K-12 PWIs”, I will begin presenting the findings from the interviews I conducted with Black adults who attended private K-12 PWIs in their youth. This section will focus on the first of three themes that appeared consistently in each interview: racial microaggressions. This section will analyze the interview subjects’ experiences with racial microaggressions and offer support from the literature on CRT.

In the third section of the handbook, titled “Navigating Social Inclusion and Belonging at private K-12 PWIs”, I will continue presenting the findings from my interviews by this time focusing on a second consistent theme: challenges with social inclusion and belonging as Black students at private K-12 PWIs. This section will analyze the interview subjects’ experiences with social inclusion and belonging and offer support from the literature on CRT.

In the fourth section of the handbook, titled “Forming a Racial Identity at private K-12 PWIs”, I will continue presenting the findings from my interviews by this time focusing on the third and final overarching theme: a unique journey with racial identity formation as shaped by their experiences as Black students at private K-12 PWIs.

In the fifth and final section of the handbook, titled “Looking Back and Moving Forward”, I will present the insights and reflections that were provided by the interview subjects in regard to their experiences as Black students at private K-12 PWIs. The goal of this section is to ultimately use the wisdom of prior Black students at private K-12 PWIs to offer recommendations that may aid in transforming the experiences of current Black students in these spaces. I see this as a necessary, full circle opportunity to amplify Black voices in the movement to transform our educational experiences for the better.

### **Development of the Project**

I was inspired to pursue this project because of its personal relevance to my life in a number of ways. When I started my field project, I was employed at a private K-12 PWI in the Bay Area and worked closely with the school’s small population of Black students. I started working there around the same time that I began USF’s graduate program in International and Multicultural Education. I quickly saw alignment between the feelings and experiences I observed my students going through, and the concepts I was learning in class. My learnings from the Critical Race Theory course were particularly applicable to my observations of Black students’ experiences at my workplace, as well as the school’s responses to racial concerns on campus.

I also experienced attending a private K-12 PWI myself in elementary school. I later attended a PWI for my undergraduate program in college. In both experiences, I recall feeling distinctly separate from the norm, even as a well-liked and high achieving student. I still have painful memories of microaggressions I experienced from teachers and classmates and can attest to the

journey that is developing a positive racial identity within a culture that was developed with whiteness at the center. I remember the feelings of inadequacy that arose from knowing I could not possibly fit the ideal standard that was being modeled for me in those spaces. While I eventually shook off those feelings (for the most part), I wonder today how my trajectory might have been different if I had not spent those years internalizing what I know now to be a cultural message of white supremacy.

The more I learned about CRT, the more I realized that there was language and research to describe all the experiences I struggled to process growing up--the same experiences I later witnessed the Black students at my workplace enduring. I found myself wishing that I could share this newfound knowledge with young Black people navigating private K-12 PWIs. This field project provided that opportunity, while also allowing me to call in other experienced Black adult voices for their wisdom.

Today, I have a different job and no longer work closely with the Black students who in many ways inspired this research. However, in a way this makes the importance of my project that much more evident. Black students will often find themselves with limited faculty and staff of color to support them at private K-12 PWIs. The few adults of color who do work in those spaces often experience burnout, as did I, that makes longevity in their roles hard to count on. Thus, in the probable absence of a critical mass of support staff of color, I hope my handbook can stand in to validate and offer perspective to the experiences of Black students at private K-12 PWIs.



Finally, this research is being completed in the midst of the global COVID-19 outbreak. While I originally intended to interview four or more participants, the logistics around scheduling and a suddenly very busy world meant that I was limited to two participants for this study. However--fortunately for my research, but less so for the state of education--the two interviews I conducted produced far more data on racialized experiences in school than I could report in this study. I hope to one day continue this research and further expand my dataset, as I believe this issue is far-reaching and will only grow increasingly relevant as our society's economic disparities grow.

Overall, I hope that this handbook can offer insight to these students' educators, helping them better understand the unique challenges presented by their school environments so they can better support their Black students.

## **The Project**

### **Black Students, White Schools, and Racism**

Exploring the experiences, challenges, and resilience of Black students at private K-12 predominantly white institutions (PWIs) through their reflections in adulthood and analyzing those experiences through a CRT framework.

#### **Section I: An Introduction to Critical Race Theory**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) began to take form in the late 1970s as a subset of critical legal studies. In “The History and Conceptual Elements of Critical Race Theory” (2013), Brown and Jackson detail how scholars used critical legal studies to address inequities in United States law, until ultimately finding the field to be limited in how much it could transform the legal system. Critical Race Theory was born and was soon applied to education as well as the legal field. Gloria Ladson-Billings and William Tate IV are identified as pioneers in the application of CRT to education.

In their groundbreaking article “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education” (1995), Ladson-Billings and Tate proposed the need for a critical race theoretical perspective in addressing the persistent issue of racism in American schooling. They acknowledged the precedence of a multicultural paradigm in education but argued that although racial differences may be hollowly addressed within this paradigm, it is ultimately a false narrative serving the same hegemonic ideologies that reproduce inequities. A critical race theory of education, according to the Ladson-

Billings and Tate, would offer a radical critique of the dominant frameworks and thus disrupt the system of racial oppression in schools. Critical Race Theory intersects with education to produce the following beliefs, which the authors label as key features of a critical race theory of education:

1. Racism is endemic to American society and continues to be deeply relevant, not an aberration in American history as the country’s cultural messaging frequently suggests.
2. Social and political gains for people of color are achieved only when there is benefit also for white people, and this has been especially true in civil rights and education reform.
3. Reality is constructed through personal narratives, and oppressed groups must tell their stories in order to shape their own liberation.

From these intersections came the five tenets of CRT (Hiraldo, 2010). The five tenets of CRT are demonstrated in Table 1.

**Table 1**

*The Five Tenets of CRT*

Tenet	Description
Counter-storytelling	A framework that legitimizes the racial and subordinate experiences of marginalized groups. Counter-stories are the personal, experiential narratives of people of color that often serve to

	dispute and question the dominant, white normative narrative (Ladson-Billings, 1998).
The centrality and intersectionality of racism	The assertion that racism is a deeply-embedded and inextricable part of American society, in which white people are privileged over people of color in every institution, and that one's experiences with racism will be uniquely affected by one's intersecting identities (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).
Whiteness as property	Whiteness, which began as a social construct within the construction of race, over time evolved beyond a racial identity and into a form of property protectable by law and unavailable to people of color. Whiteness has been protected as an exclusive form of property in various ways over American history (Harris, 1993).
Interest convergence	The assertion that white people are the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation, and that gains for people of color occur only if they also benefit white, hegemonic interests (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).

The critique of liberalism	The commitment to challenging widely accepted liberal ideologies, such as colorblindness and equal opportunity, by arguing that they perpetuate the same racism they claim to dismantle (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004).
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## Section II: Experiences with Racial Microaggressions at private K-12 PWIs

One theme that emerged from the data was the common experience of both witnessing and being on the receiving end of racial microaggressions. The interview participants both shared memories of being victims of microaggressions from peers, teachers, and parents in the school community. There were also uncomfortable recollections of witnessing other Black students be subjected to microaggressions.

For example, one participant shared an experience of being repeatedly mistaken for the one other Black student in their class of twenty students. She continued:

Nothing about us was alike, except the fact that we were Black. We didn't look alike, we didn't dress alike, we didn't hang out with any of the same people. We literally sat on opposite sides of the room. But all the time, the teacher would mix our names up. It was so annoying.

Another participant shared an experience with microaggressions from teachers, observing that she was commonly stereotyped as being exceptional because she was smart and Black:

All the teachers were white, and I remember distinctly that all the teachers were super impressed by my abilities. I didn't think that much about it then, but there was definitely the sense that I was exceeding their expectations.

The second tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism, responds to these phenomena of microaggressions by calling out America's societal preference for whiteness and the subjugatory stereotypes of Black people that are embedded, though often discreetly coded, into our white-dominant society.

Black students often make the mistake of internalizing these experiences with microaggressions, believing them to be an accurate reflection of their worth, performance, or abilities. However, CRT asserts that these experiences with microaggressions are a natural outcome of a hegemonic education system in which racism is endemic.

### **Section III: Navigating Social Inclusion and Belonging at private K-12 PWIs**

Another theme that emerged from the data was the common experience of unique challenges around social inclusion and belonging for Black students at private K-12 PWIs.

One participant spoke about her experience with being courted as an applicant, only to later find herself socially isolated as a Black student on campus. She also describes the ways her private PWI high school seemed to intentionally over-inflate the diversity on campus:

I had a [white] eighth grade teacher who encouraged me to consider boarding schools, and said they would give me money because they want more Black people. I ended up interviewing at about four or five different boarding schools. They would fly me out, and they all gave messages like “we’re going to get you into the Ivy League or a top university. We’re going to help you grow as a leader and make you academically stronger.” They had top alumni, world-renowned this and that. So I think my mom felt good about that.

And they show and highlight a lot of the international students, which can throw you for a loop...when I packed up my stuff and went, I did not expect to be the only Black student in my class. From looking at the flyers and seeing a few culturally ambiguous students in the brochures, I was shocked to get there and see that I was the only Black student in the class. I actually ended up getting close with a lot of upperclassmen, because their classes had a few more Black students than mine for some reason. But it was definitely not prepared to get there and find that I was the only one in my grade.

CRT responds to this phenomenon through the fourth tenet, interest convergence. Despite ultimately providing a culturally unsupportive educational environment, the school sought out the subject through a diversity program specifically aimed to funnel in more Black and Brown

students. The school's marketing oversold the diversity on campus, successfully recruiting the subject through her belief that there would be a larger mass of Black and Brown students on campus. Further, despite messaging that she was fortunate to receive an elite education that would greatly benefit her, there was little acknowledgement of the ways her presence benefitted the school community and administrators. Arguably, her presence was more beneficial to the institution than the other way around, as she ensured they did not have to place a "0" next to the Black student population for her grade that year.

Another participant reported feeling uniquely scrutinized in her private K-8 PWI and singled out for Blackness, in a way that made her feel separate from the rest of the student body:

Little things always reminded me I was different. Every time--and I mean every time--I did something different with my hair, I got comments and questions. Honestly, it made me not want to get braids...I stopped wearing them, really, until I got to college. I hated those questions.

And then the white kids would always kind of put me against the other Black girl in our class. They would always come to me to ask things like, "why does she do that?" or "what does this thing that she said mean?" And it would be like...I don't know!

Everything she does isn't because she's Black. Why would I know?

Similarly, one participant shared her experience of not bringing her full self to school, and struggling with the norm differences between her life at school and her life at home:



Looking back, there definitely were times when I assimilated. Things like my hair—that was a big struggle. That’s when I started really getting into weaves. I was wearing different clothes and dressing really different.

I remember coming home to old friends, and they would kinda be like “...what you got on?”, or, “why do you talk like that?” Stuff like that. I think I thought I was being myself, but there were still certain things I did to ride the wave and fit in.

Further, one participant described the isolation she experienced navigating a curriculum and campus climate that was culturally insensitive and unsupportive:

There were a lot of little uncomfortable moments that would happen. Like in eighth grade, when we did a project where we were all supposed to trace our family history back to our country of origin. And I went to my [white] teacher like...obviously, I can’t do that. And she was like “No, just try! I’m sure you can talk to your parents or something and see.” So I just boycotted that project [laughs]. But it’s crazy that she didn’t see that that was a problem.

Another time, me and my white friend got into it online on instant messenger, and she called me the n-word. That wasn’t the first time she had done that, either. So this time, I was all ready to get her in trouble: I printed out the messages and showed them to our

teacher at school the next day. And the teacher told *me* that I should let it go and be the bigger person. And I started crying.

I remember going home to my mom later and telling her the story, and she was like “you should’ve beat that little girl up, instead of crying!” But I didn’t want to beat her up, I wanted to see her get in trouble for what she said. And beating her up only would’ve made things worse for me, anyway, not her.

The third tenet of CRT, Whiteness as property, is fully on display in the instances named above. This tenet of CRT argues that full inclusion and belonging for Black students in these spaces would be impossible, based on the foundational structure and cultural norms of these schools. Black students are unable to participate in the same way white students are, because the fabric of the institution was woven with the threads of whiteness; Black students were not in mind in the fabrication of this environment, and thus, they will naturally feel the discomfort of existing outside the intended mold.

This tenet would also point out that this inability to find belonging is often upheld by the school administration, as evidenced by the unequal classroom discipline, an insensitive curriculum, and the protection of white students’ feelings over Black students’ sense of safety.

CRT also supports the final reflection through the fifth tenet, the critique of liberalism. Here, the subject insists that the colorblind, race-avoidant ideology adopted at school was as harmful as the racist encounter itself, if not more so because the institution is looked to to regulate and rectify

wrongdoings. There is a responsibility teachers and administrators have that gets blurred within liberal political-correctness, but is clearly named in CRT. For the protection of Black students in these spaces, CRT proves itself to be an essential tool for naming harmful practices and creating a sense of responsibility amongst educators.

#### **Section IV: Forming a Positive Racial Identity at private K-12 PWIs**

A final common theme that emerged from the data was the shared emergence of distinctive challenges as Black students attempting to form a positive racial identity within a private K-12 PWI.

One participant described her initial reaction of retreating into herself, followed by the decision to ultimately re-chart her path and take up space in the community:

I think at first, I really was just in a shell for those first few weeks of school. Didn't really make a lot of relationships, and I really wanted to go home. But my mom wouldn't let me...she wanted me to at least get through a year.

But one of my teachers early on saw something in me and told me he wanted me to break out of my shell. He encouraged me to join ASB. So, I think at first I started in a shell, but then I decided 'you know what? I'm just gonna be seen. I'm gonna expose them to Black people.' Because most of them were like "my neighbor is Black" or "my friend is Black"

or “my nanny is Black”, but they really had not had a real Black friend or conversations with everyday Black people.

I think I and many older Black kids on campus had that “I’m loud, I’m seen, I’m gonna be extra”, outgoing and popular personality. That was our take on it—to be seen, become known. It was either that or stay in the shell. So I became Class President, started to get to know people, and just kinda learned to get in where I fit in.

There was another Black kid on student council with me, though, who was the type to do stuff like say racist things against Black people, make racist jokes...like he would be the main one to make a racist Black joke. I think that was his way of coping and trying to fit in. My style was more “push back” and “be excellent.”

In contrast, another participant illustrated her experience of being accepted by her white classmates while observing her other Black classmate get shunned, and reflected on the costs of both:

I never had much of a problem making friends at school. My K-8 was small, with just twenty or so students per grade. So it’s hard to not be friends.

But the way I was treated was definitely night and day to how they treated the one other Black girl in our grade. They excluded her and just generally thought she was weird. I do think it was because she kind of “clung to her Blackness” more...I think she had learned that at home, and she wasn’t accepted at school because of it.

Meanwhile, I could still relate to my classmates, because unlike her, I was in the same socioeconomic status as them. So we had the same toys, we did the same activities outside of school like soccer, my family went on vacations.

It almost felt like I set the model for what they thought the other Black girl should be. But she was different, so she was weird.

As for me, I was “normal”, but there was always a part of me I felt like I couldn’t share with my classmates, because they wouldn’t understand. Just basic things like some of my interests, Black culture, the R&B I listened to, TV shows on BET and UPN. If I wanted someone to relate to on stuff like that, it was gonna be my family. So, in a way I did kind of assimilate, because I also watched the popular TV my friends at school watched, like Friends and MTV.

CRT applies to these experiences through the second tenet, the intersectionality of racism, which asserts that one’s positioning and identity across the many different areas of life will uniquely affect one’s experiences with race. In the second example above, we see the ways two Black students in the same predominantly white space are treated differently due to differences in their socioeconomic status. For the interview subject, her positioning in the same socioeconomic class as her white peers allowed her to more easily navigate her school environment, with less adjusting required on her part to fit the norm. Whereas, in the first example, we see the ways a Black student almost gives up on trying to find belonging in her predominantly white school

environment, before ultimately choosing to lean into her difference and make it a source of individuality. For one subject, her specific intersectionality made it easier to assimilate at school; for the other, the unique intersection of her identities meant needing to forge her own path, because assimilation just wasn't feasible. Both come with pros and cons, to be discussed in the next section.

### **Section V: Looking Back and Moving Forward**

In the final portion of the research interviews, I asked the participants to share their reflections of their journey as Black students who attended PWIS during their K-12 experience.

One participant discussed the importance of mentorship and perspective, as well as her realization that she had wisdoms as a Black student that she did not fully appreciate at the time. She also described how her experience at a PWI strengthened her resolve to find community in college:

Looking back, there's a lot of things that I did that helped me get through it, but also things I wish I had known. For one: find a mentor or someone who you can look up to, be honest with, and really trust. Probably let that person be outside of your family...I think in high school, that's the time you usually try to figure things out with your friends. But if your friends don't share the same background as you, you have to think about who can really relate.

Then, just understanding that there's more life to come. Like back then, not being able to get the same Dior prom dress, etc.—I remember falling out with my mom over stuff like that. But you still have so much more of yourself to explore and develop at that age. So just knowing that there's more to come. I left that experience knowing that I would probably not be close to most of those people ever again, and it's true. I'm not. But it did help me go to college knowing that finding Black friends was important to me. And so I made a point to do that, and those are some of my closest friends to this day.

And the last thing: if you feel something is off, say something. Don't second-guess yourself. Trust your instincts. Don't discredit your street smarts you learned from wherever you came from, because that's what cannot be taught. Let it be your strength.

Similarly, another participant shared that her relationships from the PWIs she attended are sparse. She also discussed the power she found in expanding her Black community and expanding her Black cultural knowledge in college:

Looking back, one thing I do regret is not making more of an effort to be friends with the other Black girl in my class. I still don't really think we had much in common, but today I understand that basic kind of sisterhood between Black women. Like, I try to always smile and say "hi" if I pass another Black girl on the street. I love that little moment. But I wasn't really thinking like that back then.

When I got to college, which was also a PWI, I specifically chose to live in the Black-interest dorm. That was my first time being friends with so many Black people and just feeling like I could be myself all the time. I could take classes with Black professors, about Black culture, and that's when I really feel like I started to become fully aware and embracing of my Blackness. Like, I was never unaware or rejecting of my Blackness, but I guess college is when I really started to build my own identity as to what Blackness could mean for me.

CRT supports these reflections through the first tenet, counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling centers experiential knowledge, which is a radical departure from the hegemonic norm of centering white stories and beliefs. This handbook radically centers the narratives and privileges the viewpoints of prior Black students in private K-12 PWIs, and is offered to current such students as a tool of personal liberation.

## **Conclusion**

This research was revealing in a number of ways. However, the overarching theme made evident from this research is that race matters at school and is uniquely challenging to navigate as a Black student attending a private K-12 PWI. As Critical Race Theory is based in the assertion that race matters and is a central organizing factor within *all* American institutions, it is useful in critiquing those institutions and their hegemonic norms. My research illustrates that CRT is uniquely positioned to disrupt the liberal narratives that normalize or conceal racism within predominantly white educational spaces.



A key takeaway I determined from this research is the need to include Black students in the discussions about how to best support them. The interview participants in this study both reported feeling silenced or disregarded by their educators, making self-advocacy difficult when racist experiences did occur. As an educator, I can speak to the imperativeness of teachers taking a genuine interest in their students, and most importantly, being willing to hear and respond to the ways that their educational space may be harmful. Further, this research also confirmed additional research in the field that affirms the need for cultural sensitivity, awareness, and a culturally relevant curriculum in order for Black students to be comfortable and thrive in private K-12 PWIs.

Another key finding I drew from this research was the essentialness of Black students educating themselves on Black history and culture, and actively seeking opportunities to engage with other Black students. Both interview subjects reported that liberation and the ability to fully embrace their Black identity came from their own cultural engagement and self-education. In doing so, both were able to find a certain comfort in their racial identity, and were thus better able to cultivate a meaningful personal identity overall. Thus, I encourage Black students at private K-12 PWIs to reimagine themselves as powerful actors with the ability to transform their own experiences. I believe Black students' experiences in PWIs will be most powerfully altered not when driven by 'diversity and inclusion' initiatives, but when driven by our own collective wisdom, experiential knowledge, and action.

Paolo Freire speaks to this perfectly in his vision for liberation, which I share, as detailed in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*:

Attempting to liberate the oppressed without their reflective participation in the act of liberation is to treat them as objects which must be saved from a burning building; it is to lead them into the populist pitfall and transform them into masses which can be manipulated.

... To achieve this praxis however, it is necessary to trust in the oppressed and their ability to reason. [It is necessary] unless one intends to carry out the transformation *for* the oppressed rather than *with* them. It is my belief that only the latter form of transformation is valid. (Freire, 1970, p. 27)

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