Racial Dialogues: A Phenomenological Study of Difficult Dialogues from the Perspective of High School English Teachers

Dissertation
Submitted to Northcentral University
Graduate Faculty of the School of Psychology
in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

by

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Prescott Valley, Arizona
August 2014
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Abstract

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of six secondary English teachers in the Southeastern United States as they facilitated racial dialogues relative to the instruction of literary texts bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes, language, and events. This study was important, as racialized discourse has been recognized as becoming more difficult in work settings and classrooms in past years. Research conducted in universities revealed that faculty lack training and racial self-awareness to feel comfortable addressing issues of race in the classroom. Further, the issue of difficult racial dialogues is not just a problem affecting university faculty and students; it exists in the public K-12 school settings as well. The findings of this study show secondary literature teachers who facilitate class discussions in which race is the topic face discomforts due to personal conflicts relative to their own level of racial awareness, as well as an awareness of their students’ race and/or culture. Teachers realized they must teach literature that engages and meets the needs of students of color; however, they have concerns over ensuing discussions of topics often considered taboo. Additionally, teachers often experience discomfort regarding forces outside their classrooms that influence the nature of classroom discussions, and are frequently unsure as how to address these due to ambiguous district and school rulings on controversial topics. Finally, teachers need the support of one another through collaboration, and the support of their administration when parental and student concerns are raised. This study met its goal to expand research of difficult racial dialogues into the secondary English classroom setting in order to gain a better understanding of what teachers of minor
students experience in these environments relative to the instruction of racially and culturally sensitive literature. Research supports the need for further expansion of critical race and critical race pedagogy into public schools. These studies should be conducted from the perspective of elementary through secondary school teachers and students in both literature as well as social studies classrooms where difficult dialogues are likely to evolve from topics of instruction.
Acknowledgements

As I conducted my final review of this document that has become my every waking, as well as sleeping thought, I know I would not be readying myself to hit save, close, and submit without certain people in my life who sacrificed of not only their time, but my time with them.

First and foremost, I thank my beautiful daughter Sela Brown, who now 14 was in second grade when I began this journey. There were many missed times together, but every time I felt like giving up, she reminded me that I would not only be throwing away my own life, but that it would feel like I had wasted her childhood. That is my kid.

I would like to thank her father, Arthur Brown, who though no longer my husband, is my co-pilot in parenting every step of the way. He has been the one to take our daughter to Disney, Sea World, Six Flags, and RV trips that will always be in her memories. It is my turn now.

I thank my high school principal, who holds his breath many days wondering what I will do next, but often saying he knows my heart and my passion are in the right place.

I thank the wonderful students I have had the honor and privilege to learn from over the past 10 years. Without them and our experiences together, I would not have realized the need for this research.

I have the utmost gratitude for the courageous and beautiful teachers who gave of their time and passion to work with me on this project. There are no words enough.

Finally, to my Chair, Dr. Andrew Carpenter. He is the most laid-back man I have ever known, and his faith in my success along with his calm and reassuring guidance got me through what has been the longest year of my life.

Dedication

I dedicate this work of passion to my Mother, Irene Burnett (1932-2014), who raised me to be strong in the face of adversity, and to be humble in spite of myself.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Controversial topics have long proved challenging for teachers of minor students, but due to the sociopolitical climate over the past several years these concerns may have increased for high school teachers of literature or social studies in which race is often a topic. The reason for increased challenges may be in part due to expanding diverse classrooms, and also due to the fact that rather than racial tensions lessoning after the 2008 election of the first African American president, they have in fact increased, in both covert and overt forms (Bernstein, Young, & Claypool, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Kosloff, Greenberg, Schmader, Dechesne, & Weise, 2010). Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, and Rivera (2009) asserted that due to these sociopolitical factors and resulting racial tensions, teachers are more timid than ever facilitating difficult dialogues. This may be especially true of teachers of minor children who teach subjects focusing on topics of race or other social injustices.

Background

The phenomenon of difficult dialogues has informed a number of recent critical race and discourse studies in predominately-adult environments. What is largely unexplored is how this phenomenon affects public high school teachers. Researchers have suggested that public school teachers lack the training and support necessary to face challenges presented by growing diverse populations (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Burton et al., 2010; Howard, 2007; Lopez, 2011). Teachers of literature and social studies who facilitate difficult dialogues relative to works of literature or history in which racism is the topic may feel especially affected by sociopolitical factors related to race.
An example of how socio-political factors can affect public school secondary literature teachers is the recent controversial censoring of Mark Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn*, a seminal work of literature taught in many U.S. high schools. The new publication replaced the word “nigger” with “slave” as though the two are synonymous; the assertion was that this particular change resulted because the word slave is less offensive (Twain, 2011, A26). Schools adopting this new publication as a part of their curriculum are in essence, as asserted by Jackson (2010) whitewashing American history, and placing teachers in the uncomfortable position of knowing historical truths, and concealing them from the students they are charged to impart knowledge. Another relevant event was a censored reading of *The Constitution of the United States* to the House of Representatives where the mention of “free persons” was omitted (Kirsh, 2011, A21); to acknowledge free persons, there is the implication of non-free persons. Altering historical documents to include classic works of fiction for the sake of political correctness is, as asserted by some (Boysen, Vogel, Copes, & Hubbard, 2009), a denial of the past and may be more damaging to the learning environment than the more blatant forms of racism.

If teachers feel free to teach accurate history and to remain true to historically significant works of literature, then their level of comfort in facilitating difficult dialogues may increase. Researchers suggested that raising racial and social awareness in minor students should begin as early as possible, with some stating that it is especially important during adolescence as it is this time in development that is most critical (Diemer, Kauffman, Koenig, Trahan, & Hsieh, 2006; French, Kim & Pillado, 2006). This study was an exploration into the lived experiences of public secondary literature teachers as they teach curriculum based literature in which race is the topic. This study is
essential to providing insights into the identified phenomenon; to breach gaps in critical race and discourse theories predominantly focused on the experiences of faculty and students in adult learning environments.

**Statement of the Problem**

Secondary literature teachers face unique challenges facilitating discussions during instruction of literary works wherein racism or racial injustices are topics. These challenges may stem from administrative strictures admonishing schoolteachers to avoid controversial topics (see IKB-R, CCSD, 2012; DeCrescio, 2006). As many seminal and contemporary works containing racial content are required or recommended readings, racial dialogues deemed critical to the expansion of racial and cultural awareness in children and adolescents (Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006) are unavoidable. One challenge may be teachers’ awareness that the responsibility to address the wrongness of racism may contradict values established in homes of some children (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding, London, & Safer, 2001). Other challenges may result from moments of intense moral conflict (LittleJohn, 2006) over whether or not to address issues of race, fear of professional consequences if they do, and reluctance to teach required subject matter (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Research supports the need for development of racial awareness in children and adolescents, yet there have been few studies conducted in the elementary through secondary settings exploring the lived experiences of teachers in the classroom as they facilitate these critical discussions.

Reasons for limited data gathered from public school settings may be due to restrictions involving research with minors; however, these factors should not preclude
the extension of critical race and discourse research to the public school setting. Burton et al. (2010) criticized the large number of critical race and discourse studies conducted in university settings, recommending an expansion of these studies into public schools; asserting young people must be prepared for ever-increasing diverse educational and work environments. It is important to explore the lived experiences of secondary literature teachers as they teach literary works that often result in difficult dialogues.

Without an understanding of challenges presented and their impact on teachers, the risks are great that avoidance of, or poorly facilitated discussions could further impede the development and expansion of racial awareness in children and adolescents.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges related to difficult racial dialogues and the effect these challenges pose for facilitation of dialogues essential to the instruction of literature in which racism is the topic. The design for this study was a hermeneutics approach complemented by a heuristic design as outlined by Moustakas (2001), with five to seven secondary literature teachers in the Southeastern United States involved in normal daily practice according to educational best practices, and adherence to national, state, and district standards of curriculum. Implementing Moustakas’s (2001) design and methodology for heuristic research, the researcher compiled all transcriptions, notes, and personal documents of each participant; then organized these into sequential narrative order. Finally, the researcher employed an interpretive lens to examine these and all other data deemed relevant to the study and condensed these findings concisely into composites representative of the participant group.
Theoretical Framework

Critical theories are the basis for the theoretical framework of the following reviewed studies, many of which explored the researched phenomenon through the lens of critical race and critical discourse theories. Researchers often conduct studies into racism or other social injustices using critical theories, as critical theories by their very nature are advocacy and activist approaches (Poutanen & Kovalainen, 2009), in which theorists seek to study some condition or phenomenon that has created an oppressive environment for individuals. Out of necessity, critical theories are somewhat evolutionary in nature (Poutanen & Kovalainen, 2009), as contextual changes in society, predicated on many factors (i.e., the election of first African American president, 911, acts of terrorism, etc.) create a need for theories regarding how these changes will affect a group, and what actions can affect change within that group.

Critical theory, the foundation for many critical theoretical perspectives, is a means of examining lives critically in the midst of the mundane, such as teachers in the midst of normal teaching practices. According to Poutanen and Kovalainen (2009), theorists employ critical theory in order to provide an empirical view of how people live and operate within their immediate social and political structures without allowing existent knowledge, or understanding of other structures and mechanisms to inform their critique, which in turn informs recommendations for affected change. Depicted values are without impartiality, leaving room for self-introspection or evaluation on the part of the researcher, whose role is reflexive (Poutanen & Kovalainen, 2009), meaning that he or she becomes a part of the environment, not operating apart from it. As asserted by Poutanen and Kovaloaninen, as well as others (Packer, 1985; Vannini, 2009; Westerman,
2004), through the integration of theory and practice, critical theory allows individuals to reflect on findings and to learn from them in order to affect changes in their lives, habits, and extended societies.

Interpretive theories provide theorists with the freedom necessary to depict a shared phenomenon authentically. Theorists often combine interpretive theories with critical race and discourse theories integrated with hermeneutical approaches (Vannini, 2009; Westerman, 2004); as such, the goal is to gain understanding and meaning through the interpretation of observed lives in their daily practices interacting and intersecting with other individuals, situations, or phenomenon in the midst of these practices. Interpretive theories may be the most appropriate option for heuristic studies, such as with Moustakas’s (2001) design, which uses narratives as data in which interpretations are formed using narrative analysis, conversations, discourse analysis, and as Packer (1985) stated, in hermeneutics where much is learned through observation of body language and facial expressions. Critical discourse analysis theory is widely used in the social sciences, and often selected as an alternative to interpretive theories and approaches due to discomfort with the idea of interpretation as opposed to critical scrutiny. Alternatively, as suggested by Molder (2009), critical discourse is used to expand interpretive theories through further analysis using linguistics and knowledge of cultural norms and mores to provide clearer explanations of meaning based upon context as well as content.

Most studies in the foregoing literature review incorporated critical theories and approaches and are qualitative in nature; that is not to say quantitative critical studies are viewed as unimportant; they do provide impartial accounts using numerical data to
represent these events; however, they do not relay the entire story. To fill in the gaps from earlier quantitative studies, Sue and Constantine (2007) and Sue et al. (2008, 2009, 2010), as well as others (Spanierman et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010) began conducting focus groups using a combination of direct observation, interviews, and content analysis, as well as applying interpretive theories, discourse theories, and analysis. A possible rationale behind these methods is that it is important to not simply quantify incidents and correlate them to variables, but also to analyze what was being said and by whom also to whom, as well as precipitating variables which might influence discourse.

This exploration into the lived experiences and perspectives of secondary public school teachers is relevant to the current body of critical inquiry into difficult dialogues pertaining to issues of race. Contrary to some previous studies conducted with university graduate students in focus groups as the primary setting and a scripted order of questions regarding experiences (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2009 & 2010), the study will take place in the midst of normal practices of teachers interacting with high school students, colleagues, administrators, and the parents of students. Additionally, the motivation for this research project was pure interest and curiosity, which should be the basis of all research (Gelso, 2006). The study, which employed characteristics of critical race and critical discourse theories integrated with an interpretive hermeneutic framework, was designed to be consistent with what Westerman (2004) described as pure methods of inquiry and was the most appropriate choice for the phenomenon under investigation and the selected setting.
Research Questions

The purpose of the two research questions was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges relative to teaching literature in which racism is the topic. Participants for this study were five to seven secondary literature teachers who planned to teach a work of literature in which racism is the topic. The following research questions provided a platform for exploration into the lived experiences of these teachers.

Q1. What do public secondary literature teachers perceive as challenges related to facilitating classroom discussions wherein racism is the topic?

Q2. To what extent do secondary literature teachers perceive outside influences such as administrative strictures, student, and/or parental complaints as affecting their instruction of literature in which racism is the topic?

Nature of the Study

This qualitative study was conducted in the natural classroom setting from an interpretive hermeneutics approach implementing a heuristic design as outlined by Moustakas (2001). The phenomenological study using an interpretive lens was designed with the objective in mind of gaining understanding of the perceptions and experiences of those impacted by a shared phenomenon through exploration and discovery. The research design, method of data collection, and analysis closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001) and were the most appropriate to explore the phenomenon under investigation as it was imperative to gain an understanding of not only the teachers’/participants’ perceptions of the classroom dynamic, but of the internal and external forces affecting the dynamic.
The questions for the study were open-ended in nature in order to provide a platform for further inquiry as the phenomenon under investigation was one that evolved. Question one inquires as to what secondary literature teachers perceive as challenges related to the facilitation of classroom discussions with race as the topic. This question allowed participants to voice their current pre-study state of awareness of challenges; answers varied from participant to participant depending upon a variety of factors. Question two expands upon question one by inquiring as to perceptions of outside influences, such as parental complaints and administrative concerns relative to classroom discussions on race, and how the awareness of these external factors influence instruction and facilitation of associated dialogues. It is important to have an understanding of external as well as internal influences affecting teachers as well as how these affect the facilitation of racially sensitive dialogues. These questions were appropriate for the study as they provided flexibility in order to align with a hermeneutical perspective.

The quest of hermeneutical studies is to gain understanding and meaning through the interpretation of observed lives in their daily practices with the researcher interacting and intersecting with those individuals, situations, or phenomenon in the midst of these practices (Vannini, 2009; Westerman, 2004). Therefore, data for this study was collected in the form of interviews, journal writings, and direct as well as indirect observation. The researcher for the current study gathered, organized, and analyzed all transcriptions, notes, and journals. From these narratives, the researcher ordered these according to recurrent themes, revisited individual accounts for recurring themes, and then condensed all data to form a composite that most closely represented the group.
Significance of the Study

Public school teachers face unique challenges when broaching topics of race relative to the instruction of literature bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes, events, and issues (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Eunhyun, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2005; Lopez, 2011). Insufficient research regarding these difficult racial dialogues in the elementary through secondary public school settings has resulted in public school teachers lacking support necessary for effective facilitation of difficult racial dialogues (Lopez, 2011) deemed critical to the expansion of racial and cultural awareness in children and adolescents (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006). Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges related to difficult racial dialogues and the perceived effect on facilitation of dialogues essential to the instruction of literature in which racism is the topic.

Gaining understanding of challenges presented and their impact on teachers provides a vehicle for researchers to explore new ways of providing education and training as well as support so teachers are more comfortable meeting these challenges. This is significant because teachers who are prepared to facilitate racially and culturally difficult dialogues contribute to the development and expansion of racial awareness in children and adolescents (Agirdag, Houtte, & Avermaet, 2012; Epstein & Nelson, 2011). In addition, when teachers are comfortable including culturally relevant pedagogy, students’ levels of academic achievement improve (Ladson-Billings, 2005, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008).
Definition of Key Terms

**Colorblind Ideology/Colorblind Racism.** Colorblind ideologies and colorblind racism are defined as the perception on the part of individuals as having a balanced appreciation for all people regardless of skin color or ethnic background (Bonilla-Silva, 2003).

**Difficult Racial Dialogues.** Difficult racial dialogues are defined as threatening conversations or interactions between members of different racial or ethnic groups because they (a) potentially reveal biases and prejudices of the participants, (b) may be found offensive to others, (c) can be challenged publicly, and (c) evoke strong emotional reactions (Sue & Constantine; 2007; Sue et al., 2008-2010).

**Microaggressions.** Microaggressions are defined as a subtle form of bias revealed through one or more of the following forms: Microassaults- Conscious and intentional discriminatory actions: using racial epithets, displaying White supremacist symbols - swastikas, or preventing one's son or daughter from dating outside of their race (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2008-2010).

**Microinsults.** Microinsults are defined as verbal, nonverbal, and environmental communications that subtly convey rudeness and insensitivity that demean a person's racial heritage or identity. An example is an employee who asks a co-worker of color how he/she got his/her job, implying he/she may have landed it through an affirmative action or quota system. (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2008-2010)

**Microinvalidations.** Microinvalidations are defined as communications that subtly exclude negate or nullify the thoughts, feelings, or experiential reality of a person of color. For instance, White people often ask Latinos where they were born, conveying
the message that they are perpetual foreigners in their own land (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue et al., 2008-2010).

**White Empathy.** White empathy is defined as the ability of White individuals to experience emotions on the behalf of individuals or groups of color who are current or historical victims of oppression or other social injustices (Boysen, 2009).

**White Guilt.** White guilt is defined as guilt experienced on the part of White individuals because of historical injustices perpetrated by Whites to persons or groups of color (Boysen, 2009).

**White Privilege.** White privilege is defined as the attainment of certain social and legal privileges afforded White individuals based upon assumptions regarding Whiteness (Boysen, 2009).

**White Shame.** White shame is defined as the experiencing of shame on the part of White individuals in response to historical injustices perpetrated by Whites to persons or groups of color (Boysen, 2009).

**Summary**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences and perceptions of secondary classroom teachers in a natural classroom setting as they facilitated dialogues relative to the instruction of literature with racially and culturally sensitive themes. A qualitative approach and phenomenological design were implemented for the current investigation. The research design, method of data collection, and analysis closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001) and were the most appropriate to explore the phenomenon under investigation as it was
imperative to gain an understanding of not only the teachers’/participants’ perceptions of the classroom dynamic, but of the internal and external forces affecting the dynamic.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Theoretical underpinnings in past inquiries into White racism and White privilege conducted from as early as 1978 have been the foundation for many current critical race and discourse studies. Studies conducted through the 1980s and 1990s applied critical theory regarding male privilege and the Women’s Rights Movement as the foundation for studies in White privilege (see Katz, 1978; McIntosh, 1998; Frankenburg, 1993). These studies are vital to current studies exploring the phenomenon of difficult dialogues and other phenomenon related to race and racism that affect learning and work environments. Further, past studies hold historical as well as theoretical significance relative to the current study as they follow historical time-lines relative to gender as well as racial equality, which often ran concurrently. In fact much of the research conducted over the past few years has stemmed from what Burton et al. (2010) coined the inaugural decade. It has been during this time that race and gender became talking points in political rallies and these topics are issues likely not solely confined to political talk shows, but work and learning environments as well.

In the past several years, researchers have conducted a vast number of studies on the topics of critical race and critical discourse in colleges and universities in the United States. Studies in university and college settings have provided illumination into the phenomenon of difficult dialogues in an adult environment. Conversely, there have been few studies conducted in elementary, middle, and secondary public school settings where some suggest the expansion of racial and cultural awareness is most critical (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006; Lopez, 2011). Without research involving the instruction of minor students, training and support efforts necessary for
effective facilitation of difficult racial dialogues, relative to the instruction of seminal as well as contemporary works of literature, may continue to be insufficient.

The current research literature has generated recurrent themes of oppression relative to the ability of individuals to address racist ideologies in the workplace, university classrooms, and even therapeutic settings. In graduate level courses, students have been shown to be uncomfortable discussing race, religion, and discrimination, with many White students denying the very existence of racism, or that if indeed it does exist; it is distinct from their lives (Boysen et al., 2009; Cobb-Roberts, 2011 & 2012; Tummala-Narra, 2009). Such perceptions are congruent with the findings of Smith et al. (2008) who addressed “the dynamics of contemporary racism” (p. 336); defined as the new spin White individuals place on their bias. One of the objectives of Smith et al.’s investigation was to “take up the challenge” (2008, p. 336) issued by Sue (2005), who stated “racism and ‘the conspiracy of silence’ surrounding it are the most pressing issues currently facing the profession of psychology” (as cited in Smith et al., 2008, p. 338).

The findings garnered from Smith et al.’s inquiry corroborated Bonilla-Silva and Foreman’s (2003) findings regarding individuals’ aversive techniques to conceal their own racism by spinning their reality of racism, but outside their world and their reality. According to Bonilla-Silva and Foreman, these types of projections are a defensive strategy to avoid personal associations with White supremacy by admitting racism does exists, but outside and apart from the individual. If these types of projections are affecting adults in adult work and learning environments, they may have an even greater impact in secondary public school learning environments where teachers who instruct on topics in
which current events become part of lessons teach the children of adults who may espouse these attitudes.

In spite of increased attention on topics of critical race and discourse in adult learning and work environments, there are gaps in the available literature; these gaps are not due to omissions on the part of investigators, but as Smith et al. (2008) asserted due to the nature of the phenomenon which is pervasive and adaptive. Therefore, research must also adapt to meet the demands of what Smith et al., in citing Lee and Skillings (1991) compared to a disease. Smith et al. argued we must recognize racism as an epidemic pervading our society and weakening its defenses. As Sue et al. (2009) suggested, our best defense against the further spreading of this disease is by combating it education and open dialogue beginning in the classroom. In an effort to meet the identified need, the purpose of this study was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges related to difficult racial dialogues and the perceived effect on facilitation of dialogues essential to the instruction of literature in which racism is the topic.

**Documentation**

Databases used to conduct the search for the literature review were *Ebrary, EBSCOhost, ProQuest, and SAGE Journals Online*. The use of following search terms was necessary to conduct this search: critical race, critical discourse, difficult dialogues, difficult racial dialogues and public school students, public school teachers and difficult dialogues. While reviewing the literature on the topic of difficult racial dialogues in preparation for this study, the limited number of studies conducted in settings with school-aged children became apparent. As a result, the focus of most studies in this
review is on adults in adult educational settings where topics of race and culture have become difficult dialogues, and as Sue and Lin et al. (2009) found, leaving instructors often feeling helpless as to how they should address these incidents in the classroom.

This literature review presents information on the following sections: shame and guilt over the historical past and relevance to the classroom environment; teachers’ racial awareness and microaggressions as predictors of difficult dialogues in the classroom; perspectives of university faculty of color on difficult racial dialogues; the impact of socio-political factors on racial dialogues; the difficulty of difficult dialogues with minor students; and the challenges of public secondary teachers.

**Shame and Guilt over the Historical Past and Relevance to the Classroom Environment**

The current literature contains a general consensus that the denial of the negative past, relative to social injustices perpetrated against certain racial, cultural, religious, and gender groups, is psychologically damaging and is the most negative in regard to classroom discourse (see Bonilla-Silva, 2000, 2002, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Foreman, 2000; Boysen et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2006; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). Werlin (2004) suggested that certain elementary through secondary public school texts depicting the pre-Civil Rights Era in the United States as a time of innocence, a utopian view of American history (actually tarnished by oppression, genocide, and slavery), are far more psychologically damaging to students than exposure to accurate history. Similarly, Boysen et al. (2009) argued that the denial of racism, past or present, is a subtle form of racism that can be far more damaging to the ego of students of color and the learning environment than overt forms. When instructors fail to establish or even to acknowledge negative past history, this can, as asserted by some (Sue, Torino et al.,
create hostile learning environments and the potential for increased microaggressions.

Guilt and shame over a shared negative past may be factors also associated with incidents of microaggressions in classroom discussions. Brown et al. (2008) and Roccas et al. (2006) conducted two separate quantitative studies with high school adolescents outside the United States to explore the relationship between collective guilt and shame, and making reparations for historical wrongdoing. Brown et al. found when members of an in-group experienced collective guilt regarding the past wrongdoings of their group they were more likely to seek reparation. Alternatively, collective shame resulted in the in-group seeking to avoid the source of their guilt. There was also an association between the ability to express shame and a feeling of lack of control over past crimes or wrongdoings (e.g., the historical facts of slavery, segregation, and the denial of civil rights to persons of African descent in the United States). In both studies (Brown et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2006) the participants demonstrated a corresponding reaction relative to collective shame in which there was the feeling of exposure by the group as flawed relative to the historical wrongdoings and as a result viewed in disgust by peers. Brown et al. suggested such perceived threats to the image of the group might account for the avoidant behaviors associated with shame. These assertions (Brown et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2006) are congruent with findings by Smith et al. (2008), who addressed the new spin individuals place on racist ideologies. To clarify, the aversive techniques White individuals employ as a defensive strategy to avoid association with White supremacy views (Bonilla-Silva, 2000, 2002, 2003), which are often manifested in microagressions
toward Black students (Sue, Torino et al., 2009) or other groups, such as Mexican or other immigrants.

An individual’s sense of historical self may have an impact upon reactions to discussions on racial and other social injustices. Roccas et al. (2006) asserted there may be a correlation between in-group identity and a group’s perception of history and the ability to feel guilt over the historical past, thus impeding the ability to relate to the present. That is, due to such perceptions, the in-group who has historically wronged the out-group will work to engender feelings of moral superiority over the other group in order to justify its wrongdoing, and these feelings may intensify during times of socio-political conflict (e.g., the 2008 and 2012 presidential campaigns). During these times, groups tend to become more cohesive in thought and deed (i.e., religious fundamentalists and tea party organizations). In some cases this cohesiveness may be as extreme as perpetrating violence and other heinous acts against entire groups or members of the out-group (Roccas et al., 2006), or in the case of classroom discourse, may manifest as microaggressions against the historically wronged group.

If teachers are to provide historical foundation for works of literature in which racism or other social injustices are factors, they must educationally, as well as psychologically prepared for the reactions of their students as well as the parents of the students. Brown et al.’s (2008) and Roccas et al.’s (2006) studies provide some insight into the impact the historical past can have on classroom discourse; however, these studies were conducted outside the United States where the histories differ. Additionally, the conducted studies used quantitative methodology with data collected from students
and not from educators responsible for facilitating discussions pertaining to the controversial topics.

**Teachers’ Racial Awareness and Microaggressions as Predictors of Difficult Dialogues in the Classroom**

The establishment of the historical past goes beyond the discussion of historical facts; teachers must also be aware of how the discussion of these events affects them personally and how their perspectives and reactions have a direct bearing upon classroom discourse. Awareness of racial issues and one’s own biases relative to race plays an important role in the dynamic of the classroom when racially and culturally sensitive discussions occur (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Kohl, 2008; Lopez, 2011; Sue, Lin et al, 2009). Teachers who lack racial awareness may find themselves in extreme discomfort when students raise questions for which they either lack knowledge or feel uncomfortable answering.

Not only is it important for teachers to develop their own sense of racial awareness, but they must also be aware of the potential discomforts on the part of their students. Todd et al. (2010) noted an association between awareness of racial issues and emotional responses of White university students in situations where issues of race, expressly White privilege, were topics of discussion. The phenomenon explored in this undergraduate general psychology class was whether racial affect, such as White empathy, White guilt, White fear, or colorblindness, moderated associations between color-blind racial attitudes when White students reflected on Whiteness and societal racism. In other words, if individuals experience feelings of empathy toward a racial group, this may lessen the incidence of or expressions of guilt, fear, or other attitudes described by Bonilla and Embrick (2006) as psychological defenses.
Just as there is a positive association between empathy and the lessening of negative responses, there may also be a positive correlation between a lack of racial awareness and guilt, which may result in damaging emotional responses to racial topics. Additionally, these feelings of guilt may be a source of embarrassment to the affected individual, causing discomfort when involved in racial discourse. Todd et al. (2010) demonstrated a positive correlation between racial affect (i.e. White empathy, White guilt, and White fear) and unawareness of racial issues and general emotional responses. According to Todd et al.’s findings, the existence of White fear moderated associations between unawareness of racial issues and emotional responses when disclosed in private reflections, whereas White empathy moderated associations when discussed in an open setting such as a classroom.

The implications of Todd et al.’s study are that teachers who assign journals to students for personal and literary reflection should be aware that indicators of White guilt might directly predict a negative emotional response in written reflections. Todd et al.’s (2010) asserted there is a stronger association between such negative emotions as guilt and fear relating to racial unawareness; individuals are more likely to be honest regarding their negative feelings when disclosing them privately, as in journal writing, as opposed to public discussions, such as in a classroom setting or focus group. It is important to note, Todd et al.’s study was limited due to the setting, which was not a natural classroom setting, and the manner data was collected did not provide a forum for natural and spontaneous discussions stemmed from curricula such as a literature or social studies class. Additionally, the mixed-method study design was limited in that the narratives
provided by the students were evaluated for explicit text rather than both the explicit as well as implicit as they would have been if analyzed heuristically.

In a university study with undergraduate students and their instructors, Boysen et al. (2009) sought to expand knowledge about classroom incidents of bias, specifically whether or not instructors effectively mediated such incidents. The types of bias addressed in this study included both overt bias (i.e., blatant) and covert bias (i.e., subtle forms of bias called microaggressions – most of which are unintentional slights on behalf of the offender). Microaggressions are different from intentional subtle digs due to their frequency, and are based in the historical reality, or level of racial awareness held by the offender regarding racial and ethnic differences. Forms of microaggression include social exclusion, making assumptions about intelligence based on race, and the denial of continued existence of racism, all of which can lead to social conflict in academic settings (Boysen et al, 2009).

Boysen et al. (2009) used a combination of surveys and interviews with both undergraduate students and faculty. Based upon data obtained from survey questions, one quarter of the instructors and half of students perceived occurrences of bias in their classrooms. Not only were the perceptions of bias by undergraduate students significantly higher, but approximately one quarter of undergraduates perceived themselves to be the targets of overt or subtle bias in the classroom, with some implicating instructors as the source of bias. The interviews were indicative of a higher incidence of microaggressions in the classroom than on the campus at large, and the perceptions of most professors was that they handled situations of bias effectively most of the time, and denied any bias on their part. Based upon student reports, instructors
who confronted issues of bias were sometimes viewed negatively; however, students who had been discriminated against reported positive feelings when they witnessed instructors confronting the perpetrator with facts countering the discriminatory remarks (Boysen et al., 2009).

A review of the current literature reveals microaggressions are often triggers to difficult racial dialogues in the classroom and can result in potentially lasting effects due to the ineffective manner with which educators who with insufficient training and lacking racial awareness themselves meet these situations. These instances can leave students of color feeling an assault upon their integrity, and the overall perception of the instructor reinforcing racist ideologies (Sue, Lin et al., 2009). Sue and Lin et al. (2009) recognized that although there have been numerous investigations into microaggressions in academic and work settings, most addressed the perceptions and feelings of White individuals when faced with racially sensitive topics, rather than how persons of color might feel in these same situations.

Sue and Lin et al. (2009) employed a qualitative method of study to explore the perceptions of graduate students of color pertaining to the correlation between microaggressions and difficulties with discussing racially sensitive topics in a graduate classroom in an education program. Data for Sue and Lin et al.’s (2009) study were gathered via initial interviews, and then discussions held in a focus group setting in order to foster an environment in which participants would be encouraged to discuss shared experiences, and possibly provide a forum for the discussion of novel concepts and experiences. Sue and Lin et al. (2009) found persons of color more aware of the microaggressions, which lead to difficult dialogues, participants reported what
Spanierman et al. (2009) regarded as “great psychological costs” (p.1) concerning feelings of loss of integrity, anxiety, and feelings described as being emotionally drained. Additionally, participants revealed feeling that often times their White peers and teachers, even though aware of the precipitators of difficult dialogues, were fearful of asserting an opinion. Furthermore, the suggested reasoning for hesitation or discomfort on the part of White faculty to address these incidents was the concern over being viewed as biased or ignorant (Sue, Lin et al., 2009).

Based upon their findings, Sue and Lin et al. (2009) asserted that the success or failure of how incidents of microaggressions are handled is relative to the racial and cultural awareness of the instructor, as well as to their level of comfort in discussing issues related to race and racism. Sue and Lin et al.’s findings supported previous observations that there is an association between difficult dialogues on race and incidents of microaggressions in the classroom. Furthermore, Sue and Lin et al. asserted their findings are indicative of an increased negative emotional impact upon students of color. Sue and Lin et al. asserted the level of instructors’ racial awareness and comfort discussing race are instrumental in the identification and mediating of these incidents. With proper training and education, instructors should be capable of providing an environment where students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds can feel supported, and this is especially important when teaching children and adolescents.

As with other studies on the topic of racial discourse in university settings, Sue and Lin et al.’s (2009) student provides much insight into the perspectives of students when faced with uncomfortable topics. However, there are limitations to this study that indicate the need for an expansion of critical race and discourse studies into not only the
public secondary and below environments, but also other geographic locations in the United States, such as the Southern states where there are still lingering discomforts associated with the history of slavery. One of the stated (Sue, Lin et al., 2009) limitations of this study pertained to the selection and dissemination of participants. Sue and Lin et al. noted there was a higher number of female students as opposed to males, and more Asian students than Black students. However, the demographic makeup of the sample mirrored the makeup of the teaching college as well as other Northeastern colleges and universities.

Other noted (Sue, Lin et al., 2009) restrictions were regarding the amount of time spent in each of the focus groups; it was recognized that more time might have proved beneficial in the allowance of additional information relative to experiences with the topic area. This particular limitation might have been avoided had these discussions occurred in a natural learning environment where the topic could resurface as a natural part of continued discourse. A final noted (Sue, Lin et al., 2009) limitation was regarding the semi-structured nature of the interactions between facilitators and group members, which may have inhibited the revealing of experiences more specific to the individual as opposed to the revealing of shared experiences. The authors did note in addition to these limitations, that though racial and ethnic identity of teachers discussed was not restricted, the findings related to White teachers only, and again this largely was due to the reported (Sue, Lin et al., 2009) demographic makeup of the campus.

All limitations noted by the aforementioned authors are a strong indication of the need of an expansion of these studies into other geographic locations as well as to secondary as well as post-secondary natural learning environments. As with other studies
(Boysen et al., 2009; Spainerman et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010), Sue and Lin et al.’s (2009) findings contributed to the growing body of research literature on the topic of difficult racial dialogues in university settings. However, the findings might have been more diverse if the study was conducted using students enrolled in the basic curriculum of literature or the social sciences as opposed to a teacher education at the graduate level. Using participants from a general college campus, rather than teacher education, may have provided focus group discussions more relevant to actual classroom discussions that evolve out of curriculum based instruction, and more directly addressed how instructors effectively mediate difficult dialogues, yet maintain the integrity of the lecture topic or lesson plan. Additionally, Sue and Lin et al. suggested effective means of facilitating difficult dialogues and asserted that open and honest discussion relative to racially sensitive issues beginning in the lower grades through high school will provide the vehicle for improved race relations beyond the classroom.

In a more recent qualitative study, Sue and Rivera et al. (2010) explored the perceptions and experiences of White trainees in a counseling psychology program regarding racial dialogues. The authors cited this study as parallel to a previous study (Sue, Lin et al., 2009) and the same method of design was used to conduct the study with focus group participants. In Sue and Lin et al.’s (2009) study, the perceptions by students of color were that difficult dialogues regarding issues of race resulted from the often inadvertent or innocent, micro-aggressions by White peers and instructors. Sue and Rivera et al.’s (2010) study revealed corresponding domains and themes to the earlier study (Sue, Lin et al., 2009), validating the perceptions of participants of the previous study. In Sue and Rivera et al.’s study it was found that there was a generalized denial of
White privilege, to the extent that some members were quick to disavow their Whiteness by their association to their ethnic group (e.g., Jewish or Greek). One statement made by a participant that echoed Brown et al.’s (2008) study on collective guilt, was that she had no control over the past wrongs of society. In addition to denial of White privilege, there was the overall shared sentiment of “color-blindness,” in which the individual who makes this claim thinks he or she is perceived as having a balanced appreciation for all people; yet, in reality it causes persons of color to feel they are invisible (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003; Bonilla-Silva & Forman, 2003). The last predominating theme revealed was the denial of the right to discuss issues of race under the premise of having never been a victim of racism. This rationalization is consistent with avoidance relative to collective guilt and shame (Brown et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2006; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008).

Identified reactions to racial dialogue of participants in this study were anxiety, helplessness, and feeling misunderstood (Sue, Rivera et al., 2010). The authors noted that overall the participants took no personal role or acceptance in the discussions; rather offering responses from a globalized perspective or as bystanders. This lack of accepting or disavowing a personal stake in issues of race could be viewed as a defensive maneuver to protect the psyche from the consequences of collective guilt or shame as suggested by some (Brown et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2006; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008). The implication of Sue and Riviera et al.’s study is that difficult dialogues can result in psychological costs for all persons involved in discussions of race, not just the target of the microaggressions.

The limitations of this study were similar to other studies (Boysen et al., 2009; Spanierman et al., 2009; Sue, Lin et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010) using focus groups as
opposed to an actual class setting, and the findings may have not generalized to regions outside the Northeast (Sue, Riviera et al., 2010). Additionally, the findings were not garnered from the vantage point of educators, which may have provided a greater understanding to improve strategies for addressing issues of race and opening the lines of communication regarding race. Additionally, although this study provided much in the way of understanding the phenomenon of difficult dialogues, there remains a gap in the research pertaining to the facilitation of difficult dialogues with school-aged children from elementary through high school, and additional research is needed in this critical area (Bolgatz, 2005a; 2005b; Burton, et al., 2010; Lopez, 2011).

**Perspectives of University Faculty of Color on Difficult Racial Dialogues**

Studies in university classrooms seem to dominate the landscape relative to critical race and discourse studies. In spite of their number, Sue et al. (2009 & 2010) acknowledged the need for studies from the perspective of faculty, and most notably faculty of color. In a qualitative experiential study, consistent with hermeneutic approaches, Tummala-Narra (2009), a multi-ethnic female, analyzed the experiences in two different class settings with graduate students enrolled in a counseling psychology course on diversity in which the investigator was also the instructor. The topic of White privilege was explored through the interaction of class discussions of assigned readings, and experiential exercises as these are identified as the primary modes of learning for the course. Tummala-Narra (2009) addressed the broad range of emotional manifestations presented when issues of diversity were topics in the classroom and the impact upon student to student as well as teacher and student interactions. Tummala-Narra proposed that examining the subjectivity of race and ethnicity might help in forming a better
understanding of its influence on classroom interactions and discourse, thus establish a foundation for critical learning on issues of race, overcome impasses, and implement action.

Tummala-Narra’s (2009) descriptions and interpretations corroborated other researchers’ findings (Boysen et al., 2009; Spanierman et al., 2009; Sue, Lin et al., 2009; Sue, Rivera et al., 2010; Todd et al., 2010) that White students were the least comfortable with the topic of race and diversity, minimizing the role of race and White privilege on personal, as well as professional levels. Tummala-Narra’s findings were also consistent with other researchers (e.g., Brown et al., 2008; Roccas et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2008) who asserted White individuals spin their racial reality to avoid psychological discomfort or uncomfortable associations with the historical past. In Tummala-Narra’s study, the disavowing of White privilege and the existence of racism from the perspectives of White students resulted in divisions in the class creating an impasse to further discourse, leaving students of color feeling insulted and invalidated.

In addition to her students’ perceptions of the classroom exchanges, Tummala-Narra (2009) acknowledged her personal dilemma in the midst of facilitating constructive dialogue at finding her own feelings in conflict as an Indian American having dealt with racism on both a personal and professional level. Her feelings of identification shifted between the White students voicing discomfort, and the students of color silent due to their discomfort. Based upon Tummala-Narra’s account, the perceptions and feelings of instructors involved in the facilitation of difficult dialogues are essential to the understanding of what can and does go wrong within the classroom relative to racial dialogues. The findings of Tummala-Narra’s study are consistent with studies using a
phenomenological hermeneutic framework, wherein the setting is in the midst of normal practice with no preconceptions or expectations of outcomes (Moustakas, 2001). The subjectivity of the investigator is relevant to the investigation and becomes as much a part of the data as that collected from participants (Moustakas, 2001) and are consistent with what Westerman (2004) described as pure methods of inquiry. Studies such as Tummala-Narra’s should be expanded to the secondary public school setting and focus on the experiences of teachers of multicultural literature as well as general literature and social studies wherein race and other social injustices are often topics.

In order to understand the variables involved within the classroom environment when racially and culturally sensitive issues are discussed, Sue and Torino et al. (2009) conducted a study concurrent to Tummala-Narra’s (2009) study to explore the perceptions of White university faculty when faced with difficult dialogues in the classroom. The implications of Sue and Torino et al.’s research corroborated Boysen et al.’s (2009) assertions that many educators are often unaware that difficult dialogues or the resultant microaggressions are occurring; others though aware of such situations, may be uncomfortable, or simply feel helpless and fail to confront the situations. The reactions of both graduate faculty and students in Sue and Torino et al.’s study revealed varying levels of intense emotion with the most overriding of these being anxiety when confronted with issues of race. Tummala-Narra found one of the reasons reported by faculty for the avoidance of racial dialogues in graduate level classrooms was the concern of losing control of the class. Variables shown to influence avoidance of racial dialogues were lack of knowledge and training in this area, uncertainty of appropriate measures to
take, and levels of discomfort regarding issues of race (Tummala-Narra, 2009; Sue, Torino et al., 2009).

There is a consensus within the reviewed literature that the manner and the immediacy in which instructors address overt and covert demonstrations of bias is crucial to the classroom environment and overall dynamic of peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor relationships (Boysen et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010; Sue, Torino et al., 2009). Sue and Torino et al. (2009) suggested that the failure on the part of instructors to address these subtle forms of bias could leave students of color feeling an assault on their integrity and provide the overall impression of the instructor embracing racist ideologies. These occurrences place instructors in a precarious position with their students concerning instructor racial awareness. For example, there is the danger of students assuming a perceived alliance with instructors of similar backgrounds, that although the alliance can be of a positive nature, it could, as suggested by Tummala-Narra (2009), also create impasses to racial and cultural dialogues.

Cobb-Roberts (2011), a Black African-American, examined her role as co-author in Henry et al.’s (2007) case study that explored the issue of difficult dialogues in university classrooms from the perspective of various faculty members, all of whom served as co-authors to the study. Key elements examined in Henry et al.’s study were resistance and backlash relative to dialogues pertaining to race. Although the study was designed to look at various faculty perspectives, Henry et al.’s case study centered on incidents revolving around a diversity course taught by Cobb-Roberts and a particular semester involving a White male student and his claims of discomfort in the instructor’s class room in which the discussions were on White privilege.
Cobb-Roberts (2011) analyzed her role in Henry et al.’s (2007) study through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Critical Feminist Theory (CFT), choosing to use an autoethnographic approach as this enabled her to provide critical examination of herself, her actions, and her perceptions relative to her participation. Cobb-Roberts contended her purpose for the more recent study was both personal and professional; an effort to ameliorate the residual negative emotions associated with her perception of her voice as all but silent in the prior collaborative endeavor. In her analysis and self-critique, she discussed how she became a part of the system that propagates White privilege through silent advocating of color-blind ideologies, which as Boysen (2009) asserted as more damaging than blatant name calling. Cobb-Roberts’ self-analysis revealed moments of intense conflict in which she feared the perception on the parts of White students that she was siding with students of color when addressing social injustices and discrimination. These findings are commensurate with those of an earlier study (Tummula-Narra, 2009), in which the instructor experienced a similar dilemma.

In revisiting the case, Cobb-Roberts (2011) recalled sensing early in the course around which her case study was built, that her race and gender would be problematic, as it had so often been, as she was asking her students to “critique systems of power and privilege for which [she] was a victim” (p. 96). Cobb-Roberts described her experience in front of White as well as students of color as a “slippery slope” (p. 94) in which she was asking them to relinquish the comfort of privilege in order to “struggle with notions of injustice” (p. 94). She further related the internal conflict relative to purposefully constructing a safe place for open expression of reactions and views. Yet in so doing, unintentionally silencing the opportunity for honest confrontation for racist and color-
blind ideologies (c.f., Sue et al., 2007-2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003; Bonilla-Silva, Goar, & Embrick, 2006; Bonilla-Silva & Foreman, 2000) as having a profoundly negative impact on classroom discourse as well as negative emotional consequences for the instructor (Cobb-Roberts, 2011).

Cobb-Roberts (2011) suggested that instructors of subjects bearing racially and culturally sensitive content are under a microscope and they are in a sense naked before their students, making them vulnerable to backlash from administration based upon the negative feedback or surveys from their students. Teaching under this sort of duress, as previously asserted, is emotionally draining (Sue, Lin et al., 2009). In support of these assumptions, a recent study (Littleford, Ong, Tseng, Milliken, & Humy, 2010) designed to measure the impact of perceived bias on instructor evaluations by students indicated that students were more likely to provide negative evaluations of instructors who were perceived as biased toward the student’s particular racial or cultural group. Littleford et al. (2010) further asserted that teachers of multicultural content were far more likely to be judged by their ethnic, racial, or cultural background. Thusly, it was noted that due to the nature of the course, race, ethnicity, and culture are an issue and that the first impression of the instructor can be a lasting impression, often resulting in a negative performance evaluation by students. Based upon their findings, Littleford et al. (2010) recommended that institutions find other means of evaluating instructor competence and performance for those instructors who teach multicultural and diversity based courses.

Of the literature available for review, Tummala-Narra (2009) and Cobb-Roberts (2011) were of the very few authors who addressed the subjectivity of race and racial dialogues from the vantage point of the instructor. These two studies are important and
add much to current knowledge, but what their studies do not address is how these same types of discussions affect instructors of minor students in required subjects such as literature or social studies in which racism is often the topic. Tummula-Narra (2009) and Cobb-Roberts (2011) suggested that teachers of subjects that address social injustices such as racism are under scrutiny and subject to professional repercussions; this is even more the case with teachers of minor students for they are not only answerable to their administrations, but to the parents of their students (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001).

The Impact of Socio-Political Factors on Racial Dialogues

The United States has in recent years seen a resurgence of racism and bias demonstrated both overtly and covertly (Bernstein, Young, & Claypool, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Burton et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008; Sue, Nadel et al., 2008). This resurgence is commensurate with issues of race and gender becoming political talking points of the presidential campaigns for the 2008 and 2011 elections (Kosloff, Greenberg, Schmader, Dechesne, & Weise, 2010). It has been asserted these racially charged incidents, are not simply confined to political rallies and the media, but pervading the workplace and classroom, thus creating hostile working and learning environments (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Sue et al., 2009). Recognizing this trend, Smith et al. (2008) addressed “the dynamics of contemporary racism” (p. 336), what Smith et al. referred to as the new spin White individuals place on their bias. Smith et al. (2008) acknowledged that a deficit in the multicultural competence framework exploring the dynamic of contemporary forms of racism has left psychologists without clear direction on how to explore the deepest levels of racist influences in the work environments.
One of the stated objectives of Smith et al.’s (2008) study, was to “take up the challenge” (p. 336) issued by Sue (2005), who stated that “racism and ‘the conspiracy of silence’ (as cited in Smith et al., 2008) surrounding it are the most pressing issues currently facing the profession of psychology” (p. 338). An additional stated goal was the desire to adhere to the American Psychological Association’s Multicultural Guidelines, which strictly advise psychologists to become aware of their own biases, explicitly voicing a warning against color-blind ideologies and the associated dangers of perpetuating the “status quo” of the advantages of Whites over persons of color (as cited in Smith et al., 2008). Finally, a primary objective for this study was to advance multicultural awareness among psychologists of whom many feel themselves to be advocates of multiculturalism unknowingly perpetuate lingering subtle biases (Smith et al., 2008). The admonishment of the American Psychological Association as well as the objectives of Smith et al.’s study could well be directed to administrators and educators in the public school systems whose classrooms are, as some have asserted (Burton et al., 2010; Hodgkinson, 2000; Howard, 2007), affected by growing diverse populations.

Smith et al.’s (2008) study was conducted through the use of consensual qualitative research, as opposed to using quantitative measures such as the pencil and paper [survey] approach. According to Smith et al. (2008), past research on aversive and color-blind racism indicated quantitative methods do not adequately identify the subtleties of contemporary racism, which is cloaked beneath “espoused nonracist values” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 338). Smith et al.’s study was comprised of all White participants randomly assigned to interviewers, who were also all White in order to avoid possible discomfort on the part of the informants, and with the assumption that participants would
be more forthcoming with their responses with White interviewers as opposed to interviewers of color.

Smith et al.’s (2008) findings corroborated Bonilla-Silva et al.’s (2000, 2006) theory regarding individuals’ aversive techniques to conceal their own racism, by spinning their reality of racism and racial issues as being one in which racism exists, but outside their world and their reality (Smith et al., 2008). One of the emerging themes from Smith et al.’s study was color blindness, which validated the assumption that some participants would claim color-blindness thinking this a positive attribute. Additionally, wherein most participants agreed they were all too aware of color, some voiced their awareness of color positively, while some in negative language denoting unpleasant associations such as loud or obnoxious attitudes and smell. A second theme revealed was that racism was a matter of opinion, seemingly giving it the same “freedom” as religion and politics.

Another theme minimizing the reality of racism, yet recognizing it, was that racism exists – to an extent - and the assignment of racism to certain isolated events. Many participants voiced the belief that racism exists, but is overrated or exaggerated. Alternatively, some participants reported racism as existing and being everywhere, or feeling that there are “pockets of racism” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 338) still in existence in America; yet still far removed from the individual. According to Bonilla-Silva et al. (2000, 2006), these types of projections are a defensive strategy to avoid personal associations with White supremacy by admitting racism does exist, but outside and apart from the individual. These findings are commensurate with Boysen et al.’s (2009)
assertions that these types of denials are prevalent and more harmful than blatant name-calling.

Smith et al.’s (2008) findings supported other studies conducted in university settings, however, it is important to studies conducted in public school settings, as teachers instruct minor students who may be raised in homes where the racist views identified exist and are enforced. Due to strictures imposed by schools and perceptions of political correctness, teachers may find themselves in conflict over how to address issues of race with children who may come from such homes (LittleJohn, 2006). The issue of political correctness and its influence on racial dialogues is important in literature and social studies classes; it is viewed as the culprit in the desire of some to pretend the historical past away through omission (Boysen et al., 2009). As a result, racial paranoia has become “the unintended consequences of political correctness” (Jackson, 2008, p. 257). In accordance with Jackson’s assertions, Smith et al. (2008) cited Lee and Skillings (1991) who compared racism to a disease, recommending a treatment approach following the mental health model for treating additions such as substance abuse using the 12-step program and ones similar as a means of support.

The issue of political correctness may be the reason that some may view racism as a choice, or as Smith et al. (2008) argued as a matter of opinion, seemingly giving it the same “freedom” (p. 343) as religion and politics; conversely, racism must be recognized as an epidemic pervading our society and weakening its defenses. However, in spite of the number of studies conducted in university environments on this phenomenon, there are few studies conducted in public school settings. Settings where many agree racial and cultural awareness begin and as such additional research has been suggested
Combating racism with education and open dialogue beginning in the classroom is the best defense against the further spreading of this “disease” (p. 343) and this education should not wait until college it, should begin in elementary school, and continue through secondary school.

**The Difficulty of Difficult Dialogues with Minor Students**

Sue et al. (2008-2010) asserted that in order to establish open racial dialogues a university teacher must not only be knowledgeable of historical, sociological, and psychological context, but must also have an awareness of personal biases. These issues do not simply present themselves in university classrooms, teachers of children and adolescents face these issues when discussing sensitive or controversial issues relative to a work of literature or history. According to pedagogical researchers (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b: Lopez, 2011) as well as critical race theorists (Burton et al., 2010), this is problematic as many teachers of minor children lack preparedness to deal with issues presenting themselves in public school classroom settings. In order to meet these demands, additional research involving teachers of minor students is essential to the development of racial awareness training programs for public school teachers.

Outside influences affect public elementary through secondary school teachers' level of comfort regarding racial discussions (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001) and also pose a problem regarding the expansion of critical race and discourse studies into these settings (Burton et al., 2010). Examples of these outside influences include ethical and legal principles relative to research involving minors (U.S.
Department of Health & Human Services, 2010) and administrative strictures
admonishing public school teachers to avoid controversial topics (see IKB-R, CCSD,
2012; DeCrescio, 2006). These constraints and regard to the differing values established
by parents for their children (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001) may
be the reasons for limited knowledge regarding the experiences of teachers who teach
curriculum-based subject matter containing racial content.

Sue et al.’s research (2008-2010) as well as the research of others (Boysen, et al.,
2009; Brown et al., 2008; Cobb-Roberts, 2011 & 2012; Spanierman et al., 2009; Todd et
al., 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009) have provided a vast amount of information regarding
the experiences of university students and instructors. Yet in spite of the abundance of
information, there is a gap in the research regarding how these issues impact teachers and
students in elementary through secondary public school settings where pedagogic
theorists (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Diemer et al., 2006, French et al., 2006; Lopez, 2011)
and others (Burton et al., 2010) say racial and cultural awareness should begin.

In a study on ethnic identity and violence, French et al. (2006) cited Erikson’s
(1968) work as having identified adolescence as a time of self-discovery, of breaking
away in search of an identity outside of family. French et al. suggested that during this
time a child begins developing a sense of ideology regarding political, societal, and
religious matters. The classroom is the first place in which many children have the
chance to experience exposure to diverse ideologies and gain the opportunity to compare
these with those of his or her upbringing (French et al., 2006). As such, additional
research into teaching and addressing these topics in the elementary, middle, and
secondary school settings is vital.
The Challenges of Public Secondary Teachers

A review of the current literature has generated recurrent themes of oppression regarding the ability of students as well as faculty to address biases in post-secondary instructional settings. In one of the few studies in a secondary setting garnered by a review of the current literature, Deimer et al. (2006) explored the correlation of urban adolescents’ perception of support from important members of their family, peer group, and community for “challenging racism, sexism, social injustices and the development of critical consciousness” (p. 444). The authors demonstrated a stronger correlation between perceived support in challenging racism, sexism, and social injustice when asked to reflect upon these issues in either writing or discussing, but there was significantly less support for taking action (i.e., directly addressing these issues when the target themselves, or witnessing racism, sexism, or social injustice perpetrated against another).

Deimer et al. (2006) noted that some of the participants related in narratives they felt supported in discussing the issue of racism, however, many of their family and older community supports prefer not to discuss the past (Deimer et al., 2006). The authors further asserted that teachers who teach subjects dealing with racism and social injustice find this is frequently the case with Black students. As a result, these students often do not know enough of their own history; which according to research cited in this study has a direct impact upon the development of critical consciousness as well as feelings of oppression (Diemer et al., 2006). When students do not learn of their racial and cultural histories beginning in the homes, this places an undue burden upon teachers of literature and social studies to fill in these gaps; gaps that may be inconsistent with what some parents wish for their children to know.
The racial climate has been asserted to have a significant impact upon students’ motivation and psychological well-being (Reynolds, Sneva, Jacobs, & Gregory, 2010). Reynolds et al. found a negative correlation between race-related stress and extrinsic motivation, but a positive relationship between race-related stress and intrinsic motivation resulting in amotivation in students of color. Based upon the findings the authors asserted students who experience race-related stress are far more likely to suffer academically and/or drop out of college than their less affected counterparts. Reynolds et al. further claimed that students with strong family and social supports might be less impacted and better able to absorb the brunt of racial slights than those without strong family and social support. Further implications noted by Reynolds et al. were that students who feel supported by and comfortable with their instructors and in their classes are far less stressed in relation to racial dialogues than those who do not feel comfortable with their instructors or do not feel supported.

If students feel their instructors are not supportive or if the instructor lacks the skills to facilitate, or even mediate difficult classroom discussions relative to racial issues, then students are likely to have increased race-related stress (Davies, 2009; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006; Kreyling, 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010). The implications of Reynolds et al.’s (2010) study support previous and current studies suggesting the need for open racial discourse in elementary through secondary classrooms. An understanding of public secondary school teachers’ perceptions and experiences regarding the facilitation of difficult dialogues is needed to provide information for the design of programs to train elementary through secondary public school teachers to facilitate difficult dialogues. The effective facilitation of difficult dialogues in public elementary
through secondary school classrooms may combat the rise of racial microaggressions through the expansion of racial and cultural awareness (Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Boysen et al., 2009; Davies, 2009; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006; Lopez, 2011; Sue et al., 2007, 2009, 2010; Todd et al., 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009).

Challenges of Meeting the Needs of Multicultural Classrooms

Emerging demographic and social realities change what was once accepted practice in English classrooms. Lopez (2011) asserted students of non-White cultural backgrounds often suffer academically with literacy rates much lower than that of their White counterparts. Lopez, as well as others (Bolgatz 2005b; Ladson-Billings, 2005, Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008), believe this is due to a lack of multicultural pedagogy in classrooms in which the standard works of literature are British and American writers, and these are taught rather than introducing newer and multicultural works. Lopez, in citing Morrell (2005), acknowledged the suggestion that there needs to be an increased emphasis on a critical English education that is explicit about the role of language and literacy in disrupting existing power relations. This view is commensurate with Roberts, Bell, and Murphy’s (2008) study with Black urban youth and their feelings regarding the “stock” African American works of literature primarily taught during Black History month. Burton et al. (2010) and Ladson-Billings (2005, 2009, 2013) recognized these shifting demographic and social realities for US schools and added the socio-political climate is a factor in how persons of other cultures feel in classroom and work settings.

In a recent study, with the setting not in a U.S. school, but in a Canadian territory school, Lopez (2011) conducted a case study with a secondary English teacher on activism and agency while teaching culturally relevant literature. The purpose of this
study was to support the argument that teachers who are willing to teach these complex subjects, which often lead to difficult dialogues, need support. The goal of Lopez’s study was to present different ways in which culturally relevant teaching can be infused with common elements of culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy. The teacher participant used performance poetry, which was not a part of normal curriculum practices. The use of this type of lesson that was a step outside the standard practices box was selected in the hope the findings would benefit not only English teachers, but also, all teachers who seek better understanding of how to incorporate culturally relevant practices in their classrooms.

Teachers who expand beyond the typical cannons of literature often find themselves stressed as they are stepping outside recognized safety zones. Lopez (2011) analyzed the tensions experienced by the study’s teacher participant as she navigated her way through teaching in a way that while effective in meeting the needs of diverse students, strayed from strictly meeting academic standards of curriculum and pedagogy. The policies held within Ontario are more relaxed regarding teaching English than those held within much of the United States. Lopez cited the policy, which acknowledges there is no one correct method of teaching or learning English, and teachers should use their skills and resources at their discretion in order to achieve academic objectives while meeting the diverse needs of all students. The goal of the policy is to disrupt the dominant Eurocentric forms of knowledge and discourses that are prevalent in many Canadian schools (Lopez, 2011). This objective compares with this research project as well as studies highlighted in the literature review to disrupt dominant racial views and establish an environment where the histories, culture, language, and literature of all
students become relevant. Perhaps as important in that endeavor is for all students to learn from these systems and challenge themselves, their families, their communities, and peers to expand their minds and experiences as well.

Lopez’s (2011) study took place in a secondary English classroom in a large suburban racially, culturally, and religiously diverse school. The student population was widely made up of primarily South Asians – Pakistan, India, West Indians (Jamaicans, Guyanese, Trinidadian), Asians, Filipinos and Whites. There is no mention of students from the US of any racial or cultural background, this may be due to the lack of available demographic data regarding school enrollment. Within this school system, students are placed on one of three academic tracks: University – where the largest number of students plan on attending university, the applied college track, for those who wish to focus on particular field, and workforce for those who wish to receive vocational training.

According to data collected, students enrolled in the applied and workforce tracks were predominately non-white. Additionally, the predominately-White teaching staff reported that there tends to be more discipline referrals for students of color. This is consistent with the findings in Roberts et al.’s (2008) study in which Black students reported differences in how White teachers disciplined them and their White peers for minor classroom infractions such as talking, sleeping, or simply getting up out of their seat.

The participant English teacher for Lopez’s (2011) study implemented a poetry performance project in her 12th grade class, which is on the academic track and the majority of the students within this class were White. The study teacher had previously taught the applied English classes that other teachers identified as challenging, but stated
due to her interest and intuition was able to establish a positive teaching environment and relationship with her students. This teacher’s experience is consistent with Agirdag et al.’s (2012) views on the importance of student and teacher relationships. This teacher’s interest and intuition may have been the result of her racial and ethnic background as an African-Canadian who was described as having a keen awareness of her family’s racial history. Racial self-awareness is important and can as in this case produce positive results, but there can be negative aspects to this awareness as well. For example, in a study conducted by Segal and Garrett (2013), White prospective teachers were also keenly aware of their whiteness and privilege; however, this awareness got in the way of their connecting with Black individuals who were victims of Hurricane Katrina. In fact, these future teachers used their whiteness and life of privilege as a barrier, as an excuse for not connecting.

Information obtained through a review of the current literature does seem to suggest that most White individuals are in some level of denial regarding issues of race; either denying its existence, or that if it does exist it has nothing to do with their lives. The teacher in Lopez’s (2011) study voiced that one of the reasons for interest in the study was that she felt a level of dissatisfaction with the lack of engagement in her academic grade 12 English class students, which according to the information gathered in this study were primarily White. This realization of lack of engagement was probably due to her sense of racial and cultural awareness, but also due to having taught in the applied and workforce track classes that were primarily students of color where connections were established. Lopez acknowledged that students in academic classes are predominately White, and that most students in these classes, White or of color are from
more socio-economically advantaged families. Therefore, these students may not have had direct exposure to discrimination in the ways that the less socio-economically advantaged students have. It is usually students of lower social economic status in the non-academic courses; alternatively, it is usually the students from a home with college-educated parents and of higher income in the academic or advanced classes (Agirdag et al., 2012; Kearns, 2011).

Research supports the theory that students thrive when exposed to learning relevant to their personal lives (Epstein et al., 2011; Halliday & Moses, 2013; Kerns, 2011). This holds especially true in literature classes where the readings must be relevant in order for students to maintain interest. It may well be that students in academic or advanced classes who are predominately White middle class excel academically as well as socially because the curriculum appears tailored for their lives, their worlds (Kearns, 2011). According to Lopez (2011), when teachers strive toward culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy, students are empowered and teachers find themselves risk-takers. In the body of work produced by such researchers as Ladson-Billings (2005, 2009, 2013) there is consensus that when culturally relevant pedagogy informs literacy practices teachers take a more critical approach to include the cultural experiences of all students with the realization that literacy occurs in social, historical, and political contexts (Choules, 2007).

A case in point, when teaching a work of literature such as *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) many current events both politically and socially are relevant to the teaching and drawing historical and literary parallels to recent events is essential and supported by standards of the curriculum (see CCSS ELA RI 9-10.7-9). However, some teachers may
be afraid to discuss the Trayvon Martin death and the ensuing trial (Berry & Stovall, 2013). Some teachers may be afraid or uncomfortable to discuss ongoing racial slurs directed at the president (“‘He’s 47 percent Negro’,” n.d.) or insults directed at General Colon Powel referring to him as a “house negro” (“Democrats Denounced Gen Powell as a ‘House Negro,’” n.d.). These are relevant, but they are also controversial. There is also the reality that some teachers may harbor these same notions. Some teachers, as many White Americans do (Williams, 2013), may feel Trayvon Martin’s death was justified or they may not view some of the televised and printed reports of racial slurs and innuendos directed at President Obama as such, or even harmful even if they do. To avoid talking about current events because it appears to be taking political sides (Walton, Allen, Puckett, & Deskins, 2008) is cowardly (Ochoa, 2009) and harmful to students. When teachers do not voice their opposition to these current events, they may be viewed as not having opposition, the results of which are damaging to teacher-to-student relationships as well as student-to-student relationships.

According to Lopez (2011) even when a teacher is racially and culturally aware, and may have an intuitive ability to make connections these are still conscious actions and a desire to affect change that “prompts reflections, transformation, and growth” (p. 80). This idea of reflection, transformation, and growth is vital to this study for this was the end goal of the project, for teachers to reflect upon how, why, and even why not when it comes to racial discussions in the classrooms. Vital to the current body of knowledge is answers to such questions as to how these discussions or lack of discussions transform external as well as internal attitudes and to what level these exchanges promote personal as well as professional growth in teachers.
Initiating discussions on difficult topics is an uncomfortable task for most anyone; for teachers in a public school setting, it can be even more so. However, as Lopez (2011) has demonstrated through her case study, with a teacher willing to take the risks there can be personal as well as professional growth. The study proved a positive experience for the students involved as they moved from disengaged, to discomfort, to the disruption of previously held notions of race and culture. Lopez reported the students as initially uncomfortable with the discussions relative to poetry read, which focused on the experiences of urban youth, with many students admitting to having their eyes opened to the experiences of “other” kids. Non-White students became more comfortable discussing their differences and how they had at times felt marginalized within the classroom, while some others felt compelled toward action such as forming a club against bullying. Tummula-Narra (2009) found in a study conducted with a university graduate class in which there was a larger ratio of White students to Black, that once dialogues were opened, the Black students were more comfortable in voicing their views, while in the beginning the racialized discussions had a polarizing effect on the class. The implication of the reported events in these two distinct settings is that teachers can become agents of change in their classrooms through the power of discourse.

The process of opening racial dialogues in a secondary classroom can, as was described by the participant teacher, be an emotional as well as stressful experience. Lopez’s (2011) observations and data obtained via interviews revealed a teacher who felt she was exploring unchartered waters and was especially concerned over how the lesson would be accepted by the mostly White students. Given her role as a Black woman, she feared the students would somehow feel she was pushing her racial agenda onto them.
However, just as in a university study conducted by Rothschild (2003) who found she was able to overcome her Whiteness in front of a class largely comprised of Black and Latino students, the study teacher was able to overcome her color as well, by addressing her color and her experiences due to her color. However, there is the contrast of how Rothschild as a White woman was able to remove her Whiteness as a barrier to students of color, yet the White students in a separate study setting remained resistant. This may have been because Rothschild was not the classroom teacher, and as such did not have an established relationship with the students. This distinction is perhaps another area open for exploration, but does appear to support research conducted in actual classroom settings involving active teachers in their respective classrooms.

No matter the color of teachers’ skin or the color of students’ skin, acknowledging and exploring the experiences of those outside the dominant culture is not something teachers can afford to ignore. Lopez’s (2011) study supports theoretical viewpoints (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005, 2013; Ladson-Billings & Brown 2008) regarding the importance of culturally relevant pedagogy to multicultural classrooms. Moreover, the study takes this view a step further to demonstrate that even when classrooms, or perhaps even whole schools are not multicultural, that students still benefit from a multicultural curriculum and related discussions as the world in which they will receive post-secondary education, work, and live is very much multicultural. Additionally, Lopez’s (2011) study demonstrates when teachers are provided permission to take risks within the allowance of the curriculum with support and guidance; they not only grow professionally, put personally as well. By expanding the English classroom curriculum beyond the tried and true, teachers of all colors are better able to connect with their students, and aid their
students to better connect with one another and become better agents in their socio-political structures.

Teachers above all should not feel oppressed by political correctness to avoid controversial discussions of race and culture in the classroom (Kumashiro, 2000). Many agree it is in the school environment that many students have their first experiences with the injustices of society (Agirdag et al., 2012; Banks, 2009; Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Diemer et al., 2006; McCarthy et al., 2007). Lopez (2011) asserted the importance of teachers having space in the curriculum to develop agency for social justice teaching. Ladson-Billings (1995), a pioneer in critical race pedagogy, stated culturally relevant teaching is good for all students, not just those of color; it increases engagement and academic achievement. In addition to the academic advantages, culturally relevant teaching raises critical consciousness (French et al., 2006) and improves self-esteem in adolescents (Agirdag et al., 2012).

Lopez (2011) further suggested, as there is a relationship between pedagogy and critical literacy and increased academic achievement; it is disturbing that some schools do not support this type of teaching. All teachers, not just those who teach a literature course labeled “multicultural literature” must realize the importance of not just including, but infusing their curriculum with multicultural works. However as Lopez affirmed, many English teachers find adding multicultural works to their lessons to be challenging, as they must fit what is viewed as alternative texts into a standardized curriculum upon which standardized tests are based. As research supports (Kearns, 2011; Halladay & Moses, 2013), students from lower socio-economic backgrounds are marginalized by
these types of tests; they are also marginalized in classrooms that “teach to these tests” rather than teaching to the students.

English teachers are often resistant to incorporating texts such as were used in Lopez’s (2011) study or those used in a similar study (Roberts et al., 2008), as they view these outside academic standards, and feel they are dumbing down the curriculum. An argument in opposition to this is the number of traditional texts written in which the colloquial and dialectical language is not of academic standards. Charles Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* as a point in case, other works such as the Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* is another work in which the “common” folk are the storytellers. These are highly complex works and yet provide much insight into the socio-political constructs of the time-period. The common-man – everyman- has been the focal point of stories of every era. As Roberts et al.’s (2008) study supports, if we deny youth of today exposure to modern multi-cultural works that in their own way relate the struggles encountered in a diverse and sometimes reversed diverse cultures, we deny and invalidate their culture and race.

A review of the literature finds pedagogy and critical race theorists support the need for multicultural works to be included in the curriculum and for teachers to have the training and education necessary to facilitate associated dialogues. However, teachers need support beyond their education programs and professional development diversity workshops. Lopez (2011) stresses the importance of collaboration and as an example cited Sagor’s (2005) suggestion of forming “critical friends.” Teachers can better accomplish the goals set forth in critical and culturally relevant pedagogy if they establish safe areas and have colleagues with whom they can share experiences and assist one another through collaboration and mentorship. It is important for teachers to be able to
discuss the stresses and tensions associated with teaching multicultural texts and the facilitation of associated discussions. In addition, forming critical friends will allow teachers to collaborate on the academic side for as Lopez (2011) acknowledged, teaching outside the traditional textbooks requires extra planning for lessons and assessments.

Many schools feel they are promoting inclusion and diversity if they hold cultural fairs allowing students to wear their cultural garments, display art, music, dance, and food. Embracing diversity goes beyond these things; inclusion is more than recognizing religious holidays and customs of “others.” As Boysen et al. (2009) argued in reference to universities’ attempts to embrace diversity, they feel they have met their obligation by holding training workshops and implementing inclusion policies. As Boysen further offered, it seems that no one seems to know what the next step is; however, some have asserted that meeting the needs of growing diverse communities and workplaces begins in the public school classrooms (Burton et al., 2010).

A step in the right direction may be bringing critically and culturally relevant pedagogy into the classrooms and arming teachers with the space and the training to not only facilitate difficult racially and culturally sensitive dialogues, but also to invite such discussions. Lopez (2011) asserted that research supports the importance of having these fundamentals in place for teachers and that there is urgency for teacher education programs to place a greater importance on preparing future teachers to engage in culturally relevant practices. These recommendations are especially vital to English classrooms, Lopez (2011) along with others (Roberts et al., 2008) acknowledged the importance of teachers becoming activists and engaging in the shift toward critical English education. According to Lopez, this shift demands a change in curricular content
in secondary English classrooms as well as a change in literacy pedagogy and textual consumption. Lopez, as did Roberts et al., acknowledged the difficulty of bringing diverse texts into the English classroom due to the number of canonical texts (i.e., Shakespeare, Poe, Whitman, and Hemmingway) that are required and traditional readings. Lopez suggested there is a need for additional research into how teachers can develop ways of framing culturally relevant lessons and strategies in literacy to culturally diverse classrooms; however, in addition to finding ways to teach these lessons, teachers must also develop a level of comfort in doing so.

Comfort with teaching multicultural texts and facilitating associated dialogues is derived from knowledge and building personal cultural and racial awareness. Lopez (2011) asserted that teacher education and research must take into account the experiences of teachers such as the one of focus in her study; teachers who are in the classroom navigating their way through what has been unchartered territory for many. Lopez’s study demonstrated it is possible for teachers to make room in their classrooms and the curriculum for culturally relevant texts and related discussions. That by doing so the teacher, as well as students involved, are able to form a deeper and greater understanding of others and of themselves, thus expanding critical racial and cultural awareness.

Cochran-Smith et al. (2008) asserted prior to Lopez’s (2011) study that there are few empirical studies of culturally relevant teachers’ practices with diverse students. Lopez cited Cochran-Smith et al. in support of her own argument that there is still a deficit in the research. Indeed a search of the current literature has found few studies in which the experiences of teachers in the classroom is the focus since that time, and the
demographic as well as socio-political landscape has broadened and changed in many ways since then. Lopez’s study relates to *Racial Dialogues*, as it is one of the few studies, and especially current, taking place in a secondary setting. It is especially of importance that it is taking place in an English classroom. Lopez emphasized, “it is not enough to understand the theoretical underpinnings of culturally relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies; teachers must be able to answer for themselves the question of what does this look like and feel like in my classroom?” (p. 76).

Teachers of inner city youth as well as those with students in more rural settings all grapple with how to make learning more culturally and socially relevant to their students (Berkel et al., 2009). Roberts et al. (2008) examined the use of language, particularly racialized jokes, and name-calling, to consider how such talk functions to create social and rhetorical spaces where youth of color can express and critically analyze the particularities of their lived experiences of race and racism within a time of contemporary “color-blind” contexts that asserts race no longer matters. The study was conducted in a tenth-grade U.S. History class in a small urban high school in Bronx, New York. All student participants with the exception of one White student were of color with an equal number of males and females.

The authors drew upon previous CRT theoretical studies stating there was recognition of how changing yet persistent forms of racism take place in eras. These assertions are congruent with Sue and Nadal et al.’s (2008) assertions of the “new face of racism” and what Smith et al. (2008) identified as contemporary racism. It is important to note that Roberts et al.’s (2008) study was conducted before the election of the first
African American president and that the conversations in that same setting if conducted today may be very different.

The new face of racism spoken of by Sue and Nadal (2008) is present in the K-12 public education system. While legal segregation is a thing of the past, poverty and standardized testing are the means by which students of color are kept out of predominately White schools and from graduation itself (Kearns, 2011). Another form of oppression is in how students of color, especially Black students are largely unaware of their historical racial past due to how the curriculum in most schools is structured around dominant White society. Roberts et al. (2008) found that many students participating in their study were ignorant to the facts of this country’s – of their – racial past. For example, some students were unaware of legalized segregation; however, many students observed how segregation has gone from policy to normalcy as they noted how students self-segregate themselves in the classrooms, cafeterias, and common areas of school.

The urban schools located in the geographic area of Robert et al.’s (2008) study are segregated largely due to socio-economic standing, and based upon the representative population at the school in which the study was conducted, most of the poorer students are Black and Latino. Roberts cited the findings of Fine et al. (2004), Shulz et al. (2000), and Weiner and Oaks (1996) who found that in more suburban areas where there are more socially and economically mobile families of color, students are separated by a more insidious form of segregation than poverty; academics. In honors and AP classes, there is a predominance of White and Asian students, but few Black or Latino students. Those left out of honors and AP classes are in “on-level” or applied (see Lopez, 2011) courses, special education, ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages), or they drop
out (Kerns, 2011). According to some (Agirdag et al., 2012), these students are generally targeted as “at risk” based upon color and first language alone.

All these tactics provide the backdrop for “rationing of curriculum” – for example in many school systems “gifted” or advanced placement students are taught to use higher order thinking skills. In the lower level classes, especially with the advent of the Common Core, which is now adopted by more than half the states in the United States (Delguidice & Luna, 2013); students are expected to rise to the task. Teachers who have in the past resigned themselves to the fact some students are “unteachable,” are now having to rise to the task themselves to find new ways of reaching students in diverse classrooms (Halladay & Moses, 2013). Even when it was considered accepted practice for the curriculum to be watered down; all students were expected to take the same standardized tests, many of which are high stakes tests, which mean the difference between passing or failing, or in many cases graduating from high school period (Kearns, 2011).

Researchers recognize that culturally diverse pedagogy is important in all classrooms, especially language arts and social studies. However, as Lopez (2011) and Roberts et al. (2008) found, many teachers feel they do not have the time to add to their already burdened curriculum, and as others have found many White teachers are simply unprepared to discuss race (Banks-Rogers, 2008; Segall & Garrett, 2013). This refusal of teachers to discuss race in the classroom could have far-reaching repercussions. Roberts et al. argued that the racialization of youth of color in schools is situated in broader society within the color-blind ideology that dominates contemporary mainstream discourse.
In an effort to understand how students perceive what takes place in their classrooms relative to the multicultural curriculum and discussions, Roberts et al. (2008) examined race and racism through the lens of stock stories, what they termed the Story Telling Project. Roberts et al. examined the phenomenon from an ethnographic approach viewed through the analytic lens of story types. Roberts et al. (2008) defined STP (Story Telling Project) as “Learning about Race and Racism through Storytelling and Arts” (Roberts et al., 2008, p. 6). Roberts et al. used qualitative methods of classroom observations, semi-structured interviews with teachers, and semi-structured focus groups with students. The authors used literature both serious as well as satire as a means of opening up lines of discussion, finding that the youth of the hip-hop generation are very open to expressing themselves through rhyme as well as prose. As Roberts et al. (2008) as well as Lopez (2011) found, teachers who are comfortable with topics of race and racism are more likely to choose works of literature that invite these discussions, while teachers who are less comfortable may teach literature that is safer, less controversial.

The curriculum in which Roberts et al.’s (2008) study evolved was informed by interacting concepts of race as a social construction, with racism operating on several levels ranging from White supremacy and privilege to color blindness, the progeny of racism that operates in a world of hierarchies and separateness yet insists that race does not matter. Roberts et al. asserted race is not something that can be categorized according to color, but rather a social construct. As such, the classroom in which students spend the majority of their waking hours should provide an environment where students feel comfortable not only being of color, but also discussing color – Black or White. Roberts et al. asserted the STP curriculum ensures that just such an opportunity is
possible with the learning environment treated like a community, rather than simply a classroom. When teachers are comfortable with talks of race, students are encouraged and empowered so the classroom becomes a place in which they share stories about race and racism in an open forum, where students respectfully hear and discuss, then critically analyze.

Students in Roberts et al.’s (2008) study voiced their objections to the stock stories taught in many of their classes and questioned why there were no stories of the common people who lived through oppression, and of more importance to them- what is happening now to them and around them. Much has happened to and around students and all people of color since 2008. Issues of color have always been an area of controversy in classrooms and the workplace, but even more so since the election of our first African American president (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2013). To discuss racial equality is now seen as taking political sides – rather than the side of what is right or just (Walton et al., 2008). The shooting of Trayvon Martin is an excellent example of what could be discussed in classrooms today (Berry & Stovall, 2013). How might this case have compared to the 1955 brutal killing of Emmitt Till? If teachers are uncomfortable or even afraid to broach these topics for fear of censure by administration or complaints by [White] parents, then students, of color and White, are without an adult to guide them through their own socio-political environment.

Another concern revealed in Roberts et al.’s (2008) study was how colorblind racism has turned a blind academic eye to poor grammar on the part of students of color; accepting that they do not know better. One student posed the question of how students can be expected to know better if they are not taught better. This one question asked by a
student that seemed to be off topic from Roberts et al.’s intent raises an important question and could extend itself to further research into how color-blind education marginalizes students by not correcting their grammar, their use of the spoken as well as the written language. Some (Mordaunt, 2011; Swearingen, Jacobs, & Sledd, 1981) pose there is such a thing as Black English and even go so far as to suggest this should be treated as a language. While this may seem inclusive, it is really exclusion for it sets the pace for failure in academics and the professional world (Kearns, 2011).

There is much debate over where to draw the racial line between political correctness and the correcting of linguistic and written grammatical errors (Ladson-Billings, 2013; Mordaunt, 2011; Swearingen et al., 1981). However, failing to correct a matter of language could be viewed as another form of oppression and places students “at risk” at greater risk as adults operating in academic and professional circles. With this said, there may be some White teachers who feel it is racist to correct the grammar of Black students and as Kohli (2008) revealed from her personal experiences as well as in a study with teachers of color, there is the danger of challenging what is accepted as cultural language, and thus cause a child to feel invalidated.

The issue of language also lends itself to name-calling based upon stereotypes. Many teachers are often shocked to realize that that one of the ways in which youth of color navigate their cultural path through a color-blind landscape is through racialized jokes and name-calling. The use of the word “nigger” has so saturated the lexicon of Black youth today that a word that was once only heard whispered or used by racist White individuals is now viewed by the post-Civil Rights generation as a new form of pronoun and even as a form of endearment (Kennedy, 2002). While many teachers,
Black, Hispanic, and White cringe at the use of the N-word, or wetback, or even cracker, the level of comfort in correcting this could be directly tied to the teacher’s own lack of knowledge concerning the origins of such words. Students themselves are often ignorant to the etymology, and teachers, who are equally ignorant or uncomfortable discussing these words, may give voice to misconceptions and stereotypes through their very own silence. Students in the Roberts et al.’s (2008) study seemed eager to test the researchers by using these words, to see how comfortable these adults were with not only hearing the use of such words, but how comfortable they were discussing these words. A teacher does not have to speak the lingo to understand the lingo. In order to correct the lingo, teachers must know what is incorrect. As Roberts et al. asserted, the ability of teachers to not only hear, but also respond to students in a supportive and informative manner regarding issues of race will garner the trust and respect of the students in their charge.

Having teachers who have an interest in expanding the curriculum to meet the needs of their diverse classrooms is important. Unfortunately, it is not always possible. Although, Roberts et al. (2008) did not note any particular limitations to their study, the teachers were all interested in the study and therefore, not resistant to the discussions on race. The study was a qualitative ethnographic study wherein the students and teachers interacted during the normal course of observed instruction and focus groups; however, the teachers selected for the study were drawn from a pool of educators at a teachers’ workshop on how to conduct a story-telling project. Additionally, all teachers involved in the study were of color, had there been at least one White teacher participant the results may have been different; quite possibly just as the students’ views shifted as the
curriculum unfolded regarding their thoughts of their respective races, their views regarding Whites and how Whites feel about persons of color may also have shifted.

Studies from the perspective of students are important to the current research, but they only give a partial account of what takes place in the classroom. What teachers teach, why they teach certain works and why they elect to avoid others is equally, if not more important to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon of difficult racial dialogues. For example, Roberts et al. (2008) found that Black students felt that they are denied the whole truth by having primarily stock or standard stories taught during certain times of the year (i.e., Black History Month or lessons on the Civil War and slavery). Students felt these stories do not reflect how they feel or what is current and relevant to their world, and voiced a desire to see more counter stories – stories that challenge stock stories that oftentimes do not reveal the less comfortable aspects of racial history.

An area of concern noted by Roberts et al. (2008) and recognized earlier by Werrlein, (2004) is that in many instances the social studies curriculum does not tell the entire story. What literature teachers find is that what the history books leave untold, works of fiction often reveal, such as Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). This novel was written during a time of racial unrest beginning just after Brown vs. the Board of Education, the murder of Emmitt Till, and the Montgomery Bus Boycotts. There are literary allegories to the past and parallels to the past as well as present that teachers can make – should make – that bring the present into focus while teaching what may be accepted as a stock story. However, this particular novel is not a stock story. Many classic works challenge the history books and other works of fiction that may have sanitized slavery, the depression, and Civil Rights era. As such, Lee’s *To Kill a*
*Mockingbird* (1960) has spent as much time on the banned books list as it has in the approved curriculum (Saney, 2003). Another work of “stock” literature is *Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl* (1952), a true account written during the systematic genocide of the Jewish people in Nazi Germany, and the parallels are painfully obvious to the treatment of Mexican and other Latino immigrants in the United States (Ruiz, Gallardo, & Delgado-Romero, 2013). The similarities are obvious, yet due to discomfort or perhaps even agreement with strict and unfair immigration laws (Reyna, Dobria, & Wetherell, 2013) some teachers may not open the floor for discussion or even invite written discussion in the form of compare and contrast essays. Such assignments are not only important to the curriculum and meeting educational standards, but many (Agirdag et al., 2012; Brown et al., 2008; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008) agree are socially relevant and healing to immigrant children and their families.

Oftentimes social studies and literature are taught concurrently according to parallel literary and historical eras. Bolgatz (2005b) conducted a qualitative study exploring the experiences of a Black Literature teacher and a White Social Studies teacher teaching 11th grade American History and American Literature concurrently. The sharing of students and collaborating on the curriculum enabled the two teachers to not only study what the history books relate about history, but what the writers of letters, poems, biographies, works of fiction revealed. Bolgatz asserted the study was an opportunity for these two teachers to do what many avoid due to the controversial nature of topics often considered taboo. Bolgatz further supported recent assertions (Roberts et al., 2008; Kohli, 2008; Lopez, 2011; Sue, Lin et al., 2009) that teachers do not have the tools and support systems in place for effective instruction of sensitive topics or the
training to facilitate classroom relative dialogues. However, the two teachers initiated the dialogues by putting the topic of race on the table with race-related curricular materials and assignments. As with other studies (Berkel et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2008; Lopez, 2011; Rothschild, 2003), the students demonstrated a willingness to voice their own thoughts, feelings, and concerns about language and what race and racism means to them.

Studies conducted in the natural classroom environment as opposed to focus groups provide data that are more authentic; for this purpose, Bolgatz (2005b) conducted her study within a combination of natural classroom environment with informal interviews conducted periodically. This allowed for the teachers who already had a relationship with the students to use themselves as well as the curriculum as a tool to foster open discussions about race. Sue and Lin et al. (2009) expressed the importance of teachers using self as a tool in the classroom when broaching sensitive racial topics. For example, the older teacher in Bolgatz’s study, a Black male, was able to share his memories of segregation that even extended itself to the “public” swimming pool. When teachers – White or of color – bring all of who they are into the classroom, it opens the door for students to bring all of who they are into the class and discussions as well. Additionally, because there was an established teacher and student relationship, when the dialogues became less than comfortable, the teachers were able to address these issues and maintain the flow of dialogue. Agirdag et al. (2012) stressed the importance of teacher and student relationships to establishing an environment conducive to discussing ethnicity, race, and culture. This level of comfort may not be present with outside researchers conducting focus group discussions with students or even teachers selected from a group.
In order to maintain the authenticity of the findings, Bolgatz (2005b) operated as a participant observer in the classroom and in the midst of participating also took notes, deconstructed dialogues, and documented observations of participants and their reactions, the setting, as well as her own personal reactions and thoughts regarding the class activities and discussions. In addition to noted observations and transcription of dialogues, Bolgatz video recorded informal interviews with students as well as the two involved teachers. The topics of these interviews covered thoughts on the classroom discussions and activities, and in addition, how both the teachers and the students personally felt. As themes unfolded from the coded transcriptions, Bolgatz scrutinized these for resistance to racial dialogues or institutional racism. Bolgatz cross-referenced the discussions and classroom observations with the informal interviews in efforts to triangulate the data to ensure a more authentic accounting of the represented perspectives.

From an academic perspective, the teachers were able to combine the curriculum – what was in the history and literature texts – to current events of the time of the study (e.g. U.S. military involvement in Kosovo) (Bolgatz, 2005b). Much has happened on the socio-political front since Bolgatz conducted this study; however, the findings of her study are relevant today and are further proof that studies conducted in the natural classroom environment of public secondary schools are important. Bolgatz asserted that “encouraging critical reflection shifts the hierarchical relationship between teacher and student, allowing students to have a position of increased power: the power to critique” (p. 34).

Studies from the perspectives of teachers as well as students are vital to the current body of knowledge. Bolgatz’s (2005b) study, even though conducted more than a
decade ago, is the closest to what *Racial Dialogues* was designed to explore. It is important to note that Bolgatz conducted her study prior to the election or even the campaigning of Barrack Obama. Current history has changed and the discussions within a literature and history classroom post-Obama with the resultant socio-political climate have changed wherein topics of race are no longer about right and wrong, but, rather Democrat and Republican (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Walton et al., 2008). This opens up another area altogether, for teacher angst as they are admonished against revealing their party affiliation or discuss for whom they vote or have voted (see IKB-R, CCSD, 2012). However, as research indicates (Choules, 2007 Dallmer, 2007; Tatum, 1992; Werrlein, 2004; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008), teaching accurate history and teaching it within context broadens understanding and expands racial and social awareness.

Rothschild (2003) asserted that the current socio-political structures in place are of importance when constructing racialized dialogues. Race discussions pre-Obama brought different results. Pre-Obama teachers were not teaching children whose parents may have made a voting decision based upon race alone. This includes Blacks as well as Whites. Jeffries (2010) described the 2008 election “as a force that fosters conversations that cross academic boundaries, and cascade down from the ivory tower to newsrooms, living rooms, churches, and cafes below” (p. 404). Even though Rothschild conducted her study in the early 2000s, it lends proof to the reality as asserted by Bonilla-Silva (2010) that issues of race did not start nor end in 2008. Teachers have long needed support in the classrooms and if college and university instructors have difficulties in adult environments, then how much more of a challenge it is for public secondary teachers who are as Harding et al. (2001) addressed “teaching other people’s children.”
Rothschild (2003) further acknowledged the importance of actually seeing color in accord with others (Bonilla-Silva, 2002, 2003; Boysen et al., 2009) who contend that color-blind ideologies are demeaning to persons of color and invalidates their experiences both socially and personally as a person of color.

**Challenges for Public School Teachers of Color: Brown and Yellow, Black, and White**

Socio-political factors, growing diverse communities and schools, as well as the changes in the education system are all external factors that influence classroom discussions teachers have with students (Ladson-Billings, 2013). One area of concern for critical race and critical pedagogy researchers is how these factors affect the discussion of race, culture, and other sensitive topics (Banks-Rogers, 2008; Berkel et al., 2009; Harding et al., 2001; Roberts et al., 2008). Although most research on the topic of difficult classroom dialogues supports claims that these dialogues must take place and that instructors need ongoing training in order to meet the growing diverse needs of their multicultural classrooms (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Lopez, 2011), there are still few studies of public school teachers and their perceptions and experiences with classroom discussions on racism. An understanding of teachers lived experiences as they face existing and emerging challenges is essential to developing programs for prospective teachers as well as new and tenured teachers.

Visual differences of the teacher, although not a factor related to socio-political structures and changes in education may also present challenges, as these can create a barrier between teachers and the students if the teacher lacks an awareness of his or her racial self. As Cobb-Roberts (2011) and Tummala-Nara (2009) asserted, teachers are
judged by the color of their skin from the moment they enter the classroom. Some students may be unwilling to open up to a teacher who is of a different race or culture, and if teachers are unprepared both professionally and personally for the types of dialogues that can occur when race is the topic they could be caught in the fray. For example, Cobb-Roberts, an African American university professor, found herself under scrutiny based upon allegations of creating an uncomfortable environment made by a White university student in her cultural diversity class in which the topic was on disrupting Whiteness. Color can create a barrier, if allowed; however, teachers can use their color to displace these barriers and open the doors to these difficult but important dialogues in their classrooms.

Teachers of African, Asian, Hispanic, or Indian descent are considered of color. It seems, as a society we have forgotten white is a color too. When White teachers stand before a classroom where students are of varying hues, they are indeed aware of their own color. Rothschild (2003) conducted a qualitative study in which she was the White instructor entering the classroom and standing, as Cobb-Roberts (2011) described her own experience, naked before her students. Rothschild (2003) conducted her study from a sociological framework with the goal in mind of examining race in two different classroom environments. One study was conducted in an inner city college in a major American city with predominately Black and Latino students, and the other in a New England university with a predominately White student and faculty population. Rothschild (2003) found her experiences facilitating racialized talks in each of these two settings to be profoundly different. She found that even though in the inner city college she was the outsider, once her Whiteness no longer proved to be an obstacle to discourse,
the students were quite open about their racial experiences. Alternatively, at the New England university, where she was a part of the majority, the students were less comfortable speaking about issues of race, and many were in denial that racial problems and racism exists.

The resistance from the White students Rothschild (2003) encountered was consistent with the findings of others who found White students to be resistant not only to topics of race, but in the admission of their own biases and racist viewpoints (Bonilla-Silva, 2006; Boysen et al., 2009; Cobbs-Roberts, 2011; Tummala-Nara; 2009; Spanierman et al., 2009). Rothschild challenged the White students on these beliefs, just as the inner city students were challenged on their belief that Rothschild was incompetent to teach on matters of race because she is White; she found while the Black students opened up once challenged, the White students primarily remained resistant to the discussions. The implications of this continued resistance is that it was not the instructor’s whiteness that presented the barrier, but rather that of the students. The reasons for this type of resistance range from guilt and anger, to color-blind ideologies that prevent the individual from opening up to these types of dialogues (Boysen et al., 2009; Spanierman et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010), for in doing so he or she must face the discomfort of acknowledging White privilege (Heinze & DeCandia, 2011). Teachers need additional training and support in order to prepare them to overcome these types of impasses to racial dialogues in order to engage students who might otherwise remain resistant and disengaged.

More concerning than White students in the general classroom who are resistant to topics of race or acknowledging their own biases are students who are in teacher
education programs and are not only resistant, but choose to ignore racial realities when faced with them. Segal and Garrett (2013) explored this phenomenon in a qualitative study with White students in a teacher social studies education program. The teacher education students viewed the Spike Lee documentary detailing the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina on the primarily African American populated New Orleans and surrounding areas (as cited in Segal & Garrett, 2013). Segal and Garrett did not plan this study to explore the ways in which racist views are expressed, but rather how they are suppressed and how racism is largely ignored. Citing Felman’s (1982) notion of ignorance being not passive, but rather active, Segal and Garrett wished to expose this ignorance - the ignoring of facts - in action.

The general assumption held by many critical race theorists is that White teachers do not address issues of race in the classroom due to lack of knowledge. Sue et al. (2008, 2009, 2010) as well as others who conducted studies in university settings found that many White university instructors were uncomfortable with these types of discussions, many voicing they were afraid of appearing either racist, ignorant, or both. While in other studies, (Boysen et al., 2009; Cobb-Roberts, 2011; Spanierman et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010; Tummala-Nara, 2009) some White students denied the very existence of racism and those who did acknowledge it expressed that it existed outside their lives. These findings are consistent with studies conducted by Bonilla-Silva (2000, 2003, 2006, 2011) in which White individuals expressed color-blind ideologies to protect themselves from racial realities, and therefore released them from any responsibility to action.

Segal and Garrett (2013) sought to challenge what they asserted is the misconception that teachers avoid racialized discussions due to a lack of knowledge and
explore the ways in which White teachers do not simply avoid the topic of race, but rather use sophisticated maneuvers to ignore the topic. Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study combined narrative analysis, discourse analysis and psychoanalytically informed notions of ignorance and resistance to explore prospective social studies teachers’ perceptions and awareness. Using this data they explored the ways in which what has been posed as discomfort due to a lack of knowledge regarding issues of race, is actually White teachers actively ignoring the topic; with the word ignoring used in its truest sense, meaning to turn one’s mind away from the knowledge presented.

As Boysen et al. (2009) as well as others have asserted, teachers actively or passively ignoring racism through colorblind attitudes is damaging to students of all colors. As asserted by Sue and Torino et al. (2009), colorblind attitudes lead to microaggressions in the classroom, which are damaging and invalidate students of color when not addressed by teachers. Further, as Sue and Torino et al., as well as others (Boysen et al., 2009) have expressed, when teachers do not openly address issues of race and racism, they reinforce colorblind ideologies and may give the impression to all students that they espouse racist and colorblind attitudes themselves.

The participants in this study viewed Spike Lee’s 2006 documentary, *When the Levees Broke* (as cited in Segal & Garrett, 2013); while not dispassionate regarding the devastation of homes and lives in New Orleans, the participants were largely resistant to the notion that race played any factor in how this disaster was handled by the government (Segal & Garrett, 2013). Their resistance remained intact during the course of the film and discussions in spite of interviews and footage viewed in the documentary presenting ideas to the contrary, that race was a factor in how the victims of Hurricane Katrina were
treated. The findings of Segal and Garrett’s study were consistent with color-blind and racist ideologies presented in previous studies (Bonilla-Silva, 2000, 2003, 2006, 2011) in which Whites portrayed their Whiteness as an excuse for lack of knowledge and/or responsibility. Bonilla-Silva has long addressed the dangers in color-blind ideologies. Similarly, (Boysen et al., 2009) and others (Spanierman et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), addressed these dangers and suggested that along with the verbal denial of color and bias there is possibly a greater danger posed by those who both see and hear, but say nothing, thus as Sue (2005) asserted, propagate racism through silence.

When a person denies the existence of racism, this is in a sense stating a lack of knowledge of when and how racism has occurred in his or her lifetime. Segal and Garrett (2013) asserted that the reality is no one can claim lack of knowledge about race or racism. The truth is that in this age where information is literally at our fingertips to claim a lack of knowledge regarding issues of race is also a claim of “did not care to know.” Segal and Garrett suggested that many simply ignore what is fact, as did the participants in their study, who did not claim a lack of knowledge regarding race and racism. In fact, Segal and Garrett found these prospective teachers were quite knowledgeable about race, and that they made an obvious choice to ignore it using sophisticated means. Segal and Garrett asserted this means of circumventing topics of race and racism with surface knowledge may have become the norm in racial dialogues, and therefore, is an area for further research.

The findings of how these White prospective teachers used sophisticated means of ignoring race, by actively acknowledging race and simultaneously circumventing it in
many cases, holds implications on how teacher education programs should address matters of racial and cultural diversity. If the participants in this study are representative of White teachers entering our public schools in current and future socio-political and diverse climates, this should pose a great concern to not only education, but also the field of psychology as these teachers hold the developing esteems (Agirdag et al., 2012) of upwards of 100 children per day as captive audiences.

While the fact Segal and Garrett (2013) conducted their study with primarily White prospective teachers may be viewed as a limitation, the researchers justified their rational with the supported assertion that White teachers are still the majority throughout much of the United States. Of importance to future studies, as acknowledged by the authors, the participants were students in a teacher social studies education program. Segal and Garrett acknowledged these students were taught on histories and systems of racism, they were taught numerous courses on diversity and inclusion. However, these prospective teachers have not been called upon to put this knowledge into practice, nor have they to any significant measure been called upon to challenge their own notions of race, which some participants admitted (Segal & Garrett, 2013) was due to their privileged life-styles.

The participants in Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study hoped to be social studies teachers in the public school setting. Hurricane Katrina and other forms of human devastation, such as the genocide in Rwanda and Darfur in which race was a factor are studied in social studies as well as literature classes (Scarlett, 2009). How teachers address the obvious topics associated with these catastrophic events is crucial to their students’ racial and cultural identity development (Berkel et al., 2009; Brown et al., 2008;
Roccas et al., 2006; Wohl & Branscombe, 2008), as well as their esteems (Agirdag et al., 2012). How will these teachers address the emotions of students, if they are not in touch with their own? Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study indicates that there may be a whole new population of teachers entering the public school system who due to their choice to ignore the role race plays in many events occurring in past and recent history may in the process of ignoring race, also ignore the educational, cultural, racial, and personal needs of their students.

Even with legal desegregation of schools in the United States being a reality since the late 50s to the late 60s for most areas, the education system remains a system of oppression for not only students of color (Kumashiro, 2000), but also its teachers of color (Kohi, 2008). Critical Race Theory has only in recent years been introduced to the education system (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005) with many agreeing that teaching multicultural topics in literature (Bolgatz, 2005b; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008) and social studies is important (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Epstein, Mayorga, & Nelson, 2011). However, teaching on multicultural topics and facilitating often uncomfortable dialogues is a different concept altogether. Who a teacher is, the “who” he or she presents in front of the classroom begins with skin color. The means by which new teachers address issues of race, may also begin with their own skin color. It may often be the expectation that White teachers will not discuss race, similarly, it may be the assumption that Black teachers or those more vocal on the topic will force their anti-racist views on students (Smith & Redington, 2010). As found in Sue et al.’s (2008, 2009, 2010) studies conducted primarily in teacher education programs, White teachers feel they are too
white to discuss race. As Rothschild (2003) demonstrated in her experience with inner city schoolchildren, often students of color may agree.

When a teacher’s color presents a barrier, it is up to the teacher, White or “of color,” to dispel preconceptions based on skin color. More importantly, it is up to the teacher to invite open discussions on race and other socially significant topics relative to the curriculum or even events that unfold in the classroom. Kohli’s (2008) qualitative study with nine study participants of color presents a stark contrast to Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study with White prospective teachers. The nine study participants in Kohli’s study, also prospective teachers in a teacher education program, were interviewed regarding their past experiences with racism, cultural, or linguistic discrimination while school children themselves.

Critical Race Theory was the lens through which Kohli (2008) explored how these experiences shaped participants’ cultural, personal, familial, and social perspectives as well as to what extent these experiences might shape how they planned to conduct their own classrooms regarding matters of racial or cultural differences. In addition to participating in interviews, these future teachers wrote an education biography examining their educational experiences through the lens of race, class, and gender. According to the findings, all women in the study had experienced subtle as well as more overt forms of racial, cultural, or linguistic discrimination, and they all agreed their experiences would make them more aware of their role as a teacher in protecting children from feeling as outcasts due to differences related to appearance or other distinguishing features (Kohli, 2008). It is evident that the past personal experiences with discrimination shaped the ideas of how these young women hoped to conduct their
classrooms in ways that do not invalidate students relative to their racial, cultural, and linguistic experiences.

The exploration of the past educational experiences of these teachers of color provides some insight into what students of color experience in U.S. public schools. Many who may feel that they are viewed as less academically capable, more violent, and less trustworthy (Agirdag et al., 2012; Berkel et al., 2009; Robets et al., 2008). In addition to having these future teachers reflect upon their own experiences with discrimination, bringing these experiences into who they are and who they will be as teachers is important to their ability to build valuable relationships with their students (Agirdag et al., 2012). The findings presented in Kohli’s (2008) study indicate an element of education that teacher education programs should aspire to adopt in order to send forth teachers who are not only racially aware regarding the experiences of others, but also aware of their own racial selves.

The contrasting of Kohli’s (2008) and Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study is not to suggest that all White teachers lack awareness or even that all teachers of color are entirely aware or even more sympathetic toward students of color. Kohli (2008) asserted it is not enough to place teachers of color in the classrooms that are predominately of color. This is especially important if these teachers are not yet healed from their experiences with racial, cultural, and/or linguistic discrimination. Students need to feel the classroom is a place they can speak openly about racism and other forms of discrimination; Kohli suggested this is only possible when teachers themselves have had opportunity and space to heal.
Sue and Nadal et al. (2008) found that racial microaggressions and other more blatant forms of racism are factors causing stress and depression in many Black Americans, and often these individuals do not seek professional help due to the acceptance as racism as a part of their lives. As Lopez (2011) and Sue and Rivera et al. (2011) asserted in later studies, teacher education programs as well as professional development programs for working teachers should establish workshops and platforms for new and existing teachers of color so they also have a safe place to speak openly about their experiences with discrimination both in and out of the workplace.

There were no stated limitations for Kohli’s (2008) study as use of only teacher education students of color was deliberate and pertinent to the findings. As Segal and Garrett (2013) discussed in their more recent study the percentage of White teachers to teachers of other races is higher in the United States, so it is significant to note that according to statistical data presented in Kohli’s study, 90% of teachers in the United States were White. What this suggests is that there has been very little change in the ratios over past years; therefore, the majority of teachers in the United States is White. There was no data to suggest this statistic is due to a favorability of White teachers, or whether there are just more White individuals pursuing careers in education. What was missing from the study was a recommendation that not just teachers of color, but also, all teachers should develop racial self-awareness and realize how this awareness affects their role in the classroom. Teachers who lack knowledge and awareness, or who may simply ignore racial realities, present a barrier to student learning (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008). Researchers must explore ways to overcome these
barriers; dialogues between teachers of other ethnic, cultural, and racial backgrounds would be good means of implementing action in this goal.

A review of studies conducted with prospective teachers is indicative of the actual teachers who will soon be entering public schools to teach primarily diverse populations. What the researchers asserted in both studies (Kohli, 2008; Segal & Garrett, 2013) is that race and culture are covered quite extensively in teacher education programs. However, no amount of textbook knowledge can erase years of indoctrinated racist and color-blind ideologies (Sue, Torino et al., 2009), or heal the pain caused when persons are the target of racism or other forms of discrimination (Kohli, 2008; Sue, Nadal et al., 2008; Sue, Rivera et al., 2011). When teachers enter a classroom, faces of every hue look to them and form judgments of them based upon the color of their skin, their cultures, and the accents with which they speak.

White prospective teachers in Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study used their Whiteness and privilege as an excuse for ignoring race and racism, and at the end of the study had no insights into how their colorblind attitudes might become a barrier between them and their future students, or how indeed these attitudes might be harmful to these students. Conversely, in Kohli’s (2008) study, the undergraduate education teachers were rather “brava” about how they planned to include topics of race, to conduct their classrooms as a safe haven, and an open forum for students to discuss culture, race, and other differences. The truth is, until prospective teachers enter the doors to their own classrooms, they will have no idea of how they will feel, or how they will address racialized discourse relative to the subjects they teach (i.e., social studies or literature). Even university faculty grapple with issues how to broach these topics for various
reasons from appearing to take sides (Cobb-Roberts, 2011; Sue, Rivera et al., 2011; Tummala-Narra, 2009) to losing control of their classrooms (Sue, Tornio et al., 2009). Others (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009) voice teachers of multicultural subjects may fear broaching topics of race or confronting racist and colorblind ideologies for fear of receiving unfavorable evaluations.

The Challenges Ahead

Burton et al. (2010) recently called for increased critical race studies in the public school systems citing a need to prepare teachers for burgeoning diverse classrooms. In the previous year (Sheilds, 2009), there was a call for teachers to take a transformative leadership role in the facilitation of difficult dialogues by taking “courageous action in racialized contexts” (p. 53). Even earlier Bolgatz (2005b) asserted this need stating that critical multicultural theorists have long recognized the need to increase multicultural curriculum, and for teachers to initiate conversations in their classrooms about race and the unequal distribution of power and wealth. She further offered that these were countered with calls for teachers to discuss differences without “normalizing Whiteness or any other positions” (p. 28); as such, facts regarding historical and societal oppression should be examined critically and discussed openly in the classroom.

Bolgatz (2005b) cited research as far back as the 1950s recognizing the need for the expansion of racial dialogues in the public school classroom, acknowledging that in spite of these calls, little has been done to assist teachers who face challenges when broaching sensitive topics such as race. Bolgatz, citing several studies conducted in university settings, asserted that the majority of the reviewed university studies acknowledged the potential negatives of discussing race in the classroom, but did not
address how to avoid such negatives. A recent review of the literature does not demonstrate much new research regarding this issue, in spite of changes in our socio-political climate in the past years. The level of discomfort in discussing race may be somewhat equalized when it comes to difficult dialogues in either a university or high school classroom. However, university faculty have less to worry about than teachers of minor students who often fear administrative backlash due to parent complaints (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001), or that as Bolgatz suggested some feel discussing racism might somehow create or exacerbate racism.

As previously asserted, the inclusion of multicultural texts and associated dialogues to the public school curriculum is necessary to meet the growing diverse classrooms and communities. The inclusion of multicultural texts seems a simple modification to further the expansion of racial awareness and the inclusion of all students; however, it is not without its problems. Roberts et al. (2008) suggested teachers of color fear a lack of support or accusations of pushing their own anti-racist or cultural agendas. Bolgatz (2005b) asserted that White teachers have concerns of “how they will be able to ‘fit’ multicultural education into their already over-stuffed curricula” (p. 29); Lopez (2011) found this to be a concern of many teachers, especially English teachers. However, this is a question that should be changed to inquire as to how “can we not?”

There is a wealth of multicultural literature not only included in most adopted textbooks, but also selected young adult novel readings. With the advent of e-books, the opportunities to include multicultural literature to students are practically endless. However, if teachers are professionally and personally unprepared for the ensuing discussions, many fear the results could be disastrous resulting in racial microaggressions
which are damaging to the classroom environment as well as to important students’ self-esteem and student-teacher relationships (Agirdag et al., 2012).

Summary
A review of current literature revealed a renewed interest in studies on racism that has resulted in a rise in the number of critical race and discourse studies incorporating interpretive theories and frameworks (Burton et al., 2010). These studies have crossed multi-disciplinary lines in the past several years; from communications, criminal justice, education, counseling, and psychology in efforts to study the issue of “contemporary racism” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 337). This “new face of racism” (Sue, Nadel et al., 2008, p. 330) is viewed by some (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Burton et al., 2010) as the catalyst for the increasing number of studies conducted on how racial awareness, historical awareness, and associated feelings of guilt, shame, or privilege impact racialized discourse in the classroom, counseling sessions, and the workplace.

The current socio-political climate as well as ethical considerations have resulted in a gap in the research regarding how this phenomenon is impacting students and teachers in the elementary through secondary setting and additional research has been suggested (Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Burton et al., 2010; Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008). Examining the perceptions of secondary classroom teachers on how they are addressing, or not addressing racial issues is needed to provide information on a phenomenon that may be the cause of post-secondary students who are racially, socially, and culturally unprepared for diverse classroom environments (Sue & Constantine, 2007; Sue, Lin et al., 2009; Sue, Torino et al., 2009). Critical discourse and social interaction theorists (Leeds-
Hurwitz, 2009), as well as others (Davies, 2009; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006), suggested that the lack of openness in the classroom, in some cases the actual suppression of accurate history and censoring of works of classic literature may cause some students to enter college and the workforce lacking racial awareness.

Researchers recognized the dangers posed by the avoidance of racial dialogues and suggested this avoidance further perpetuates the growing issue of what some have phrased as “contemporary racism” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 337) and the prevalence of microaggressions in the classroom and work settings (Sue et al. 2008-2010). In support of these assertions, Burton et al. (2010) recently critiqued the increasing number of critical race and critical dialogue studies in university settings and recommended the incorporation of new perspectives from critical race theories and conceptual discourse on colorism in public schools. As Burton asserted, there is an urgency to meet the challenges faced in America due to the increase in the ethnic/racial minority population and recent heightened racial sensitivity, and the public school classroom is fallow ground for this important work to be begin.
Chapter 3: Research Method

Secondary literature teachers face unique challenges facilitating discussions during instruction of literary works wherein racism or racial injustices are topics. These challenges may stem from administrative strictures admonishing schoolteachers to avoid controversial topics (see IKB-R, CCSD, 2012; DeCrescio, 2006). As many seminal and contemporary works containing racial content are required or recommended readings, racial dialogues deemed critical to the expansion of racial and cultural awareness in children and adolescents (Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006) are unavoidable. One challenge may be teachers’ awareness that the responsibility to address the wrongness of racism may contradict values established in homes of some children (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding, London, & Safer, 2001). Other challenges may result from moments of intense moral conflict (LittleJohn, 2006) over whether or not to address issues of race, fear of professional consequences if they do, and reluctance to teach required subject matter (Ladson-Billings, 2005).

Research supports the need for development of racial awareness in children and adolescents, yet there have been few studies conducted in the elementary through secondary settings exploring the lived experiences of teachers in the classroom as they facilitate these critical discussions.

Reasons for limited data gathered from public school settings may be due to restrictions involving research with minors; however, these factors should not preclude the extension of critical race and discourse research to the public school setting. Burton et al. (2010) criticized the large number of critical race and discourse studies conducted in university settings, recommending an expansion of these studies into public schools;
asserting young people must be prepared for ever-increasing diverse educational and work environments. It is important to explore the lived experiences of secondary literature teachers as they teach literary works that often result in difficult dialogues. Without an understanding of challenges presented and their impact on teachers, the risks are great that avoidance of, or poorly facilitated discussions could further impede the development and expansion of racial awareness in children and adolescents.

The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges related to difficult racial dialogues and the effect these challenges pose for facilitation of dialogues essential to the instruction of literature in which racism is the topic. The research method and design for this study was a hermeneutics approach complemented by a heuristic design as outlined by Moustakas (2001), with six secondary literature teachers in the Southeastern United States involved in normal daily practice according to educational best practices, and adherence to national, state, and district standards of curriculum. Implementing Moustakas’s (2001) design and methodology for heuristic research, I compiled all transcriptions, notes, and personal documents of each participant; then organized these into sequential narrative order. Finally, I employed an interpretive lens to examine these and all other data deemed relevant to the study and condensed these findings concisely into composites representative of the participant group.

The selected method and design for researching the phenomenon under investigation was most appropriate for the study. The goal of this study was to explore the lived experiences of secondary literature teachers in a natural classroom setting as they taught racially and culturally sensitive literature and facilitated associated dialogues,
which can often become what Sue et al. (2005, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2011) refers to as difficult dialogues. Moustakas’ (2001) research, as well as others (Poutanen & Kovalainen, 2009 & Westerman, 2004), support that exploring the lived experiences of teachers in their natural setting in the course of daily practice is the most effective means of ensuring authentic accounts of these experiences.

The purpose of the two proposed research questions was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges relative to teaching literature in which racism is the topic. Participants for this study were six secondary literature teachers who planned to teach a work of literature in which racism was the topic. The following research questions provided a platform for exploration into the lived experiences of these teachers.

**Q1.** What do public secondary literature teachers perceive as challenges related to facilitating classroom discussions wherein racism is the topic?

**Q2.** To what extent do secondary literature teachers perceive outside influences such as administrative strictures, student, and/or parental complaints as affecting their instruction of literature in which racism is the topic?

**Research Methods and Design**

A qualitative approach and phenomenological design was employed for the current investigation. Phenomenological studies using an interpretive lens are designed with the objective in mind of gaining understanding of the perceptions and experiences of those impacted by a shared phenomenon through exploration and discovery (Moustakas, 2001). With the study of lived experiences, it is important to realize that the theory and the method should be contingent upon the objective (O’Neill, 2002), which in the case of
the current study was an exploration into an under-researched area which will in turn fill gaps present in recently conducted research.

This research project was conducted in natural classroom settings from an interpretive hermeneutics approach implementing a heuristic design as outlined by Moustakas (2001) with the participants involved in normal daily practice according to educational best practices, and adherence to national, state, and district standards of curriculum. In heuristic studies, participants are viewed as co-researchers (Moustakas, 2001); however, for the purpose of this study, participants are referred to as participants or teachers. Hermeneutics was selected to complement the design as this approach has been cited (Richardson, 2002; Westerman, 2004) as being compatible with many qualitative research designs, as well as more traditional quantitative approaches due to its interpretative nature and flexibility.

Studies conducted from a hermeneutics perspective provide insight in a way that the more objective viewpoints cannot. In traditional phenomenological approaches, such as focus groups (see Sue et al., 2008-1010), or those, where data is gathered in the form of observations (see Bolgatz 2005a, 2005b) the investigator’s interpretations are confined to data collected. However, with hermeneutic studies the hermeneutic investigator becomes or is already a part of the setting and culture upon which the study is based (Richardson, 2002), and as such develops theories out of an interest in the practices of the setting or culture of which he or she is already a part (Westerman, 2004).

As outlined by Moustakas (2001), the proposed methodology allowed for direct and indirect observation, as well as introspective analysis of observations, recorded data collected through active participation in classroom and collaborative group dialogue, as
well as personal journal responses. As opposed to the transcendental phenomenological approach, which requires the researcher to focus on objective observation and description of participant reactions, heuristic inquiry is concerned with discovery, of learning how participants relate to the lived [phenomenological] experience as well as how participants experience the investigated phenomenon (Moustakas, 2001). Heuristic methodology was the most effective approach for the this exploratory study, which involved me, as the researcher, as well as other secondary high school teachers working collaboratively as well as independently to explore a shared phenomenon.

The research design, method of data collection, and analysis closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001) and were the most appropriate to explore the phenomenon under investigation as it was imperative to gain an understanding of not only the teachers’ perceptions of the classroom dynamic, but of the internal and external forces affecting the dynamic. Participants in this study and their subjective experiences as revealed through interviews, journal entries, and online discussions were essential to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Moreover, my role as participant was important to this process as only through personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation followed by careful and thoughtful analysis of the data could I gain understanding (Moustakas, 2001).

This research study was designed to contribute to the current body of knowledge in critical studies of difficult classroom dialogues by expanding studies conducted primarily in graduate programs in the Midwest and Eastern regions (e.g., Sue et al., 2008-2010) into a public secondary school settings in a Southern geographic area. The expansion of university studies into the public secondary setting is important, as there are
different implications to the discussion of race due to historical as well as current socio-political influences. In addition, there is the need to broach these topics more carefully out of deference to ethical and legal considerations of teaching minors (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Hicks, 2010). Finally, this study may provide a vehicle for further research into alternatives to avoidance of sensitive topics, which can be damaging and lead to hostile learning environments (Sue, Torino et al., 2009) by engendering an atmosphere of oppression (Kumoshiro, 2000), thus hindering critical social development and critical consciousness in young people (Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006).

**Population**

The study population for this qualitative study included certified teachers of high school literature involved in normal daily practice according to educational best practices, and adherence to national, state, and district standards of curriculum. The investigator for this study recruited secondary literature teachers from a school district located in the Southeastern United States. The district from which the sample was selected is reported as being the second largest school system in Georgia, and the 24th largest in the United States, with more than 106,000 students and approximately 7100 teachers (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011-2012). Due to strictures regarding research within the public school setting, there was no further data available narrowing down the demographics of teacher per subject, age, race/ethnicity, or education.

According to local IRB procedures for conducting research within public schools, principals received from the local IRB a copy of the research application and proposal for research with high school literature teachers within their schools. Once the principals were in receipt of these materials, the local IRB sent notification to me that these
principals could be contacted with a request to recruit teachers from their respective schools. Of the 18 principals contacted, only three responded with a written declination and four responded with an agreement to participate. According to local IRB procedures, I then had to meet with each of the assenting principals and obtain an ink signature upon one sheet of paper with 18 lines for each high school principal in the district. Rather than mail the form, I hand delivered it to the local IRB office. I allowed two weeks for the local IRB to send final approval in order for me to begin recruiting teachers. When the letter did not arrive, I called and was told they were awaiting other signatures. I explained the four signatures I obtained were all I had, and due to time-constraints, these would have to suffice. I was then instructed to send an email noting these facts and that my approval letter would be forthcoming. Upon receipt of the final letter of approval, a recruitment email was sent to 49 high school English teachers within the district. Of the teachers contacted, there were 41 females and eight males. As noted above, there was no data available as to other demographic descriptors for these teachers.

Sample

Of the 49 teachers contacted via the recruitment email, nine responded noting interest in the study. Of the nine, only five committed to the study. All five participants for the study were female. The total number of participants for this study was six, to include myself, a female of mixed race, a doctoral candidate at Northcentral University and high school literature and composition teacher. The study was designed to work with three to seven participants, so the number of participants was appropriate for this study, as Moustakas (2001) advised against conducting phenomenological studies with a large
number of participants; alternatively, Moustakas warns against choosing too few as there is the risk of participants dropping out of the study.

The recruitment email stipulated that participating teachers should have a minimum of three years’ experience teaching literature in the secondary school setting. This stipulation was established, as prior experiences with difficult racial dialogues in the classroom were relevant to the study. Teachers selected for the study were those who planned or agreed to teach a literary work or unit of study bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes. The literary work or unit of study was to be one taught under normal conditions and as a part of the approved curriculum during the study timeframe. There was no preferences for age, gender, race, religion, or culture as the study participants were representative of teachers in general, and not teachers of a specific demographic make-up. Compensation was not offered for participation in this study. Participation was voluntary and members were informed they could opt out of the study at any time without any negative consequences.

Materials/Instruments

Several materials were used in the current investigation, including an initial online interview guide, daily journal guide, online discussion guide, and final interview guide.

Initial online interview guide. The initial online interview guide questions were designed to assess each participant’s current racial and cultural attitudes, as well as level of comfort associated with teaching racially and culturally sensitive literature (see Appendix A). Questions used for the initial online interview were a combination of closed and open-ended questions. Four closed ended questions addressed basic demographic information (i.e., name, race/ethnicity, age, years teaching) which was used
to describe the study sample. The four open-ended questions assessed the current level of racial awareness, as well as experiences with difficult dialogues, and perceptions of support from administration. The open-ended questions were developed using interviews conducted by Sue et al. (2008-2010) and others (Boysen et al., 2009; Spanierman et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010) with university faculty and students, my personal experiences as a high school literature teacher, as well as discussions held with colleague as guidelines. Responses to the open-ended questions laid the foundation for authentic accounts and were employed as a guide for exploration. Open-ended questions were the most appropriate for this study; as Moustakas (2001) asserted, the purpose of a qualitative phenomenological study is discovery rather than explanation.

**Journal.** Participants kept a journal for the duration of teaching their selected novel or unit of study to free-write thoughts, feelings, and observations associated with the lessons and the experience of difficult racial dialogues relative to normal classroom instruction. In addition, teachers were to provide documentation or a copy of written interactions with administration, parents, other teachers, and/or other intervening parties as well as their perceptions of these exchanges (see Appendix B). Todd et al. (2010) and Deimer et al. (2006) found that most individuals are more comfortable discussing race via journal writing and narratives than speaking in a group, or even individually regarding the topic of race. As Moustakas (2001) and others (Guignon, 2002; Packer, 1987; Richardson, 2002; Westerman, 2004) have asserted, the goal of phenomenological studies is to obtain authentic accounts based upon what is experienced in the moment. Therefore, in order for the journal to be an authentic account, there were no scripted questions. Only through direct interaction and acting as agents in the natural setting in
the moment events are unfolding can there be an authentic account of these experiences (Guignon, 2002). As such, the purpose of the journal was to obtain an authentic account of the lived experiences of teachers as they facilitated racial discussions with students in the natural classroom setting as well as any interaction with others relevant to these discussions or related classroom events. A guide was provided to participants only to demonstrate examples of what they could include in their journals. It was emphasized to participants that this was their journal and as such they were to write their perceptions, experiences, and reflections of the phenomenon under investigation.

**Online discussion guide.** In addition to keeping a daily journal, teachers were invited to participate in an optional secure online discussion forum established and facilitated by me. The purpose of the online forum was to share experiences (i.e., difficult classroom dialogues, administrative support or non-support relevant to any parental and/or student concerns) relative to teaching a novel or biographical work bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes (see Appendix C). Moustakas (2001) asserted that when conducting a study heuristically it is important for the investigator to remain in constant and consistent contact with participants as an involved actor in the subjective process of discovery as opposed to an objective observer. While the online discussion forum was optional, teacher participants were encouraged to take advantage of this forum, to not only share their experiences for the purpose of data collection, but also for the support they would receive from one another during this exploration. Lopez (2011) asserted the importance of teachers who teach culturally and racially sensitive literature to work collaboratively as there are stresses related to teaching these types of works that go beyond the normal scope of teaching. However, because of time
constraints relative to lost instructional days due to inclement weather, and other reasons undisclosed by participants, the online forum was not utilized.

**Final interview guide.** At the completion of the study, participants partook in final interviews to explore any changes in their perceptions since the beginning of the study regarding their own racial awareness and the facilitation of racial discussions. I developed the final interview questions (See Appendix D) based upon personal classroom experiences, the collective experiences of faculty in studies conducted on university campuses (Boysen et al., 2009; Cobb-Roberts, 2011; Spanierman et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2007-2010; Todd et al., 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009), as well as conversations held with colleagues who teach racially and culturally sensitive literature. The final interview questions (see Appendix D) were in alignment with the study research questions and designed to explore teachers’ retrospective interpretations of class events and discussions, their own affective responses, and the level to which they felt comfortable regarding support from their administration. With phenomenological studies, especially those employing an interpretive design, such as hermeneutics, interview questions are but a guide, as the investigator should allow the interview dialogue to develop naturally and authentically in order to maintain the integrity of the phenomenon as experienced by participants (Moustakas, 2001).

**Data Collection, Processing, and Analysis**

The method of data collection and analysis closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001) and were the most appropriate to this study design as the phenomenon under investigation involved both teachers and myself, as researcher as well as participant. Due to the nature of the topic, it was imperative to gain an understanding
of not only the teachers’ perceptions of the classroom dynamic, but of the internal and external forces affecting the dynamic. Moustakas (2001) asserted that only through personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation followed by careful and thoughtful analysis of the data, from the personal experiences of the investigator as well as that of participants, that understanding of the phenomenon is gained.

NCU Internal Review Board, as well as the local IRB for the district in which research was conducted granted approval for this research project. The process of obtaining local IRB approval from the school district in which the study was conducted was a very involved process, culminating in preliminary approval of research contingent upon the agreement of principals from each of the 18 high schools in the district. Of the 18 principals contacted, two declined, and four agreed to allow their English departments to participate, the others never responded. The school district’s IRB required that each assenting principal provide his or her signature in ink (e.g., no facsimiles); upon receipt of the signatures final approval was granted. Due to inclement weather (two weeks of snow) and a scheduled school break, obtaining the required signatures took over a month. The inclement weather and loss of instructional time was the reason cited by principals who declined participation in the study.

Upon final approval by the school district’s IRB, teachers were recruited via internal email sent to teachers of high school literature of the approved schools in a school district located in the Southeastern US to participate in an exploration into the lived experiences of teachers as they facilitate racial dialogues in the secondary literature classroom setting. Teachers who responded were provided with informed consent forms, and upon receipt of their signatures, participants were then sent additional research
materials (i.e., journal guidelines, secure link to initial online interview, and secure link to optional online forum).

Once participants received materials, they were instructed to participate in the initial online interview conducted via a secure link. It is important to note that due to the afore-mentioned inclement weather, there was a two-week loss of instructional time. These days were not to be made up and teachers were instructed by district administration to use whatever means necessary (i.e. extra homework, projects, after school tutoring, and Saturday homework sessions) to ensure students’ needs were served. This act of nature created unforeseen problems and due to concerns of participant drop out, it was necessary to assure participants of the flexibility of the study, and that they could begin and end their novel or unit of study at any point between the time of consent and the day designated for the final interviews. The consents were obtained at differing times, and it was necessary to send “gentle reminders” out at different points regarding the initial interview and the secure forum.

Participants maintained a journal until the completion of the novel or unit of study. As stated previously, minimal instructions were provided, as thoughts and perceptions were to be organic rather than prompted to maintain the integrity of the heuristic design and the authenticity and accuracy of the experienced phenomenon (Guignon, 2002; Moustakas, 2001). Approximately one week after the initial interview, optional online discussions were made available in the selected online secure forum. In deference to teachers’ time constraints, these were made very flexible as none of the teachers could commit to teach their lesson in concert with others. The number of sessions were based upon the number of weeks teachers needed to teach their selected
novel; an approximation of four maximum sessions were provided. The original study
design called for teachers to teach during the same part of the semester so they could
collaborate and provide support for one another. However, the local IRB for the school
district would not allow these constraints and requested the times in the online forum be
optional as well as flexible. Teachers decided upon a work of literature and timeframe in
which this work would be taught in their respective classrooms. Based upon data
collected from the initial interviews, teachers were more comfortable teaching racially
and culturally sensitive literature at the end of the semester once standardized state-
mandated testing had been completed. It would seem that this desire makes teaching
such works more of an afterthought; however, based upon self-reports from teachers in
the initial interviews the works chosen are works they teach each year. Their preference
for their selected work is discussed in a later section. Bolgatz (2005b) and Lopez (2011)
found high school English teachers are already overburdened with tasks not related to
instruction in addition to meeting rigorous standards of instruction (Halladay & Moses,
2013). As a result, most cannot find the time to fit in multicultural works to their already
overloaded lesson plans, in addition teachers have difficulty finding time to collaborate
with peers, and therefore lack peer-to-peer perspective and support (Bolgatz, 2005b;
Lopez, 2011). For the teachers involved in this study, the addition of a two-week loss of
instructional time due to inclement weather further added to this burden. Because of the
loss of time and other constraints, only one of the teachers involved in the study made use
of the online forum, and her data was included in the study. For the other participants,
questions from the online forum were incorporated into the final interview, as these
questions would have been followed up upon in the final interview as a part of the natural interview process.

Approximately one week after the completion of the novel, I conducted the final interviews in person with each individual participant. Participants were provided a range of dates and times, as well as their choice of location in which we could meet for the final interview. The final interview was not recorded via audio or video; however, I took notes during the final interviews via secure laptop computer. It was necessary to iterate responses back to participants to ensure their responses for clarity and accuracy. Each interview lasted approximately 45-60 minutes. During the final interview, participant journals of each participant were collected; these were scanned into a secure password protected folder, with hard copies sealed, and maintained in a secure location located in my personal home office.

**Data analysis.** The data from the different data collection methods (i.e., initial interview, daily journal, online discussion, and final interview) was analyzed according to Moustaka’s guidelines for heuristic research. Notes from the collected data (i.e., initial interview, online discussion, and final interview) was analyzed heuristically along with previously mentioned data (i.e., daily journal) gathered from each participant.

**Data immersion and incubation.** Implementing Moustakas’s (2001) design and methodology for heuristic research, all transcriptions and notes from the initial and final interviews, personal documents of each participant, including daily journals, and online discussions were compiled and organized into sequential narrative order. After data was organized according to each participant, I spent several hours each day immersed in the data, one participant at a time. As recommended by Moustakas, I did not move on to the
next participant until a level of confidence was achieved that the understanding of the data in each of its various forms was consistent with how it was actually presented by the participant. This process required full immersion in the data for sustained periods in order for the material to be fully understood. As recommended by Moustakas, the immersion process involved extensive note taking in order to gain intimate knowledge of each individual and to identify emergent and recurring themes.

Once data and notes on each individual participant were organized, I devoted a period in reflection over how the data accurately represented the phenomenon as experienced by each individual. Once satisfied that I had an understanding of the data presented by each participant, I created an individual portrait of that participant. Once this portrait was complete, I cross-analyzed this depiction with my notes from the journal and interviews, to once again ensure that I had captured an authentic and accurate depiction of each participant and her experiences and perceptions as presented in the data. Once each individual portrait was completed, I presented it to the participant to whom it belonged, and requested that she read it carefully, and that if she found the portrait discrepant or if there was anything she wished to add, to inform me within two days. Each participant voiced satisfaction with her individual portrait; however, had there been discrepancies or inconsistencies noted by a participant, feedback would have been documented and reflected upon; any changes or inconsistencies of perceptions and thoughts would have necessitated additions to or deletions of previous data. These considerations as recommended by Moustakas (2001) are a part of the heuristic process in order that the data presented is an authentic account based upon the perceptions and introspection of the investigator, while maintaining the integrity of data presented.
**Illumination and explication.** Once the immersion and incubation process was completed, I reviewed the group as a whole while again documenting emergent and recurring themes. These themes were color coded within the journals and my notes, and these were then organized and analyzed once again to ensure that each theme was an authentic description of what each individual and then the group as a whole experienced. From these data, a composite of the group was generated that I felt reflected the more predominant themes depicted by individual participants. The creation of the group composite allowed for an expanded awareness of the phenomenon as a shared experience (Moustakas, 2001). It was necessary then to revisit initial data for individual participants obtained during the initial interviewing process and all other data collected and transcribed into narrative form through the course of the study. Based upon the analysis of this information, and the individual portraits created for each of the five participants, to include myself, I selected those portions that embodied the group’s shared experiences and perceptions. These accounts were then organized according to emergent themes, then these were comprised of thick descriptions representative of the experienced phenomenon using the exact words of the participants when possible in order to generate a more accurate and authentic depiction.

**Creative synthesis of data.** Once all data was heuristically analyzed, I developed a creative synthesis in the form of an in-depth narrative description of the phenomenon as experienced by individual participants as depicted in their individual portraits, the group as a whole, as well as my own perceptions. The narrative’s purpose was to integrate the material in a manner reflective of my own “intuition, imagination, and personal knowledge of the meanings and essences of the experience” (Moustakas, 2001, p. 1).
Assumptions

According to what was learned through a critical review of the literature on the topic of racial dialogues in university as well as secondary classrooms, many teachers are uncomfortable teaching literature of a racial nature. One assumption held based upon the findings of others is that it would be difficult to locate teachers willing to participate in the study. Participants were not randomly selected; therefore, teachers selected for the study were those who responded to the recruitment inquiry who planned or agreed to teach a literary work or unit of study bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes.

The literary work or unit of study was to be one taught under normal conditions and as a part of the approved curriculum during the study timeframe. Bolgatz (2005b), Lopez (2011), and Roberts et al. (2008) each have asserted that literature teachers find they are already stretched to their limits in trying to meet standards demanded by their respective states and districts and that adding multicultural literature is a burden that many teachers cannot withstand. Therefore, it is important to note, teachers in the district of interest are on a 4x4-block schedule, meaning 90-minute class periods per day for one semester; therefore, narrowing the timeframe was considered simpler than traditional schedule. In addition, teachers in the district of interest are required to collaborate at least 45 minutes per week with their departmental colleagues within their respective schools, or within the district, therefore it was assumed that participating teachers would be able to collaborate during the study process. Consequently, the entire study was designed to be a part of normal practice to in no way impart undue stress upon the participants. Furthermore, prospective collaboration of the participant teachers was in keeping with Lopez’s (2011) recommendations that teachers seek support both
professionally and personally from their colleagues when teaching on topics such as race or other controversial issues.

Subjective data collected through interviews, online discussions, and the daily journals was evaluated for authenticity, rather than simply determining honesty of responses. According to Moustakas (2001) and others (Guignon, 2002; Westerman, 2004), subjective data is only considered authentic if it is the true response of the reporter of the data. As such, if a participant is not honest regarding reactions or perspectives, the dishonest response becomes as much a part of the analyzed data as all others. Furthermore, the dishonesty would be considered a reaction and would provide rationale for further investigation as to why a teacher may feel such discomfort in the honest sharing of reactions and perspectives regarding his or her experiences with racial dialogues in the classroom. The triangulation of the data provided a means of assessing consistency of responses from individual participants; other means of assessing integrity and authenticity of the data is discussed in ensuing sections.

Limitations

A possible weakness identified for the study design rested within the very element identified as strength with hermeneutic approaches; that of me, the investigator, being both participant and investigator. Unlike traditional phenomenological approaches, the hermeneutic investigator does not just become a part of the setting or culture in which a study is based. Rather, in “closing the proverbial gap between theory and practice” (Richardson, 2002, p. 123), the hermeneutic investigator develops theories out of an interest in the practices of the setting or culture of which he or she is already a part (Westerman, 2004).
The subjectivity of the investigator and participants may be viewed as a limitation or weakness in qualitative studies. However, it is important to realize that with studies using a phenomenological hermeneutic framework with the setting in the midst of normal practice, there are no preconceptions or expectations of outcomes. Another question that may be raised relative to subjectivity is how this might somehow present data that is not trustworthy. This question had some bearing in considering the design and methodology; however, a phenomenological heuristic design complemented by a hermeneutic approach was selected as opposed to a quantitative design using an experimental method or survey type instrument of query, as studies from a quantitative standpoint have a stated hypothesis or expectations of certain outcomes (Gelso, 2008). With heuristic studies using phenomenological hermeneutic framework the subjectivity of the investigator, as well as the participants, is relevant to the investigation, and becomes as much an integral part of the data as objective observations (Packer, 1985). As such, the characteristics and findings of the proposed study should be consistent with what Westerman (2004) described as pure methods of inquiry.

One of the possible threats to validity identified for this study rested with the risks of participant morbidity, that is, that some participants may have dropped out of the study prior to completion of data collection. In order to avoid this, the design allowed for five to seven teacher participants. The study could have been conducted with as few as three to five teachers as long as their demographic make-up was representative of a larger population. Another perceived threat could have rested with contamination of the study, as the teachers selected were from the same district, and even from the same schools and departments, therefore there was the possibility of ex-parte discussions. However,
because teacher-to-teacher interactions are vital to the perception of support in the classroom (Lopez, 2011), teachers were asked to document these conversations and post-conversation reflections in their journals, just as they would conversations relevant to their experiences with teachers not involved in the study.

In order to ensure the research results’ trustworthiness, I will maintain documentation of data origins, method of collecting, and how it was disseminated for a period of no less than five years. To ensure integrity and credibility of the study, data and the method of collection was examined by the Chair presiding over the study. Additionally, data was triangulated through indirect and direct observation and consistent interaction with participants, individual interviews, and journal entries of all participants as well as those belonging to myself, the researcher. These measures were taken as recommended by Godafshani (2003), for through constant and extended contact, and the triangulation of the data, the consistency of the data sources can be better affirmed.

**Delimitations**

Possible limitations and weaknesses presumed for the study design were recognized, and as such, steps were taken to ensure that the study, participants, nor the data were compromised in any way. The integrity of the data was ensured through triangulation of the data, with the researcher following Moustaka’s (2001) guidelines to remain in close contact with the data and participants. This was accomplished through initial online interviews, daily journals kept by all participants, including myself, the researcher, and the optional online forum discussions so that participants would feel support through contact and collaboration asserted by Lopez (2011) as essential to teachers who teach subjects wherein the topic is race or culture, and then the final
interviews with participants. Data was constantly collected through direct and indirect contact with participants and analyzed during the course of the study, with final collection and analysis conducted at the end when the daily journals were collected. Data from interviews, other forms of data, such as communication with parents, administration, colleagues, and students was to be cross-referenced with the daily journal entries and examined closely for inconsistencies from the reporting participants; however, due to limitations imposed upon the study due to a loss of instructional time, other extraneous artifacts had to be excluded from data collection.

To reduce the risks of participants dropping out of the study, the range of selected participants was five to seven, in addition the level of contact between researcher and participants, as well as between participants was presumed important to ensure participants did not feel isolated and without support during the course of the study. Lopez (2011) recognized that teachers who teach multicultural works, or teachers who stray from what are considered cannons of the literature curriculum, often do feel isolated and experience a level of stress due to feeling at times they are navigating their way through unfamiliar territory.

**Ethical Assurances**

*Ethical considerations for theoretically sound research questions involving sensitive or controversial issues.* When conducting research involving sensitive or controversial issues, it is important to use care in the development of theoretically relevant research questions that demonstrate understanding of the issues as they relate to the population experiencing the explored phenomenon (Miller, 2004). According to literature applicable to studies into the issues related to racial dialogues and secondary
classroom environments (French et al., 2006), additional research into teaching and addressing these topics in the elementary, middle, and secondary school settings is vital. In order to establish open dialogue on sensitive or controversial issues relative to a work of literature, a teacher must be not only knowledgeable of historical, sociological, and psychological context, but must also have an awareness of personal biases (Sue, Lin et al., 2009). In addition to personal awareness, teachers need to be educated on and prepared to deal with issues presenting themselves in the classroom just as they arise in therapy sessions such as transference and counter-transference (Smith et al., 2008).

**Ethical considerations regarding proposed research methodology.** In the process of determining the appropriate approach, methodology, and framework for this study, it was necessary to define, distinguish, and even interpret the various frames of thought used in both quantitative and qualitative research (Creswell, 2009). Prior to making this determination, the initial step was to define the purpose of the study. As the purpose of this study was interpretive and exploratory versus explanatory, a qualitative approach was the most appropriate means of conducting the proposed study (Shank, 2006). After making this determination, the next step was to narrow perspective in order to determine the appropriate framework. According to some (Guignon, 2002; Shank, 2006; Westerman, 2004), when studying social issues it is oftentimes difficult to isolate the nucleus from the whole. Subsequently, as asserted by Moustakas (2001), in a qualitative phenomenological study, it is even more difficult to isolate the researcher and all the many facets of that researcher from the observable world, for the researcher is a part of that world.
After careful consideration regarding the purpose of this study, which was to explore teachers’ thoughts, emotions, and experiences when facilitating discussions relative to the instruction of culturally and racially sensitive literature, it was decided the study would implement a hermeneutic approach utilizing heuristic methodology. As outlined by Moustakas (2001), the proposed methodology allowed for direct, indirect observation, as well as introspective analysis of observed, and recorded data collected through active participation in classroom and collaborative group dialogue and personal journal responses. As opposed to the transcendental phenomenological approach, which requires the researcher to focus on objective observation and description of participant reactions, heuristic inquiry is concerned with discovery, of learning how participants relate to the lived [phenomenological] experience as well as how the researcher, and participants experience the investigated phenomenon (Moustakas, 2001). A hermeneutic approach implementing heuristic methodology was the most effective approach for the proposed exploratory study, which involved myself as the researcher, as well as other secondary high school teachers working collaboratively as well as independently to explore a shared phenomenon enacted within the realm of normal practices. Research conducted in the midst of normal practices, according to Guignon (2002) and Westerman (2004), is the most reliable means of obtaining authentic accounts of a phenomenon.

**Ethical consideration in regard to participants, indirect participants, and setting.** The hermeneutic approach requires a study be conducted within the realm of normal practices and in the accustomed setting. In order to ensure accuracy, integrity, and validity of the collection and interpretation of the data, the setting must not be one of fabrication, but authentic (Guignon, 2002; Westerman, 2004) and under normative
circumstances. For the purpose of this hermeneutic study, the setting was the secondary literature classroom. Persons present in each classroom were the teacher, who is considered participant/co-researcher (Moustakas, 2001), and the students. Students were only involved in the study in as much as they were enrolled in the participant teachers’ classes, and were involved only in as much as they are during the normal course of instruction, class interaction, and testing. Therefore, there were minimal risks involved regarding the ethical integrity of the study relative to using children as subjects, or regarding the violating of confidentiality (Hicks, 2010). Even though the high school students were indirect participants, the activities and their presence were in the normal course of instruction and testing. Therefore, this study met the requirements (Dell, 2006; NCU IRB, 2008) for Exemption 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1), and was approved by my mentor, and Northcentral University’s IRB as well as the selected school district’s IRB.

Additionally, due to the study occurring in the course of ordinary practices of instruction and classroom discourse, there was no requirement of consent on the part of the students or their parents (Hicks, 2010).

In studies utilizing a hermeneutic approach, the researcher is a direct participant acting as an agent in the world. As such, ethical considerations are viewed from a common sense approach; the researcher acts as an authentic being, seeks to do no harm to those with whom there is contact, directly or indirectly, and strives to collect and interpret data with integrity while upholding ethical standards of reporting data (Guignon, 2002; Westerman, 2004). Teachers involved in the study are by their very definition expected to be ethical human beings operating upon the best interests of the children under their instruction and guidance.
It is important to realize in conducting dialogues in which the topic of conversation will focus on the wrongness of racism or discrimination of any sort, that these topics may contradict the values established in the homes of some students. It has been suggested this can present moments of intense moral conflict for teachers, and they must be prepared to deal with these conflicting emotions while facilitating classroom dialogues (Littlejohn, 2006). It is also important to note that although the actual moral code of teacher participants could not be accurately assessed, to ensure the maturity of teachers selected, only certified teachers with more than three years’ experience teaching literature in the secondary classroom were considered.

Participants received and signed informed consent forms addressing the purpose of the study, procedures, and confidentiality protocols. Participants then took part in an initial interview with me, the researcher. The interview questions were designed to assess current racial and cultural attitudes, as well as level of comfort associated with teaching racially and culturally sensitive literature. It was important that teachers involved be self-aware in terms of their own levels of racial awareness and personal biases, which can have an impact on participants (Ponterotto, 2010) immersed in the setting under investigation on a consistent basis.

The personal and demographic information obtained in the interviews will be kept confidential; with age, gender, race, and ethnicity used only as identifiers for the purpose of the study. In adherence to Moustakas’s (2001) guidelines for heuristic studies, participants were viewed as co-researchers, and though not responsible for the research process and publication, were bound by ethical principles for educators and recognized best practices.
There are risks involved in conducting research in which the researcher and participants, who in heuristic inquiry are considered co-researchers (Moustakas, 2001), are both participants and reporters of the data. Due to the setting, risks were assessed on a regular basis to ensure no harm; directly or indirectly was done to the participants or the students involved. In qualitative research, the credibility of the study lies with the researcher who “is the instrument” (as cited in Golafshani, 2003, p. 600). In being instrumental to the study, and indeed to the very findings, boundaries similar to those established between patient and therapist should be observed to establish integrity and maintain ethical standards for research (Patton, 2002).

With this study design, my role as researcher was a multi-faceted one, as I served as observer, participant, and analyst. Self-awareness was integral to the study; therefore, constant personal inventory was essential to ensure awareness of any bias or resentment towards those involved who voiced negative feelings or opinions toward those of other races or cultures (Sue, Lin et al., 2009). In phenomenological studies, the researcher’s position is analogous to the parent with a child on a plane who is instructed in the event of an emergency, to affix his or her oxygen mask first, to ensure being alive to care for the child. As such, the researcher must extend this level of care to the participants involved, as the dialogue process can “open old wounds” (Patton, 2002, p. 406). Therefore, the researcher needs to be prepared to take care of such issues in an ethical manner, thus ensuring the safety and confidentiality of each person who may be considered direct or collateral participants (Patton, 2002).

Ethical considerations regarding data collection, handling, analysis, reporting, and retention. Teachers began the study with a self-selected novel or unit of
study approved as a part of the normal curriculum that bears racially sensitive themes as well as self-prepared lesson plans with objectives in alignment with approved standards of learning. Each maintained a journal for self-reflection and observations, and access to scheduled optional secure online meeting times to share experiences. Participants maintained daily journal entries of thoughts, feelings, and observations associated with the lessons and the experience of classroom dialogues relative to the novel, interactions with administration, parents, other teachers, and/or other intervening parties. Additional data in the form of online interviews and face-to-face interactions were collected on a continual basis as they occurred.

Implementing Moustakas’s (2001) design and methodology for heuristic research, I compiled and organized all transcriptions, notes, and personal documents of each participant into sequential narrative order. After data was organized according to each participant, I continued analysis of the data until a level of confidence was achieved that the understanding of the data in each of its various forms was consistent with how it was actually presented by the participant. This step ensured maintaining the integrity of the findings, and upholding ethical standards regarding respect for participants (Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine, 2009).

The heuristic process requires extensive note taking in order to gain intimate knowledge of each individual and to identify emergent and recurring themes (Moustakas, 2001). Once notes on the individual participant were organized, I devoted a period in which reflection over how the data accurately represented the phenomenon as experienced by the individual. If upon revisiting the material there had been
inconsistencies, I would have sought clarification from the participant. As such, to ensure I had created an authentic individual portrait of each participant, these were provided to each participant for review, and feedback was requested in the event of discrepant details, or if there were additions necessary. According to Moustakas (2001) participant feedback is essential to the process and would have been documented and reflected upon; any changes or inconsistencies of perceptions and thoughts would have necessitated additions to or deletions of previous data. This step is considered necessary to insure the integrity of received data and that an authentic account of participant information is reported as possible (Committee on Science, Engineering, and Public Policy, National Academy of Sciences, National Academy of Engineering, and Institute of Medicine, 2009).

Once all data were analyzed and color-coded according to emergent themes, an initial composite of the group was generated that I felt reflected the more predominant themes depicted by individual participants. Based upon the analysis of this information, I selected narratives that embodied the group’s shared experiences and perceptions and with these created individual portraits. These individual portraits were comprised of thick descriptions of the experienced phenomenon using the exact words of the participants whenever possible in order to generate a more accurate and authentic depiction in adherence to ethical considerations (APA, 2010) to provide accurate representations of phenomenon as reported by participants. The final step was the creation of the group composite, which allowed an expanded awareness of the phenomenon as a shared experience (Moustakas, 2001).
The same measures were taken regarding all data for individual participants obtained during the interviewing process and from journals maintained during the course of the study. The method of data analysis and reporting closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001) and is the most appropriate to this study design as the phenomenon under investigation involved both teacher/participant and researcher/participant. Due to the nature of the topic, it was imperative to gain an understanding of not only the teachers’ perceptions of the classroom dynamic, but of the internal and external forces affecting the dynamic. According to Moustakas (2001) it is only through personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation followed by careful and thoughtful analysis of the data that the researcher gains understanding (Moustakas, 2001), therefore, my own accounts of experiences and perceptions in the classroom in addition to analysis of data collected from participants was essential.

Data was collected in the form of initial online individual interviews, notes taken from direct interaction with participants, participant journals, and final face-to-face individual interviews with each participant. Once these were analyzed and reports were documented, all hard data was scanned and stored in password protected and digital form, and then hard data was sealed and stored in a secure location within my personal residence. Digital data was collected by secure means and will be maintained in secure password protected storage, with all data, both hard and digital maintained by me for a period not less than five years. If no further study is conducted during a five-year period, all data will be destroyed using methods approved for the destruction of confidential materials. This means of collection and retention was revealed to participants in the
informed consent as guidelines established by APA (2010) standards for research and publication.

**Ethical consideration regarding potential risks of harm to direct and indirect participants.** Secondary public school students were only involved in the study in as much as they were enrolled in the participant teachers’ classes. Additionally, students were involved only in as much as they would be during the normal course of instruction, class interaction, and testing. Therefore, there were no anticipated direct threats to the integrity of the study, or risks of violating confidentiality (Hicks, 2010). There were no video or audio recordings of participants or students, all data was collected from the written reports and direct interviews with teachers involved. Even though the high school students were indirect participants, as these were present in the normal course of instruction and testing, there was no requirement of parental consent (Hicks, 2010). It must be noted that students were involved as indirect participants in this study and as such may have experienced psychological discomfort; however, this study was conducted in the normal course of classroom instruction and discourse utilizing curricula and other materials adhering to national, state, and district standards of education. As such, it is necessary to reiterate, the primary focus of this study was on teachers’ perceptions of difficult dialogues in the secondary public school literature classroom given teacher awareness of personal biases, educational preparedness, and feelings of administrative support as a vehicle to appropriate means of facilitating discussions relative to the teaching of racially and culturally sensitive literature.

In phenomenological research, the researcher is not only the leader of the expedition, but also a direct participant, therefore it was important to the process for me,
researcher, as well as participant, to share insights and perspectives during the course of the exploration (Moustakas, 2001). Therefore, I was fully aware that my attitudes and perceptions toward racially and culturally sensitive subjects could influence other participants’ attitudes and perceptions, and in turn, their attitudes and perceptions became influential to the students involved (Westerman, 2004). In studies involving students, it is important that teachers involved feel comfortable with the use of self as a tool. As such, to use transparency as a means of modeling healthy attitudes and methods of processing negative perceptions and emotions (Sue, Lin et al. 2009) to ensure a safe environment for the students who are considered indirect participants in the study (Arwood & Panicker, 2010).

**Summary**

The research design, method of data collection, and analysis for this study closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001). As such, they were the most appropriate to explore the phenomenon under investigation as it was imperative to gain an understanding of not only the teachers’ perceptions of the classroom dynamic, but of the internal and external forces affecting the dynamic. Participants in this study and their subjective experiences as revealed through interviews, journal entries, and online discussions were essential to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. Moreover, my role as participant was important to this process, as Moustakas (2001) asserted, it is only through personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation followed by careful and thoughtful analysis of the data that this type of understanding be gained (Moustakas, 2001).
This research study was designed to contribute to the current body of knowledge in critical studies of difficult classroom dialogues by expanding studies conducted primarily in graduate programs in the Midwest and Eastern regions (e.g., Sue et al., 2007-2010) into a public secondary school settings in a Southern geographic area. The expansion of university studies into the public secondary setting is important, as there are different implications to the discussion of race due to historical as well as current socio-political influences. In addition, there is the need to broach these topics more carefully out of deference to ethical and legal considerations of teaching minors (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Hicks, 2010). Finally, this study may provide a vehicle for further research into alternatives to avoidance of sensitive topics, which can be damaging and lead to hostile learning environments (Sue, Torino et al., 2009) by engendering an atmosphere of oppression (Kumoshiro, 2000), thus hindering critical social development and critical consciousness in young people (Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006).
Chapter 4: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the lived experiences of secondary literature teachers as they facilitated difficult dialogues related to the instruction of racially and culturally sensitive literature. Teachers participating in this study self-selected a work of literature bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes, events, and language. Per normal instructional and best practices, teachers established historical and contextual background for their selected literary work, conducted class readings, and facilitated discussions of current media events related to the selected novel, as well as general classroom discussions. Teachers maintained a reflections journal in which they recorded their experiences and perceptions of the phenomenon of racial dialogues as they occurred within their respective classrooms. The reflections journal was the primary source of data collection; however, teachers participated in an initial online interview as well as a face-to-face final interview. An online discussion forum was available to the teachers, but due to time constraints and mitigating factors, teachers could not find the time to participate. As the topic prompts were in alignment with the study’s research questions, these were incorporated into the final interview.

Research Questions and Relative Findings

The following research questions provided a platform for exploration into the lived experiences of the teachers participating in this study.

Q1. What do public secondary literature teachers perceive as challenges related to facilitating classroom discussions wherein racism is the topic?
Q2. To what extent do secondary literature teachers perceive outside influences such as administrative strictures, student, and/or parental complaints as affecting their instruction of literature in which racism is the topic?

The research questions for this study were open-ended in nature in order to provide a platform for further inquiry as the phenomenon under investigation was one that evolved. Question one inquires as to what secondary literature teachers perceived as challenges related to the facilitation of classroom discussions with race as the topic. This question allowed participants to voice their current pre-study state of awareness of challenges; answers varied from participant to participant depending upon a variety of factors. Question two expands upon question one by inquiring as to perceptions of outside influences, such as socio-political events, parental complaints, and administrative concerns relative to classroom discussions on race, and how the awareness of these external factors influence instruction and facilitation of associated dialogues. It was important to have an understanding of external as well as internal influences affecting teachers as well as how these affected the facilitation of racially sensitive dialogues. These questions were appropriate for the study as they provided flexibility in order to align with a hermeneutical perspective.

Individual Portraits of Participating Teachers

For the purpose of maintaining confidentiality, and also to allow participants a choice in how each was presented in the study, they were given the opportunity of selecting their favorite literary female name as pseudonym. Each participant is presented in an individual portrait; development of these was based upon analysis of the collected data and personal interviews. Following the individual portraits, a composite of the
group is presented with thick narrative descriptions of themes identified and phenomenon as experienced by the group as a whole.

In an effort to present each participant in as accurate and authentic manner as possible, while maintaining uniformity of spelling and language, the following edits were made for consistency:

1) Black or of African descent as opposed to African American to describe students, as many of the students are from Africa or other continents/countries, and may not or do not consider themselves as African or American.

2) White as opposed to Caucasian, for many of the students who are of other ethnicities are considered, White, but may not consider themselves as Caucasian as they are not of Anglo-European descent.

3) “N-word” or “n-word,” as each teacher used a different form for this term in her writing.

4) “Nigger” or “nigger” – this word is in quotes to indicate its usage in context.

5) Caucasian/White (interchangeably) or African American/Black ( interchangeably) for teacher participants as these are how participants are self-identified.

**Individual portrait of Elizabeth (Elizabeth Benning – Pride and Prejudice).**

Elizabeth is a self-described Caucasian/White female, age 25-30 who has taught literature at the secondary level of public school for four to seven years. She described herself as racially self-aware and moderately comfortable when it comes to discussing race in the classroom; placing herself at a seven on a scale of 1-10 regarding level of comfort.
Elizabeth stated that 60% of what she teaches in the classroom deals with racism or other social and human injustices. She indicated that the majority of what she teaches does focus on race and this is due to the demographic makeup of her classes, which she says is primarily Black or of African descent, Hispanic, and White, listed in order of percentages.

Elizabeth’s perceptions of administration is that they are supportive of teachers and are willing to listen to both sides of a situation in order to obtain an accurate account. She stated she has never had “much of a problem” when it comes to parental complaints or administrative concerns and indicated that this may be due to her lack of confidence in broaching sensitive subjects. However, she stated that the awareness that there could be issues has been in the back of her mind since she first began teaching works that deal with issues of race.

Elizabeth selected Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men (1937) for her participation in Racial Dialogues. She says she teaches this with her 10th grade class toward the end of each semester and that it is a work with which the students quickly become involved. In preparation for the class reading of this novel, Elizabeth used a variety of media to establish historical and contextual background for the novel. She indicated this generally involves filling in historical gaps as she has found that many Black students “sadly” lack knowledge regarding the slavery and Civil Rights eras, and that many of them confuse the Civil War with the Civil Rights Movement.

Elizabeth stated the literature she teaches ranges between fiction and non-fiction. She stated she likes to choose pieces with characters with which students can identify. She has found that when the class is reading a fiction or non-fiction piece that addresses
racial issues or other social injustices that the students “get fired up” and really enjoy talking about the issues. She finds they will generally “root for the underdog” such as Lenny the White intellectually challenged character and Crooks the Black stable hand in Of Mice and Men (Steinbeck, 1937).

Elizabeth described herself as being the minority in most of her classes, and that she is often acutely aware of her whiteness. She admitted that she fits the stereotype of what most of her Black students assume about White people (upper middle class, nice house, two parent household, money, good schools, good neighborhood, very few Black friends growing up), so she finds it very difficult to confront their views on the topic.

While Elizabeth described herself as moderately comfortable addressing issues of race, she admitted to strong discomfort in relationship to saying the word “nigger” which is used several times in not only Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men (1937) but several other works of literature considered tenets in high school literature. Elizabeth shared that every time she teaches this particular novel and “this word” comes up there is a conversation about it. She voiced, “I have trouble finding the right words to describe my own feelings about it” when the students challenge her for not using it in the reading rather than saying, “n-word.”

In spite of Elizabeth’s timidity in broaching or delving too deeply into controversial topics such as race, she does allow students to share and explore on their own. She encourages exploration, yet is mindful of possible lines that can be crossed. Additionally, her students appear to respect her boundaries and realize where limits are established. She admitted that her classroom dynamic has improved in regard to these types of discussions over the years, while it would appear that this is due to her gaining
experience and increasing her level of awareness, she attributed this to her students having increased exposure both inside and outside the classroom to different situations involving racial or cultural conflict. Finally, despite the discomfort she admitted to feeling regarding some of the literature taught, she recognizes those works that engage the students and “gets them all excited.” Elizabeth portrays a willingness to tread often uneven ground for the benefit of the students while at the same time exploring her own level of racial and cultural awareness.

**Individual portrait of Sacajawea (Lemhi Shoshone woman, interpreter, and guide for Lewis and Clark in their exploration of the Western United States).**

Sacajawea is a 35-44 year-old self-described African-American/Black female who has taught literature in the secondary public school setting for 12 plus years. Sacajawea teaches primarily juniors and seniors in both honors and on-level classes. Sacajawea described herself as being “somewhat comfortable” teaching literature in which racism is the topic; however, is aware that due to teaching in the public school setting, some topics are considered “taboo.”

Sacajawea’s perception of administration is that they are supportive, in that they try to get both sides of a story. She stated she has not “knock on wood” had any “real” issues to date; however, feels this is in part due to the grade level and maturity of her students. She further elaborated that while she does not “shy away from the topic,” [of race] she is somewhat conservative in her approach and is ever mindful of the fact she is a public school teacher and must be careful in not only what she says, but also how she says it.
For the purpose of her participation in this study, Sacajawea selected Shakespeare’s *Othello*. She prepared the students for this work of literature by having them conduct their own “pre-search” into the social norms and customs of the Shakespearian era as well as background on the Moors and Venetians. Sacajawea stated she wanted to become involved with this study because “these conversations need to be had.” She says with this particular work, the topic of interracial relationships is of primary focus and that as an African American woman she is mindful to listen to what students say on the topic, as much of what they say is based upon their parents’ views, some of whom are opposed to interracial dating and marriages.

Sacajawea believes it is important to establish an environment where students feel free to express their thoughts and feelings. She described her classes as mostly racially imbalanced with the majority of students Black or of African descent, Hispanic, White, Asian, and Indian in the order of percentages. She allows and encourages students to take responsibility for their independent reading, offering a selection of choices for those who need it. Sacajawea realizes the importance of closing the connection gap when reading classic works such as Shakespeare’s *Othello* or Shelly’s *Frankenstein* by having students explore such universal themes as belongingness and acceptance.

Additionally, Sacajawea feels it is important for teachers to collaborate on important matters such as teaching literature that addresses controversial topics. She believes that teachers need to talk about race in the classroom, but also understands why it may be uncomfortable for some. She voiced that her involvement in this study was good for her in that it made her more aware as she had to think about these issues and because she had the opportunity to talk about them.
**Individual portrait of Jane (From Bronte’s Jane Eyre).** Jane is a self-described Caucasian/White female age 55-64 who has taught literature in the secondary public school setting for 8-11 years. Jane described herself as moderately comfortable teaching works of literature bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes, as well as addressing issues of race as they come up in classroom discussions. She says that her feelings toward discussions of race have “evolved over the years,” and that to her surprise students “value her opinions as a White woman who grew up in the South.”

Jane’s perception of administration is that they are supportive and as long as discussions are rational and civil that there would not be a reason for concern. Jane feels it is important for her students to have a safe environment in which they can express themselves and that even though she has not had any real issues regarding parental or administrative concerns, she is very aware that there is always the possibility of such an occurrence, and is mindful of this as she leads class discussions.

Jane teaches primarily on-level 10\textsuperscript{th} grade literature classes she described as being racially imbalanced with the majority of her students Black or of African descent, Hispanic, and White listed in the order of percentages. She stated that approximately three-fourths of what she teaches each semester is literature related to social injustice. Like many teachers, Jane has certain works of literature with which she is most comfortable teaching, and even for which she has developed affection. These feelings appear to be associated with how these works are received by her students.

Jane selected Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937) for her participation in *Racial Dialogues*. Jane stated she saves this novel for the end of each semester, as her 10th graders “always seem to enjoy it.” Jane draws from a variety of sources to help her
students make connections with the literature and to help them develop their own levels of racial and cultural awareness. To build historical and contextual background for the novel and to lay the ground work for the racially derogatory language in *Of Mice and Men* she pulled from documentaries and texts that covered not only the Great Depression and Dust Bowl era, but also the Civil Rights Movement. With the aid of these sources, she was able to take the students through the evolution of the “n-word,” which she described as “derogatory in every sense of the word” to how it is “constantly streaming through the ear-buds of today’s youth.” She observed, “what goes into their ears, comes right back out of their mouths.”

Even though Jane has a very strong aversion to the “n-word,” she says that it is important to remain true to literature as it is written. She says that the word feels foreign coming out of her mouth, and she is never comfortable saying it; however, she lays her own discomfort aside in order to present literature in an authentic manner. She says that this word and the controversy surrounding it “opens the flood gates” for discussion in her classroom. Jane meets these discussions in an honest and open manner as she realizes the relevance of this word to the culture of Black students, and as much as she disagrees with its usage, that it is important to allow open dialogue.

Jane stated that because of her involvement with *Racial Dialogues* that she spent more time building contextual and historical background for *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937). Rather than just prefacing the reading with the fact the novel contains profanity and racial slurs, she spent two days discussing language and how it has evolved over the past 50 years, and more specifically the “n-word” and how it is perceived and used today versus in the past. Another change she implemented for the purpose of this
study was the introduction of the Socratic seminar with her students. She stated she had never attempted this with her on-level students before and while it was a challenge to get them to follow procedure, the results were very positive. Jane stated that the changes made in her lesson due to the study, and having these open discussions on race “made all the difference in the world” for student engagement and her own level of comfort and this is something she will do in future classes when teaching a work containing racially and culturally sensitive themes.

Individual portrait of Havilah (Old Testament Biblical Name – A land containing both, rivers and gold/ circle). Havilah is a 35-44 year-old self-described African American/Black female who has taught literature in the secondary public school system for 8-11 years. Havilah described herself as “very comfortable” when it comes to discussing race, issues of racism, and other social injustices when topics in her classroom. She stated there is a certain comfort in the discomfort as literature provides a “theatre” in which we can say or do what we cannot do in our reality.

Havilah shared she has “really never” had an issue with administration, parents, or student complaints regarding the literature choices or topics discussed in the classroom. She attributes this in part to the age and maturity level of her students and the use of Socratic seminars, “They are older, more mature, and able to make decisions for themselves about how they feel… to voice their own objections and concerns. I find the Socratic seminars provide a good platform for this.” Havilah’s perception of her administrative team is that they are “mostly concerned with the safety of students” and that they “realize the beauty of literature” is in that it “provides a safe environment in which to discuss sometimes-uncomfortable topics – topics considered taboo.”
For the purpose of her involvement in Racial Dialogues, Havilah selected her experiences in teaching Shakespeare’s Othello. She combined reflections from the most recent two semesters as instructional time was lost the second semester due to inclement weather and other personal concerns. In both semesters, Havilah provided a variety of media sources and current socio-political events to help bridge the gap between racial themes presented in the classic Othello and how these themes are prevalent in society today. The senior class upon which her reflections are based is described as racially imbalanced with the majority of the students from countries outside the United States with racial makeup of the class in the order of percentages as follows: Black or of African descent, then Hispanic, then those she described as “technically” White.

Havilah indicated that while she realizes the risks associated with teaching works of literature with controversial themes, she also realizes the value of teaching, not only the classic fictional works, but also to incorporate current non-fiction into her lessons. She stated that the non-fiction works are especially relevant and beneficial to international students who often relate to the themes of assimilation vs. isolation that are prevalent in many of the texts.

Havilah voiced that she believes socio-political factors are a relevant and important part of teaching literature, but has found herself, as an African American woman, often-justifying events, or actions of political figures (i.e., Barack Obama) by using examples, rather than providing her opinion due to her own concerns of students thinking she is taking sides. She said this is another means in which she has found the use of Socratic seminars to be helpful as these provide “the perfect context... they can be defended, refuted.... argued... giving students equal say.... democracy”.

Havilah believes that the classroom and literature provide in a sense a haven where the class can come together as one and discuss issues that outside the classroom could become too uncomfortable. An example of this is the use of the “n-word,” its use in literature and casual conversation. Her remarks on this topic reveal a deep level of contemplation and self-awareness regarding her own feelings toward the word, versus the importance of remaining true to the text in order to maintain authenticity of the time represented in the text.

Overall, Havilah presented herself as a teacher who is racially aware, and sensitive to the issues of other races and cultures, as well as aware of what risks are necessary to take with students in the classroom, while not taking risks with herself either personally or professionally. Havilah uses a combination of sensitivity and humor in her exchanges with students; based upon her accounts of events that could have become potentially volatile this approach works for her, and with her students. Havilah strives to maintain an atmosphere where students feel a sense of “equity” and know that their voices are important to the “democratic” environment.

Gwendolen (Gwendolen Fairfax from The Importance of Being Earnest).

Gwendolen is a 55-64 year-old self-described Caucasian/White literature teacher who has taught ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) in a secondary setting for the past 12 years. Gwendolen described herself as “fairly comfortable” when teaching works of literature bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes. She stated that on a scale of 1 to 10, she places herself at “about an eight.” She ascribes her level of comfort to her background and upbringing of “growing up in poverty in Texas, living in that part of town where Blacks also lived. Our group was known as ‘poor white trash’.”
It is obvious in her dealings with her students, many of whom come from poverty-stricken countries, that her own experiences growing up in poverty have given her a kind of third eye when it comes to seeing them and their realities. Gwendolen also shared her feelings regarding the use of racial slurs, such as the “n-word,” stating that this type of language was never used in her home growing up and it was never used by her, or her own children in her household as an adult.

She voiced a strong awareness of the possibility of administrative or parental concerns regarding racial content and context of class discussions, saying, “Some days I just hold my breath. It is not always about what I am teaching, but about what I said to a student or an email to a parent. With ESOL students and parents, there are just so many opportunities for misunderstandings due to language and culture.”

Gwendolen’s perceptions of administration and administrative support are that, “The administration does what is expected of them.” She does not feel that what is expected of them is always in support or in the best interest of the teachers and voiced that in order “to avoid racial conflict in school they should trust students and teachers to do preventative reporting.” During the final interview, she recalled the time students were called out of her room for questioning regarding allegations of a child, before she herself had been questioned. She stated, “I know administration does this. I wish they would not; especially not before talking to the teacher. It makes me feel they will take a student’s word over the teacher.”

Gwendolen realizes she walks a fine line when it comes to teaching multicultural texts in order to meet the needs of her internationally diverse classes. She said that due to the various cultures, there are also various religions and many cultures are deeply rooted
in their religion, and many social injustices are rooted in these religions. Due to this realization, she stated that many works that speak of social injustices in other areas, such as the Middle East, for example, might be offensive to some of her Middle Eastern students. Whenever she teaches literature that is about the Holocaust, and the discrimination of the Hebrew/Jewish people, she says she is especially uncomfortable.

Gwendolen appears to be very sympathetic to the concerns of her students regarding feelings of discrimination and the expectation of assimilation; however, she does address these concerns in a realistic and firm manner. She was able to recount many instances the students pointed out to her of seeming discrimination on the part of school administration and realized these were not without some level of foundation.

Gwendolen, like other teachers participating in Racial Dialogues, realizes the need for these types of dialogues, and was very enthusiastic about participating. However, due to inclement weather and other more personal concerns, she voiced that she did not get to “dig as deeply” into the topics as she would have desired. She noted, “In literature there are opportunities to talk about differences” in reference to an Iranian student who would have to leave school in her junior year as she was promised in marriage to someone from her country. Gwendolen was able to relate this to The Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet and thus make a British classic relevant to her international students. Gwendolen stated whenever she teaches a work that deals with sensitive themes that she is cautious about her word choices, and in order to avoid the perception of taking sides, she “sticks to universal truths” that she hopes translate to all her ESOL students.
Individual portrait of Sojourner Truth- Researcher (African American abolitionist and women’s rights activist). I am both researcher and participant in Racial Dialogues. I am a 45-54 year-old multi-ethnic female who has taught literature in the secondary classroom for 7-10 years. I believe that racial awareness means to not only be aware of one's racial self, and that of others; also to be aware of socio-political and cultural factors affecting persons of certain races/colors. I consider myself “comfortably uncomfortable” when it comes to discussing issues of race or other controversial topics in the classroom.

Concerning administrative support, I do not always feel the support of my administration when it comes to the teaching of controversial topics such as racism, and this was certainly the case at times this semester during this project. I think my study put me more on their radar than ordinarily, and as a result, my experience became very reminiscent of events occurring four years prior, which are discussed in later sections.

For the purpose of my involvement as both researcher and participant in Racial Dialogues, I chose Lee’s To Kill a Mockingbird (1960). I have over the past several years taught primarily ninth graders, and this novel is considered a tenet for the ninth grade year in many school districts. The teaching of this novel spans nearly two months, and my lessons encompass a wide variety of historical as well as other literary works to support and expand the work.

Other works I use in the classroom that also address issues of racism or other social injustices are Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl (1952), or Ellie Wiesel’s Night (2006). However, due to time factors related to teaching on a 4x4-block schedule, teaching more than one novel of any depth is often not possible. Based upon how often
and how long I spend teaching such works, one might think I am extremely comfortable in doing so. However, during the weeks I spend on these works, I am in a highly uncomfortable state. I am only able to withstand this level of discomfort, for I have seen from experience the positive results of my perseverance.

**Group Composite of Participants**

Three of the teachers involved in the study selected texts from the 20th century, 1930s Depression Era Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men* (1937) and Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960) which reveal a historical, yet contemporary view of race relations in the United States. These teachers provided background on the history of racism against persons of African descent in the United States and the evolution of the word “nigger” in American vernacular, sharing insights into their own feelings regarding the word. Each of these teachers used historical as well as contemporary texts and media sources to bridge connection gaps between the modern classic works and the present.

Two of the teachers selected a classical work (Shakespeare’s *Othello*) in which the language is archaic and the racial slurs were not as easily identified. Both of these teachers also provided historical background, which included the history behind the Black Moors as well as the contextual use of words within the text that have evolved over the centuries. In an effort to bridge connection gaps between the classic work and the present, they each provided contemporary texts and media for class discussions, which included the use of Socratic seminars.

One teacher selected a variety of shorter works for her English Language Learners (ELLs), providing historical and contextual background applicable to each as well as providing contemporary texts and media to bridge not only connections gaps between the
fictional works and the present, but also gaps in the various histories and cultures represented in her class. This teacher did not spend as much time as did other teachers with one devoted work as she spends much of her time navigating issues of language as well as culture within the classroom, and this presents unique opportunities for racial and cultural dialogues.

**Perceived Challenge: The Power and Ownership of Words: Teachers and the Strange Evolution of the “N-word”**

One of the things teachers participating in this study agreed upon is their trouble with the “n-word.” The majority of the teachers involved in Racial Dialogues believe that if the word is in the reading text, it should be used as written in order to maintain authenticity and context of the setting, which includes time as well as place. However, some were not comfortable using the word in any context, with one participant stating, “I have found this [“N”] to be the term I am most comfortable with,” rather than saying “nigger” when it is presented in the reading text. White teachers voiced the most trouble using this word; yet felt it was important to acknowledge the word’s usage in literature as well as their own feelings regarding the word. Over all African American teachers alluded to the word, referring to it as a racial slur as used in the text, but did not focus as much attention on the word, its origins, or their own feelings regarding the word with their students. Havilah admitted that while she would not use the word in a professional setting, that she has said it upon occasion and thinks it at times when she becomes upset.

I do not say the “n-word” - as a professional – I sometimes will use it in my personal life when I get really mad, or think it in my head (laughs). Literature is an artistic depiction of life...I use it within context... this was the time... now, that
word is no longer acceptable. One has to be authentic - from a teacher's perspective. If we refuse to use the word, we are denying the horror and the reality of what went on in the past. We owe it to them [students] to be authentic... we have to help them connect with history. We have to cleanse ourselves of "it"... we need to confront "it"... literature creates a haven for us to be what it is not okay to be in reality. What we could not be... should not be... or dare not be.

Havilah admitted to using the word “nigger” herself in her personal life, but stated she would never use it in her professional life. Based upon these statements it can be inferred she is familiar with how the word makes her feel when she says it and compare that to how she feels when she hears it. She mentioned in her initial interview about the double-mindedness of racial awareness and suggested that racial awareness is being “aware of how others see you.” Teachers, both Black and White, who teach racially and culturally sensitive literature are vulnerable to their students in a way that other teachers are not. If their own level of racial self-awareness is predicated upon how they perceive their students view them, this may have an effect on their facilitation of racial dialogues.

All teachers involved in this study seemed to share the same goal of purging the word “nigger” from their students’ casual usage. All participating teachers, to include myself, who referenced this word in their journals or online interviews placed the word “nigger” in quotations as if to keep the word exclusive and separate of ourselves, as if quoting someone else. This may have been done to in some way disavow any ownership of the word, even though most admitted a willingness to read the word aloud and allow its use in class discussions when the word becomes a focal point of the discussion.
Alternatively, some teachers voiced such discomfort with the word they will not use it under any circumstances.

Students asked one White teacher, Elizabeth, why she would not use the word. She told them she had no desire to say the word that by them seeing the word as it is “used contextually” in the novel they can “get a sense of the cultural cues of the time period.” She added, “But since that is no longer the case today, I chose to stick with what I am most comfortable with.” Based upon this statement it would indicate a level of acceptance of the word if it is justified due to societal and cultural norms. Alternatively, a refusal to address feelings regarding this word with the students would be indicative of a level of discomfort; however in revisiting the statement, “…but since that is no longer the case today, I chose to stick with what I am most comfortable with,” there may also be a level of denial regarding racism in the present day.

The two African American teachers involved in the study who taught the classical work *Othello* stated that the use of racial slurs was not nearly as noticeable to students [as the other two works taught by teachers, for example, the words “beast” and “savage” have positive connotations in most of their [students] conversations today. These were used in Shakespeare’s *Othello* to not only dehumanize the Black Othello, but also to demonize. This made it necessary for the teachers to bring these words and their true intent to the attention of the students in order for them to understand, as Havilah stated, the “racial slurs embedded within the theme of the nature of evil.” Sacajawea described this as “slowly stepping in to the more in-depth and sensitive discussion about race relations.” She stated that as the students began to “pick up and verbally react to the slurs,” she asked such questions as “Does this still happen today?” This was a good way
to gauge students’ level of racial awareness. From their reactions, Sacajawea was able to surmise the students were aware that racism still exists, as they discussed the “subtleties and different forms of racism in today’s society.” It would have been easy for these two teachers to simply gloss over these words and allow the students to draw their own connotations based upon modern context; however, each of these teachers knew the underlying themes of Shakespeare’s *Othello* would have been lost and so would as one teacher noted, “the opportunity to discuss this important topic.”

In each of the participants’ classes, the “n-word” seemed to take center stage in class discussions. White teachers in discussing their own discomfort with the word voiced Black students “on the other hand had some interesting views on the word,” for example, “who can say it, and when.” Based upon journal accounts, teachers agreed Black students even felt it was within their power to grant permission to White teachers to use it when reading. Teachers found that most Black students feel they have a proprietary claim on the word, while some did not feel the word should be used at all in conversation, and in each of the classes there was what Jane described as a “spirited debate of who had the ‘right’ to use the ‘n-word’.” She stated she asked her students the question, “Do we all have the right to use it?” She voiced, “Reaction was mixed. Most of the class felt only Blacks could say the word in conversation, but it was ok [for others] if it was in a song.”

Teachers all agreed that if the word was used in the reading text, that there should be some historical and contextual background provided. Some teachers stated that due to their involvement in *Racial Dialogues* they provided more in-depth background rather than as one teacher stated, “Just prefacing the reading with a warning that there was some
pretty rough language present in the book.” Teachers related that the provision of background opened the floor for discussion through large group as well as Socratic seminars. Jane described this as “opening the flood gates” and Elizabeth stated she found students to be “quite enthusiastic” about being “allowed” to use this word. Teachers found while there was a certain level of ownership extended toward this word by most American born Black students, that some seemed to recognize it as offensive to others.

Jane questioned students regarding use of the “n-word” in literature and whether anyone had the right to censor a work (i.e., such as the revised version of Twain’s *Huckleberry Finn* where the word “nigger” was changed to “slave”). She observed, “The class was divided in the sense that half ‘professed’ indignation that the word ‘nigger’ was used at all.” However, she did note that in spite of the voiced dislike regarding usage of the word “over 200 times in this book [Huckleberry Finn],” all agreed that the author of a work has the right to use the word, and that it should remain unchanged.

Elizabeth, who had admitted her own discomfort with the word; had stated emphatically that she would never use it, voiced surprise when a young Mexican male student read a passage aloud in which the word “nigger” was repeated several times. She observed,

None of them [the Black students] commented. None of them asked anything about it after the chapter was finished. I was not inclined to force a discussion on race; if they were not interested in bringing it up, then I decided that they were all comfortable with the word being used in the context in which it was presented and that, since it was printed in the book, that it was okay the Mexican student read it aloud.
This account supports the perceived ownership of the “n-word” and that they [Black students] and only they can grant permission and under what circumstances it can be used. It is interesting to note that Elizabeth used the word “force” about exploring why there was no reaction, no discussion. Based upon her journal accounts, there was more of a reaction to her omitting the word in her own reading, than the Mexican student stating the word “fluently.”

This account prompted my own reflection of the time a White student who had never been an active participant in class suddenly one day while the class was reading begged to read the portion of To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960) where the word “nigger” was used several times in the passage. This student was one who had made several racist remarks in class on other occasions. Based upon prior incidents, I sensed his real reason for wanting to read - he wanted to say the word. He was one of two White students in the class of mostly Black and a few Hispanic students. If he had been any other White child, I would not have been suspicious or uncomfortable with him wishing to read this particular passage. The other students noted my hesitation, and encouraged me to allow him to read. It was as if they realized his agenda, and they were challenging him. He echoed, “Yes, Ms. BB. Go ahead and let me read.” I did. Each time he said the word he emphasized it, stressing each syllable, and stating it more loudly than any other word in the passage.

I could tell the other students were becoming agitated. I asked him to stop mid-point and he became angry. This caused a disruption in the class and it was several minutes before I could calm the angry students; all the while this student laughed and stared at me defiantly taking delight in what he had done. I felt helpless in this situation,
because my previous pleas with administration for the removal of this child from my 
room proved futile. I knew in my heart that had he been a Black child making comments 
in the reverse he would have been removed immediately.

Gwendolon, a White ESOL teacher, observed, “Teachers are instructed to write 
up students who disregard socially accepted speech within the classroom, although Black 
students may use the ‘n-word’ with other students who are in their social circle. I believe 
for other students not in that social circle to use the ‘n-word’, it is offensive to blacks.” I 
had to reflect upon this double standard, and consider context of usage by Black students, 
and this particular White student’s motive and intent.

Some teachers perceive the allowance of Black students to use the “n-word” as a 
part of their language as a form of reverse discrimination. The word “nigger” should no 
more be condoned coming from a Black student in reference to another, even in a 
conversational tone, than obese students using words like “cow”, “hog”, or “porker” in 
reference to an overweight peer. One of the conversations I have with my Black students 
is that I have never heard a Mexican student refer to another Mexican as a “wet back” 
and I have never heard a Jewish student call another Jewish person a “kike.” The Black 
students often tell me, “That’s different, Ms. BB.” Yet, no student has ever been able to 
explain clearly what that difference is, or how this difference came to be common to a 
culture.

White teachers found to their surprise that Black students wanted to know their 
opinions on issues of race or about as Jane stated “the rampant use of the ‘n-word’ in our 
culture,” she voiced her dislike of the word to the students and stated that she has a 
“physically hard time even saying the word.” However, White teachers who voiced such
a strong aversion to the word pulled in various media sources as well as activities when they realized how important it was to the students to discuss “their word.”

Each of these teachers recognized that had they not provided the contextual background for their novels in which this word was, as one teacher noted, “heavily peppered,” the class discussions might not have gone so well. These observations caused me to reflect upon the semester Ms. W., a student teacher assigned to me, arrived in my classroom the week we were beginning *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960). I had requested that she allow me the opportunity to establish historical and contextual background (which takes me two class periods), and that I always read the first chapter to students as there is so much foundation provided for the setting, themes, characters, etc. Ms. W., who my mostly Black class later described as “the whitest person we ever saw,” took to the podium to read the chapter in which the word “nigger” was first used. I was sitting behind my desk observing the class as Ms. W. read steeling myself for students’ reaction, and thinking ahead as to how I would handle it. When she said the word, even though the students had books in front of them and were to be reading along, their heads went up and their eyes got wide as if they had been startled by a pistol shot. I heard the sharp intakes of breath from many. Ms. W. flushed scarlet and with shaky and quickened voice moved forward. After she finished reading, I addressed the class regarding their audible reaction. I reminded them that we had discussed this word while building background. Several students looked down and then at Ms. W., others stared defiantly at me. One female student decided to be spokesperson and said that it was just a shock to hear it coming from her, that they expected her to say “n-word.” I reminded the students again we had talked about the word, and I had said the word as it was used in the
presentation building background. Other students chimed in with things like – “That was different”; “We do not know her”; and “But, you’re not all that white Ms. BB.”

These statements further support the assumption of ownership and also who is allowed to use the word, and who is not. Based upon student reactions in this account, it would seem that familiarity breeds the right to use the word, as well as how “not White.” As one Black female student stated to me this past semester in defense of its usage in casual language with her Black peers, “But, that is our word, Ms. BB.”

The Black students’ responses to hearing these words “come from her” (Ms. W) were in stark contrast to Black students’ nearly identical comments, but with a marked difference, to their White teacher. Jane shared with her students that even though her parents were from the Deep South, that they had instilled in her from an early age that “the word ‘nigger’ was derogatory in every sense of the word and was never to be used.” She then, in a seeming effort to inoculate the students for what was to come in the book, read a passage from Steinbeck’s Of Mice and Men (1937) “that was full of all kinds of insulting words, and they laughed.” She asked them why they were laughing and “they told me those words just did not sound right coming out of my mouth.” Jane then told the students, “that was just how I felt when I read them, but I felt they were necessary for the context of the book.” The students were more accepting of hearing this word from this teacher, because she was honest in her own feelings regarding use of the word, without dismissing their [Black students’] feelings and usage of what many see as “our word.”

Most teachers found student reactions are often mixed regarding the hearing and speaking of this word. Havilah observed that while reading from Shakespeare’s Othello,
“one [White] female student would not say the word ‘niggardly,’ because she ‘was not raised that way’….Black students laughed at her ... it was funny - why do ‘we’ laugh [at other’s discomfort] rather than feel threatened or feel angry?”

An assumption that can be made based upon these accounts is that Black individuals laugh at White individuals’ discomfort over saying this word because of the sense of ownership they feel toward the word, and that it in some sense makes them feel more powerful when they observe the level of discomfort caused by this word. I think it can also instill power within a White person who uses it for the purpose of causing discomfort, as the White student did in my class when he read the passages containing this word.

As Jane surmised with a laugh in our final interview, “The “n-word” is certainly an interesting word.” For myself, I have found in the 10 years I have taught, Black students in my classes have insisted that if you pronounce the word as "nigga" it does not mean the same - it is not an insult - it means buddy, friend, or some other term of endearment. One day in order to challenge what I firmly believe is faulty thinking; I placed the word "nigga" on the board next to the word "nigger.” I then placed the word "suga" on the board next to the word "sugar." Not one student denied knowing what I meant if sitting at the dinner table I said (using a Southern drawl) "pass me the suga, please." I saw the dawning awareness begin in the faces of some, but denial came quick to the lips of still more that it was not the same with "nigga,” with one student suggesting, “It is different when Black people say it.” That was and always has been the answer; but is it an answer that teachers simply have to accept?
This illustration is one I have used often when teaching Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960). This is a conversation to which I bring students back when we read the chapter in which the town of Maycomb responds to the death of Tom Robinson with repeating refrains of, "Typical of a nigger...." (Lee, 1960, p. 275) followed by a litany of negative stereotypical behaviors. I then reminded the students of how Tom, who was on trial for the alleged rape of a White woman, was embarrassed to use the word “whore” in open court, but without hesitation referred to himself as a “nigger”, "If you was a nigger like me, Mr. Finch, you’d be scared too” (Lee, 1960, p. 222).

I asked the students what this tells us about how Tom views himself. I then said, "Society has convinced Tom that this is what he is, a nigger." Then with deep breath, I continued, "Based upon your arguments, students, some of you have allowed society to convince you of the same." Heads lifted up and some eyes became wide with sudden understanding, others narrowed. On a good day when I use this illustration I will hear, "I am not using that word again." This is a risk I know I am taking, for a child could go home and tell his or her parents I called him or her a “nigger.”

Jane after having students view documentary accounts of the Civil Rights era Birmingham Children’s March segued to a discussion of the “connotations associated with the ‘n- word’” and how persons involved in these marches might feel about the use of the word today. She further noted that the planned novel and the discussion just happened to coincide with the Clipper’s owner Donald Sterling controversy over recorded use of the “n-word” in reference to Black team players,” which “added fodder” to the discussions. This teacher stated she used this topic to provide an opening for the students to relate further by asking them how many of them had “ever been insulted by a
racial slur, “and how it affected them. Jane then provided a poem written by Countee Cullen called “Incident” in which he wrote of a child visiting a large city for the first time, and how being called the word “nigger” was the only thing he could remember from that trip which lasted from “May to December.” Jane stated this poem opened the floor to what had formerly been a conversation of slurs related to being Black to a Hispanic male who gave an account of while in a store accidently bumping into a White man in a Wheelchair. The young man stated he apologized to the man in the wheelchair, who in turn called him a “stupid wetback.” Jane recalled the boy told the class he would never forget this event. She stated she felt it was important at this time to discuss how easily this word [nigger] slips out of the mouths of the students, and is so much a part of their conversation that when redirected some do not seem to even notice they have said it.

When teachers are not afraid to broach controversial topics in the classroom, they are also more comfortable relating the controversies of today with relevant literary as well as informational texts that broaden students’ views of the world and help them to relate the curriculum to what is real and relevant to their lives. Jane stated the class conversation on racial slurs was a “good lead-in to the novel [the class was preparing to read] because everyday people face discriminations and put-downs of one kind or another. They are not always racial. They can be about intellect, looks, weight, age, gender, etc. We make judgments about people without getting to know them.” She stated she then closed out the conversation by asking the students how many of them had ever “been guilty of making judgments about people and inflicting their own kind of bigotry on others.” She stated all students raised their hands. “The main point we ended with was that words have meaning. It was a wonderful discussion.”
Elizabeth closed out the novel she selected for *Racial Dialogues* with an activity in which students were given the assignment of identifying a theme for as many letters of the alphabet as they could. She provided the following description of the project,

The ABCs of *Of Mice and Men*, where, for each letter of the alphabet, the students have to come up with a unique word and connect it to the novel in some way. About 5 [sic] different groups (pairs) asked me if it was okay to use the word ‘nigger’ for the letter N. We discussed how they would explain the connection. Each time they referenced a quote directly from the book that included the word. Those who chose accurate quotes from the novel were encouraged to use the word, as it was appropriate for the project.

There is no mention of how she handled students not choosing “accurate quotes from the novel.” However, Elizabeth did go on to say, “I found it interesting that no non-black students asked to use the word ‘nigger’ for N.” She took note that “[B]lack students were very excited to be able to use the word for a school project.” Further saying, “They couldn’t really give me a reason why they were so happy about it, but just that they had permission to use it and it was cool to them. They chuckled as they made Power Point slides using the word ‘nigger’ and finding images to go along with them.” There is no note of what images the Black students chose for the letter N; these observations would have been insightful.

As noted previously, Black students do often feel they have ownership and they are the only ones within their social group who can use the word “nigger.” However, based upon the accounts of White teachers, it is though there was a realization that the word is offensive to others and it seems the Black students had enough regard for their
White teachers to respect their discomfort with the word. Perhaps part of a teacher’s comfort level and racial awareness is not so much as being open to all discussions on race, but a personal awareness of discomfort, and comfort in relaying these feelings to students in an open and honest manner. Based upon the shared perspective of these teachers, students respect it when their teachers are what they call “real,” even if a teacher’s brand of real differs greatly from their own.

**Perceived challenge: Bridging the Racial Divide vs. Crossing Cultural Lines:**

**Challenging the Values of Other People’s Children.**

Teachers involved in this study are acutely aware that they teach in the public school system and that they are teaching children -someone else’s children. Based upon the combined accounts of each teacher it would seem all would agree that teaching high school literature can be likened to walking in a field of landmines. You never know when one is going to blow up in your face. As Sacajawea stated in reference to parental complaints, “There can be fallout... you have to think of how these things are presented in context. If there is an issue, let me give the context in which this was said.”

Sacajawea also shared that as an African American woman, she is generally comfortable with discussions of race; however, in reference to *Othello* and the relationship of the Black male title character and the White female Desdemona she stated, “But when it comes to how parents feel about the topic of interracial relationships... I do not want to judge or challenge values. Who am I to judge? I do not want anyone going back to their [sic] parents to say, ‘Ms. ____ says....’ I just focus on their reactions rather than me sharing my views.”
Sometimes one controversial topic such as racism can lead to other controversial topics. For example, the topic of interracial marriage can quickly lead to Gay rights and marriage-equality, as was the case in Sacajawea’s classroom where the topic turned to Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayer and her stance on marriage equality. These discussions can then quickly segue into a religious debate over sin and morality.

Gwendolon who teaches in a multicultural classroom observed, “It [religion] can become very uncomfortable because of all the different nationalities represented in my room each year. Teachers are an influence on students. I try to stay away from anything that would offend anyone. I stick to universal truths.”

Teachers who have an awareness they teach students from different nationalities, cultures, and religions may be more anxious than other teachers regarding parental complaints. In my own classroom, I know this has been an issue for me as religion is a part of the cultural landscape and sometimes it is necessary to explain certain precepts for students to understand why events occur as they do or did. Gwendolon, who had several students from the Middle East in her classroom, voiced discomfort in establishing contextual background for Anne Frank: Diary of a Young Girl (Frank, 1952) as it was necessary to provide a history of the Hebrew people in order for students to understand the feelings of Hitler toward the Jewish people in Nazi Germany. She again iterated that in order to avoid appearing biased she “sticks to universal truths.” However, universal truths are not always shared, as she voiced concern was the case in this situation.

In my own experiences I have found that universal truths often conflict with dominate values. A topic that challenges teachers both on a cognitive and emotional level is that of addressing religious themes in a work of literature. In To Kill a
Mockingbird (1960), Lee uses symbolism to demonstrate that racism's roots are found in the ignorance of knowledge. The very first chapter of this novel is allegorical to the story of Adam and Eve found in Genesis of the Christian Bible in which Adam and Eve are punished for eating fruit from the Tree of Knowledge (Genesis, 2-4).

I always begin To Kill a Mockingbird (Lee, 1960) with my students with the explanation that even though some may have been assigned this novel for reading, and though they may have had some class conversations regarding the novel, most of these conversations were on an elementary to middle school level and on the lower levels of Blooms Taxonomy, meaning they may be able to identify character, setting, plot, and perspective, but themes, and even mood, and tone are largely lost because many teachers do not dig beneath the surface when teaching this novel. What is beneath the surface is uncomfortable. Given that the primary theme of this novel is walking around in someone else's skin, it is a very appropriate novel to use when examining racial dialogues. It is a very appropriate novel to use for delving beneath the surface.

When broaching topics that are contrary to certain values I have observed the resistance that forms in the faces of some students, and even seen its presence in their writing assignments. While I generally see resistance in some, there is interest in others, and disbelief that we are having this discussion in several. Students who are non-honor and AP students have rarely been asked to dig deeply into a text and explore underlying meanings; especially those themes that are of a religious nature or call into question cultural values, mores, and norms. For some of the students presenting this allegory is sacrilege, for some it is the first time they have been exposed to the actual story of Adam and Eve and this requires building background on a very shaky foundation.
As Sacajawea asserted, “Discussing race [or other controversial topics] without thought or strategy can cause students to shut down or hesitate to share their truths.” Teachers who teach the same works over a period of years develop strategies for these discussions, but when dealing with such topics of controversy as race and religion, teachers often find they are not only challenged, but are challenging the values established in the homes of some students. Teaching a work that takes a story taught from infancy to most American students and asking them to look at it as perhaps the origin of racism and other forms of discrimination takes more than strategy. What the students are ultimately to glean from discussions relevant to these themes is that resistance of knowledge undermines our ability to know or to develop an awareness of others, and therefore acceptance.

With this goal in mind, I asked my students, “Why are some people so resistant to knowledge?”

No answer. I gave examples – I began with Galileo then moved on to Darwin. This is where the wall always comes up. Evolution.

I asked the question again, “Why are some people so resistant to scientific evidence?”

No answer.

They looked at one another. Some whispered, “She is going to get into trouble.”

It turns out they were right, I did get into trouble. I was asking students to think on a level for which they have never been asked to think before. I found that while we, as teachers are expected to challenge students to use higher order thinking skills, that there is a limit when this thinking creates questions that challenge certain values,
especially those “values” associated with race and religion. This was evidenced as Gwendolon retold what an international student shared in class, “A girl who was Catholic came to live with her Baptist aunt. She told of how she and her mother were kicked out of her aunt’s house because they were Catholic. Even though I know how wrong that was, I did not take sides... I prefer to stick to universal truths. The aunt did not understand her [the niece’s] beliefs, and turned them out of the house because they would not convert her to Baptist faith. I wanted to make her feel better, but needed to remain neutral. This did open the door, and I talked about the abuses of other people all over the world because of religion.”

This account is an example of the kind of cultural lines teachers are often afraid to cross. For example, if beatings are considered the cultural norm and based in religious beliefs, do we not as teachers still have a moral obligation to comfort the child as well as an ethical obligation to report the abuse? This appears to be a form of reverse discrimination and at its very worst. Where would be the harm in telling the girl her aunt was wrong, that she and her mother did nothing to deserve being turned out of the house. Teachers face this and other types of angst in the classroom and feel largely on our own in how to address these issues in a manner that is acceptable to parents and to administration.

Recently in my classroom, a discussion of discrimination based upon genetic differences led to a discussion on homosexuality, which led to a student making derogatory remarks regarding homosexual students in the school, and when redirected, used the Bible to support her bullying remarks about homosexuals. I had to tell her that I do not allow bullying in my classroom even if the weapon of choice is a holy text. I got
an email from the child’s mother, I stood my ground, and she agreed she would deal with her child that “she was not raised to think that way.” I always find parents’ statements such as this interesting. As Gwendolon stated, “I am always aware that parents can have objections to how students are redirected. Sometimes you just have to hold your breath. Because of all the different cultures, religions... socio-political factors... it is always in the back of my mind. I want to make sure every child in the room is lifted up and is equal to everyone else.”

Teachers who teach multicultural literature or literature that addresses racism or other social injustices often teach under duress, ever mindful that what is said can and will make its way home and told in the manner it was perceived. The parent then provides this perception to the administrator who perceives it according to his or her own thought processes and experiences. By the time the teacher is asked questions about an incident, everyone else has already made up his or her mind about what occurred. As Sacajawea voiced, “I am always aware I have to be careful - because this is a public school system. You never know what can happen. I do try to be mindful of how I say things.” She further stated she has not had many problems with parental concerns, “Knock on wood ....nothing has happened yet.” She did state this was probably due to the fact she teaches juniors and seniors “so they are more mature.” She further iterated that while she does not shy away from controversial topics such as race, “they [topic] have perimeters... I approach things in a conservative manner anyways. This is public school, and we have to be careful.”

Teachers do not always feel the support of their administration when parents or students voice concerns or complain. Sometimes we are placed in a state of anxiety at
how administration handles these situations. This semester while conducting this study, as had occurred in an account shared by Gwendolon, students were taken from my classroom for questioning regarding classroom dialogues and lesson content based upon the allegations of one student. This particular student who was caught while skipping my class voiced his discomfort with my use of the word “black” in reference to persons of African descent, rather than saying African American, as well as the discussions on religion, which as asserted earlier is a predominant theme in the novel we were reading. Gwendolon shared a similar experience in her final interview, “I remember the time students were called out of my room and questioned. I know administration does this. I wish they would not; especially not before speaking to the teacher. It makes me feel they will take a student’s word over the teacher.”

Education standards for research say we should teach our students to seek information from primary sources whenever possible. This is a good standard for all to adopt when questions arise about what the teacher said or how it was meant; go ask the teacher. The investigation for these types of issues should start and stop with the teacher. The order in which “witnesses” are questioned often can tell a great deal about what one is hoping to find in an investigation. It became apparent to me the time students were called out of my classroom based upon the line of questioning in my own meeting that it was due to their [administration’s] knowledge of my being atheist that placed me under scrutiny. My principal proceeded to question me regarding my “agenda,” even down to asking me what my facial expression was like whenever I discussed religion within context of the reading.
This experience aided me in knowing how teachers of color must have felt in the early days of integration; how those first college professors must have felt on college campuses with students whose minds had already been shaped by the warped sense of right and wrong imposed by a broken society. I realized due to this experience my place in society as “the minority” for perhaps the first time, as due to my lighter skin tone, the softer texture of my hair, and the angular shape of my nose, I had never before faced true discrimination. This caused me to question how we, as teachers, can teach adults to step out of their own protective white armor and into the “colored” skin of others and take a walk for a day.

**Perceived Challenge: Socio-political Factors and Other Outside Forces: The Impediments and Instruments to the Facilitation of Racial Dialogues**

Sometimes the demographic makeup of a class is a determining factor for teachers in deciding what literary works to teach, especially those that deal with race and culture. Gwendolgon shared, “I usually wait until I see the cultural and racial makeup of my classes before choosing what we read. Some of the literature that deals with oppression in the Middle East could be offensive to some of my Middle Eastern kids. I once had a boy from the Middle East tell me he did not have to listen to me because I am a woman. I had to have a conference with his parents. I am not sure how much good that did. He learned to think this way from somewhere.”

Gwendolgon stated that oftentimes the students’ experiences in their culture will lead her to a work of literature she may not have considered. She provided this example, “A student shared she is from Iran and had been promised to someone as the 11th wife and so she could not graduate with her class. Students were interested in this, and it did
relate to Romeo and Juliet; I try to relate to the students universal truths.” Classic literature can be used to teach these universal truths, referred to in literature as archetypal themes. Teachers simply need to be open to these opportunities and feel a level of comfort in facilitating discussions that evolve.

Language and the nuances of certain words can get any teacher into trouble, but with students, just learning a language and parents who may not have any knowledge of the language it can be far worse. As Gwendolon reported, “I sometimes worry about my choice of words… I once described a task as torture for some ESOL kids to a Chinese parent… I then later caught myself wondering what the parents’ idea of torture was.” In describing a typical day teaching ELLs, she stated, “Some days I just hold my breath. It is not always about what I am teaching, but about what I said to a student or an email to a parent. With ELL students and parents, there are just so many opportunities for misunderstandings due to language and culture.”

Havilah, who teaches in a multicultural classroom but in general education, shared she teaches multicultural literature to seniors who “come from other cultures.” She indicated that most of her seniors are minorities, and many from other countries. She stated that due to the inherent diversity of the course and the demographic makeup of the class, discussions of race relations have “sparked interesting discussions in Socratic seminars.” This teacher stated that “discussing race with a literary context” is “beneficial and freeing for learners.” For the multicultural course she stated she selected a textbook that “features a variety of indirect race-related issues” allowing for the introduction of such terms as assimilation, diversity, multiculturalism, etc. She stated she had her students analyze the distinctions between these terms and that once the students were able
to “discern the differences and identify these differences within the text as well as their own personal experiences” they were able to identify common themes. She stated, “The end result of this was an increase in compassion toward people unlike themselves.”

When teachers teach students from other countries, many of their students may be undocumented. When a teacher has undocumented students in the classroom there is an altogether different level of responsibility and awareness as there is so much in the media today regarding immigration, border control, and other issues that can cause discomfort to these students as well as to the teacher. Teachers are often aware that these students feel discriminated against by not only other students, but also some teachers, and administration. Gwendolon shared, “The students are aware of their minority status” and they often complain of discrimination “once they’ve acquired some basic English.” She stated that her students cited everything from disciplinary actions, to where their classes were held in mobile units as evidence of discrimination. To be fair, the school where these students attended had many classes in mobile units due to burgeoning student populations. However, not all the student complaints were without foundation, as she voiced there did seem to be a larger number of ELLs placed on In School Suspension over non-ELLS. She did concede that this [discipline referrals] might also be due to their difficulty adapting to American schools, stating, “The American school system amazes our ESOL students. Latinos have not experienced the power of school regiment so much of the day, absences, tardies - and absences must have excuses.” In their culture, “Attendance is required, but consequences are null as long as the student passes the class exam to go to the next grade. That one exam at the end of the year is what matters it seems.”
One of the other key areas in which teachers of students from other countries and cultures are more sensitive is that of assimilation. Havilah in regard to her multicultural literature class stated, “I keep going back to last year when I did the Socratic seminars... when I used the non-fiction [multicultural text] ... it really seemed to reach students who have difficulty embracing their own racial identity because of the pressures to assimilate... the stereotypes associated with each... even positive.” Gwendolon also shared, “Sadly, in general assimilation is not good for ELLs.” She told of a South Korean male student who “arrived and worked hard in all classes, dressed in a traditional belt, pants, and white shirt.” She observed, “Within a year of acquiring basic English, he refused to work, failed his classes, [and] wore his pants to his knees. His attitude and thinking had totally assimilated.” The inference therein is that the work ethic of American students is poor. Moreover, based upon Gwendolon’s description, this student’s style of dress and in general his demeanor appeared to mimic the Black male population within the school.

Gwendolon further stated that she discusses the positive and negative aspects of assimilation with her students, such as, “being able to navigate the school system, the legal system, the banking system, and the credit system.” She stated that the majority of her students say that people do not use banks in their countries, as the government, which will “take your money when they want,” owns these. She stated according to some of her students, that in their countries, “only the rich use credit, so they are not sure how it works,” for example, she elaborated they do not understand the concept of the credit bureau.

Teachers who teach students from other cultures have a unique responsibility to their students when it comes to understanding their experiences and how constantly
changing socio-political factors affect them. I had a young Hispanic male student this past semester write me the sweetest note asking me to forgive his sleepiness in class as he had worked all weekend, then had to care for younger siblings so his mother could work. This student was only 15. He asked if I would allow him “to just take a little nap” in class. While, I could not allow a nap, I did speak to him and explained I understood how he felt. He was a good student, I assured him of this, and asked what I could do to ease his burden. He was very grateful for my understanding, and completed his work that day. When he turned it in, there was 15 minutes remaining in class. I nodded to him indicating he could put his head down. This one act of not just kindness, but understanding and respect, went a long way with this child. Even though this child continued to work every day after school and weekends, and was also an admitted gang member, he passed ninth grade literature with a B and a half promise to me that he would finish high school and get into an architectural college.

During the semester in which this study occurred, teachers experienced many challenges outside the realm of their professions that affected and in many ways limited what they were able to not only do for the purpose of the study, but also, in how they would ordinarily teach their lessons. Several teacher voiced regret that there was not enough time to “dig as deeply” into the texts and class discussions, as they desired and felt the topic required. All teachers agreed that one of the most important elements of teaching a work of literature that involves racial and cultural themes is the building of background. As Havilah stated in our final interview, “I think that... hmmm.... I think that actually providing the historical background... it creates a more authentic experience for the students. It makes them aware these were the life and times... provide them with a
framework with which to analyze the text. Providing a historical perspective aids students in rendering a proper interpretation of the text.”

If teachers provide students with the background necessary to render “proper interpretation of the text,” then not only are students taking an active stance in their learning, but it takes the onus off the teacher concerning these interpretations. However, if teachers have found it difficult to incorporate the time to build historical and contextual background, and as a result have experienced the fallout of their failure to do so, they may simply avoid teaching anything of a controversial nature again.

It does take more time to build background for racially or culturally sensitive literature, because it becomes personal to not just the teacher, but also to the students involved. As a Havilah shared, “There was one situation with a student, who had been a quiet student all year long; then suddenly one day he just stood up and began preaching a sermon about the injustices of Black people. I think I did a pretty good job with that one. I was glad he was finally talking. I found myself laughing in surprise; the students did too. It was funny; it was a shock to all of us. He just woke up!” This provides the proper metaphor; as teachers of racially and culturally sensitive literature, we often walk a fine line between waking the sleeping giant and being so intent upon disrupting his slumber that we place ourselves in a state of personal and oftentimes professional angst.

Havilah in regard to teaching literature to her senior class, discussed her comfort level regarding racial discussions given the current socio-political climate, such as one in which Barack Obama, 50 Cent, and Tiger Woods were discussed as Black men competing “in a game not meant for them.” She stated in her final interview, “As far as comfort as an African American woman - the reason I am taking so long to respond - I
have not even stopped to think about how I feel because I am so focused on the students’ experiences. I do think about it... I guess. I do find myself sort of justifying with examples. Like if I am talking about Barack Obama - you and I know why ‘they’ do not like him - I try to talk about him using examples, points of reference - to try to justify... to mediate the effect. Socratic seminars provide the perfect context... they [arguments/claims] can be defended, refuted... argued... giving students equal say... democracy.” In today’s socio-political climate, introducing anything of a positive nature about President Obama into the classroom can be somewhat risky. Later in the interview, Havilah reiterated that she knows “very well how some people feel, but it was relevant.”

Sacajawea, who taught the same work and held similar discussions in her classroom, stated regarding her involvement in Racial Dialogues and her choice to use Othello, “Yeah, this is a good period of time when this [the study] happened, because of all that is going on in the media – socially and politically. When speaking to students it is different from speaking with friends; there has to be an emotional separation... sounding more fact based and less emotional makes a difference.” Jane echoed these sentiments with, “This was a good time to bring this up [the study] because of so many things going on in the news... the Clippers... these things helped the discussions and it was important and good these things were happening. Socio-political factors are important and do impact the classroom discussions.”

By presenting “facts” through documentary and other informational texts, teachers participating in this study were able to facilitate an atmosphere of discovery where students were exposed to accurate information, rather than rhetoric. Thus, students were able to form intelligent arguments supported by contextual evidence, rather than
simply debate opinions - their own or those of their teachers. This was two-fold in that it met academic standards as well as kept teachers on the periphery of controversial discourse, rather than in the middle.

**Perceived Challenge: The Socratic Method of Self-discovery: Letting Go and Letting Students Get “It”: Assessing Students’ Level of Racial and Cultural Awareness**

Teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* found that oftentimes students, especially Black students, lack knowledge regarding the history of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and other key eras and figures in Black history. When students lack this foundation, it becomes the responsibility of their teachers to fill in these historical and literary gaps. Three of the teachers involved in the study incorporated Socratic seminar into their class discussions, while the other three teachers, myself included, used more of an open floor method for class discussions. Socratic seminar worked very well for the two teachers of seniors, to which they attributed to higher levels of maturity on the part of their students who were juniors and seniors. The third teacher who used Socratic seminar admitted she had never attempted Socratic seminar with her on-level sophomore students and while they did become engaged in the discussions, she stated it was a challenge getting them to follow procedure (i.e., taking turns talking). Based upon the reported experiences of these three teachers, level of maturity as well as whether the class is an honors class or on-level class are contributing factors to the success of classroom discussions, which are more student, rather than teacher led.

All teachers involved in this study agreed that the topic of race and racial and/or cultural discrimination was one that got students “all excited” or “all fired up.” Many
teachers voiced hesitancy when it comes to evoking levels of interest in students to this degree, especially when it comes to controversial topics, as they never know when things might, as one teacher noted, “get out of hand.” However, the teachers involved in this study were able to engage their students in formal and informal Socratic style discussions on all levels due to the amount of planning and forethought invested as well as daily reflection. Teachers admitted that their involvement with *Racial Dialogues* spurred them on to take extra steps that under ordinary circumstances, but especially due to the circumstances impacting all involved teachers the semester in which the study was conducted, they would have skipped. Most of the teachers involved voiced regret they did not have more time and wished they had been able to delve more deeply into the topic.

Teachers who teach classical works often look to current cultural, political, and pop cultural events to bridge the connection gap between classic works such as Shakespeare’s *Othello* and the present. Havilah related that she incorporated the Byron Hurt documentary, *Barack and Curtis: Manhood, Power, and Respect*. She then used her creativity and “their addiction to their ‘hand-held devices’” to engage them further in the exercise. She had them send text message discussions to one another on the “connections between societal issues President Obama, Fifty Cent (Curtis Jackson)” have faced vs. those faced by the fictional Othello. Havilah called the exercise “‘Google Gabbing’ or ‘purposeful texting’.” She stated in order to monitor and to record these exchanges, she had students forward the results to her Google Voice number. She was able to create what she called a “warehouse of their conversations” which she used in whole class discussions to further the topic of race.
Havilah reflected, “This gave us a chance to come together as a group after they [students] had been in pairs... they were given the opportunity to compare the three. Othello - fiction - Obama - real life, and Curtis Johnson (50 cent), and how he used the [B]lack stereotype to make money.” She further noted the students were “able to converse intelligently about race as they tried to make connections between three heroic figures.” She stated, “The lesson they gleaned was the reality [B]lack men face in a ‘game not created for them’.”

When teaching a diverse group, a teacher is often aware that not everyone is going to agree. Therefore, ground rules for class and peer-to-peer discussions must be established. Sacajawea led her senior students in a discussion on racism that evolved from an NPR news clip, “Probe: Gains of Integration Eroded, Especially in the South” used to bridge the gap between issues of race and class in Shakespeare’s Othello and today’s racial divide. After which, she had the students participate in a free write, which “prompted great discussion.” The teacher stated she prefaced the upcoming discussion with “the importance of hearing each peer’s truth, even though you might disagree, it is important to hear everyone’s voice.” She stated that during this discussion one White female student shared that she had experienced racism, but added she felt “racism is not as prominent today.” Sacajawea observed, “Of course this caused the African-American students to retort. They feel it is still prevalent, just more subtly.” The conversation apparently became very heated because she stated she “had to interject/remind the students of the importance of hearing each other’s voices.” In this context, this teacher is not just referring to the audible voice, but the essence of who a person is by what he or she says.
Teachers often find that they have done such an excellent job of getting students to hear and share with one another, the conversation continues outside the classroom. Sacajawea shared that after this classroom discussion on race, she had to mediate potential fallout when a female student shared with her that she was made to feel uncomfortable when another student “wanted to prove her point about racism outside the class.” Conversations about race are not always in a classroom forum with an adult facilitating; they do take place in high school cafeterias and hallways as well as corporate meeting rooms and lunch counters. The English classroom is where students have not only the opportunity to discuss racism and other controversial topics in a safe environment, but to also explore their own reactions and develop a greater level of racial and self-awareness so they are better prepared for what takes place in the world beyond high school. Even in university classrooms, I have learned as an adjunct professor of psychology and sociology, where, while topics such as race and racism still cause discomfort, college professors of higher learning are not held to the same strictures as high school teachers when it comes to the curriculum and ensuing discussions.

Teachers also realized that oftentimes these discussions not only expand beyond the classroom, but also beyond the planned lesson time, or cause students to feel timid about sharing their own experiences. Sacajawea shared that one White female student, apparently due to being of the minority in the class, and perhaps because of the discussions becoming heated due to the statements of another White student minimizing the existence of racism, stated that she as a Jewish person had been the target of racism. This spurred new conversation and the teacher stated still another White female student
stated she wished “to share with the class she suffered from racism, too.” However, the bell rang and Sacajawea told the student she could share in class the next day.

It is important for teachers to realize that discussions on racism or other social injustices are not something that can be on a bell-to-bell schedule or that go away just because the lesson plan calls for a change of genre. Teachers must be willing to extend conversations until the next day and to allow all students the opportunity to be heard. Aware of this, Sacajawea decided to follow up to the NPR clip with an assignment she called a “six word essay on race and education.” Students were to write their essay in six words, and then write a paragraph reflecting upon the assignment. This was a good assignment because students are never more aware of the importance and power of words until they have restrictions placed upon how many they are to use. The teacher shared some of these “essays” as artifacts collected for her journal of Racial Dialogues that are indicative of the depth of conversations held within her class.

*We unite to seek knowledge together.*

*There is but one race – human.*

*Do not fear difference. Respect it.*

*Separate but equal? I think not.*

*Skin color should not determine intelligence.*

*Color should not define potential.*

*Separation is limitation. Variation is liberation.*

*Educational segregation cannot be our future.*

The ability to have “these types of conversations” according to all teachers involved in this study depends upon many factors. Jane in discussing her 10th grade class
discussions stated she had had Socratic style discussions with her students in honors level classes, but had never attempted to do so with her on-level students. She voiced that one of the challenges with this group of students was in getting them to understand and respect the process, to realize the value of taking turns. “This semester, however, I decided to expand our discussions before starting the book and to let them be the leaders of that discussion via a Socratic seminar. I had never been brave enough to attempt this before in my on-level classes and I found the results interesting.”

Jane, who taught a more contemporary novel that had itself been subject to controversy, provided not only historical and contextual background for the story itself, but also for the novel telling the students of its history on the banned book list due to language. This led to a discussion on censorship and book banning. To support the topic she provided a clip from 60 Minutes in which the topic was the revision of Twain’s Huckleberry Finn wherein the word “nigger” had been replaced with “slave.” She also provided students with editorials on the controversy over this new publication. They were instructed to take notes and identify “talking points” for what she described as her “first stab” at attempting a Socratic seminar with this on-level class where the population of students consisted of 17 Black or of African descent, five Hispanics, one Asian, and one identified as Other. There were no White students in the class.

Jane described the students as, “not at all reticent about talking about the subject.” Further indicating that her biggest challenge was getting them to follow procedure and wait their turn. She noted that when the period ended, “it was obvious that there was much more to discuss. We decided to continue our discussion the next day.” Jane portrayed not only willingness, but also eagerness regarding her facilitation of racial
dialogues. Oftentimes teachers are so pressed for time and all they have to cover in a school year, or in the case of the teachers involved in this study who are on a 4x4 block schedule, a semester, it may seem a challenge or stressful to allow a conversation to bridge over into the next class session. However, as Jane shared from her perspective, the results of this were positive.

There are many factors contributing to the success or failure of classroom dialogues of any nature. Student maturity and ability seem to be positive factors, while younger, less mature students of lower ability a negative factor. Students in the remaining classes where Socratic seminar was not employed was due to these identified negative factors. This placed the responsibility of not only leading racial dialogues, but also oftentimes introducing the topic. Often on-level students are passive in their learning and teachers find they run a teacher-centered classroom in order for any learning to occur. In a conversation with a fellow teacher of on-level students, she remarked that student-centered for on-level students usually means the students are “climbing the walls.” In order for any sort of classroom discourse to be effective, the teacher has to take command and be the leader of the expedition to discovery. He or she should be able to comfortably draw cues from the reading and introduce those topics that will ignite interest and promote inquiry.

With all things considered, time is one of the most important factors in choosing a work of literature that has controversial themes. Some teachers voiced spending a couple of class periods or more building background, some had students do independent research, some showed slides, video clips, and shared articles that spurred pre-novel discussions. Based upon what these teachers experienced, the establishment of historical
and contextual background and the provision of a safe and open forum for discussion could afford a means of inoculating the students and the class against reactions that could result in backlash against the teacher.

**Perceived Challenge: The Audacity to be Authentic: Making the Vulnerable, Venerable: Finding Comfort within the Discomfort of Racial Dialogues**

Teachers involved in this study were able to explore their own levels of racial awareness and discomfort while involved in *Racial Dialogues* with their students. Oftentimes racial dialogues can uncover old wounds for not only students, but also for teachers of color, or even White teachers who have had unpleasant experiences due to issues of race. Havilah related during the discussions held to build background for *Othello*, one Black male student became angry and said, “You do not know what it is like being a Black man growing up in this area.” Rather than take a reactive stance, she stated she led the students in reflection over their discussion and their emotions.

In Havilah’s own reflection of the class discussions she shared in her final interview, “The Black culture sparks the most emotional reactions compared to students of other races. There is a lot of healing that needs to happen in that area [Blacks]. There are still a lot of areas that need to be touched on.... that may be the reason for passivity.... they ignore... there is a lot of fear... in encountering the reality... literature is a terrific way in encountering that reality.”

If this healing cannot take place within the context of the classroom where students spend more than 80% of their lives from K-12, then where is it to take place? The literature classroom can be viewed as a place where landmines are constantly detonated, or it can be viewed and treated as a place where, as Havilah stated,
“Discussing race with a literary context” is “beneficial and freeing for learners.” The ability to do so without duress for teachers can also be freeing as Havilah further shared, “I am very comfortable because literature reflects reality in a limited sense and can thus be treated as an experimental theatre designed to enable audiences to consider the ‘what if’s’ of life.”

It is not easy to be the blank slate we as teachers hear we should be each year when our administration goes over ethics. When teaching works of literature in which the topic is the wrongness of racism or other social injustices, we do have a moral and ethical obligation to be role models to our students. We cannot be expected to do so if we are sitting upon the fence for fear of as more than one teacher stated, “taking sides.” As Havilah observed regarding her own level of comfort, “While there is discomfort, there is comfort in which we can explore taboo issues,” for “the beauty of literature is that it provides a safe environment to discuss sometimes uncomfortable topics… topics considered taboo.”

Teachers find their level of comfort from different sources, as Jane shared, “I am pretty comfortable teaching a work of literature in which race and racial injustices are the topic because I make sure to address the topics of racial injustice before we get into the work itself. I like to encourage open discussion and I always include myself in the conversation. I explain to the students that we are often products of our environment, but that open conversations and education are the keys to change.”

While conducting the literature review for my study, I found a study in which the author, an African American professor of a course on diversity, stated that teaching on the topic of race and [White] privilege is like teaching naked. This type of exposure,
oddly, cannot occur when teachers feel they are under a microscope. Each of the teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* represented in one way or another all the ways in which teachers are vulnerable to not only the students in front of them each day, but their parents, and to their own administration.

Havilah provided her definition of racial awareness as,

*For any human being to be racially aware means to note one's difference (in a negative way) from others, and thus one's separateness, which often leads to isolation. It is quite unfair when society cannot allow people to be different in ways that lie outside the norm; thus, isolated individuals are faced with becoming assimilated (losing one's true self) to gain societal acceptance, or nonconformists, who choose to forge new paths around society and gain a sense of self-actualization.*

In a sense, assimilate is what teachers are expected to do when they are told they must be blank slates in front of their students. Indeed many teachers agree that ours is an isolative existence. Sacajawea stated that as an African American woman it is uncomfortable when students voice a value that is exclusionary of persons of color, such as interracial relationships. She voiced topics such as this need to be discussed in the classroom and that teachers need to discuss how to discuss these with one another. She shared, “As an African American woman, I am aware of situations and I try to teach a diverse range of topics. [I try] to make sure literature is diverse - I try to make sure everyone is clear I am not taking sides. I have to be careful of my wording. I try to look at both sides of an issue. I can see how Caucasian teachers would have difficulty talking
about topics like that - race. But, the conversations need to be had... not swept under the carpet. They might feel uncomfortable but they need to [have these discussions].”

Jane shared regarding how her level of comfort discussing race in the classroom has changed,

My comfort level in discussing racial issues has evolved over the years.
Being a [W]hite woman raised in the South, I did not feel like my opinion would carry much weight in a class that was predominately [B]lack and Latino. I found, however, that when I first explained my upbringing to the class, I gained a little equity with them. We talked about how prejudices are often developed by the way we are raised and the circumstances in which we are raised. By putting them in charge of leading the discussion, and by sharing my own circumstances, we were able to have very open discussions.

Jane candidly shared with her students she grew up going to segregated schools, while she did acknowledge this is “the way it was”; she never excused it as being right or normal because of the times. Being sensitive to how students of different backgrounds will receive and react to a work of literature is a part of a teacher’s racial awareness; we cannot always teach what someone wishes to hear, from either literature or regarding ourselves. We teach students whose families may espouse racist ideologies, and we teach students who either they or their parents have experienced racism, to demonstrate sensitivity to both is counter-intuitive and places undue stress on a teacher.

Gwendolon in sharing her views of racial awareness observed,
To be racially aware means to look at a situation or a work of literature from a different perspective. It means asking yourself how you would respond to a piece of literature if you were living in another person’s skin or had been raised in a different environment.

This does not mean deciding not to teach a work of literature that addresses the wrongness of racism; it simply means to have an awareness that you may have students who are resistant to the work, to you, and to the class discussions. Having this awareness makes teachers forewarned and forearmed.

Elizabeth shared that to her racial awareness means,

To be observant and knowledgeable of your own race (and the solace and struggles that go along with it) as well as that of those you encounter. It also encompasses the willingness to broach the subject and identify how it affects our individual lives as well as society as a whole.

Teachers should understand and not be afraid to discuss with their students, as Elizabeth openly admitted, there is such a thing as White privilege and that yes, there is solace as well as struggles within this awareness.

Sacajawea’s definition of racial awareness was more succinct in that it is in, “Knowing other races [ethnic differences] exists.” This simple statement caused me to reflect on this semester and as the study concluded I realized how much my awareness was as much an instrument as well as an impediment to me, which caused me to wonder if there is such a thing as being too racially and self-aware. Revisiting the account of the incident involving the male student a few years ago truly caused me to re-experience the
angst I felt during that time. I know that it was necessary to revisit these moments; to allow myself to feel the discomfort. It served as a reminder of why I chose this topic.

As I reviewed my own past artifacts, reflections for this past semester, as well as the journals, and interviews of participating teachers, the question that my principal asked of me in our last official meeting regarding my teaching of *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) was “Why you, BB? I have - how many English teachers? Yet you are the only one I am getting these sorts of complaints about,” resounded in my mind. In speaking with my study participants as well as other teachers in general conversations regarding my principal’s observation, I found their reactions supportive. One teacher retorted, “That is not true; we all have parents or students from time to time who decide to use what we say in class against us.” Another stated she had never been in any trouble, and she knew it was because she was afraid to take risks in class and discuss controversial topics. One teacher remarked she is very uncomfortable challenging students when it comes to their own use of racially charged remarks, because she never knows “when it will come back” on her.

I would not say that these concerns affected my overall level of effectiveness in facilitating classroom dialogues; however, it affected my level of personal as well as professional comfort and I went home every day waiting for other shoes to drop. I do not think teachers can ever feel entirely comfortable having these discussions, but they should feel supported and have confidence in doing it. There is a difference. Skydiving, for example, is not comfortable or comforting, but you can have confidence that if you jump out of the plane your chute will work. Sometimes you know it is working, but the
wind current or a fault with the chute may make the trip down turbulent. When you stand up and your bones are not powder, you know you made it.

Summary

The findings based upon the experiences of these six English teachers of high school literature provided needed insight into this study of racial dialogues. Teachers agreed that contextually and historically accurate literature is essential to help fill the gaps history books leave open. Works of fiction and non-fiction written during periods of crisis and prospering have remained a means of getting an authentic view of society and the people within it. Therefore, it is important for teachers to feel comfortable and supported in teaching accurate literature and the history that accompanies it, in the incorporation of relevant current sociopolitical events, and facilitating the often-discomforting dialogues evolving from these.

Teachers in this study agreed that we need the support of one another regarding the teaching of human beings, rather than as one teacher iterated, “wasting valuable time collaborating on what the numerical data says.” We have to reach students’ minds in order to reach their brains, and we have to feel comfortable doing so. As was further argued, “This [racial dialogues] is a conversation that should be had; I think teachers need to collaborate on this – the important stuff instead of things that lack depth. This was a good experience for me, having to think about this, being aware, and talking about it.”
Chapter 5: Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Study Overview

Public school teachers face unique challenges when broaching topics of race relative to the instruction of literature bearing racially and culturally sensitive themes, events, and issues (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Eunhyun, 2011; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2005; Lopez, 2011). The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to explore public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges related to difficult racial dialogues and the perceived effect on facilitation of dialogues essential to the instruction of literature in which racism is the topic. A review of the literature on the topic of racial dialogues revealed there have been numerous studies conducted in post-secondary and graduate learning environments. However, there were very few conducted in the K-12 public school settings, and even fewer from the perspective of teachers, especially secondary teachers who are tasked with preparing high school students for college and career in diverse settings.

Research design and identified limitations. The research design, method of data collection, and analysis for this study closely followed guidelines as set forth by Moustakas (2001) for heuristic studies, and were the most appropriate to explore the phenomenon under investigation. Although, subjectivity of the participants could be perceived as a limitation, participants in this study and their subjective experiences as revealed through interviews and journal entries were essential to understanding the phenomenon under investigation. In the same sense, investigator subjectivity could be perceived as a limitation to the study; however, my role as participant as well as
researcher was important to this process, as Moustakas (2001) asserted, it is only through personal experience of the phenomenon under investigation followed by careful and thoughtful analysis of the data that this type of understanding is gained.

**Trustworthiness of the study design.** There is always a risk of participant morbidity with studies of any design; however, the number of participants selected allowed for any who may have withdrawn from the study before its completion. Other identified limitations or risks involved possible contamination of the study due to teachers being from the same district and even the same schools; however, teacher-to-teacher interactions were vital to the perception of support in the classroom (Lopez, 2011). As such, teachers were instructed to include reflections of these interactions in their journals.

Other limitations or possible threats to the study or study participants were identified and measures taken to ensure the conducted research had trustworthiness. To ensure integrity and credibility of the study, data was triangulated through consistent interaction with participants, individual interviews, and journal entries of all participants as well as those belonging to myself, the researcher. The integrity of this study was further ensured as the presiding Chair to this study oversaw the collection and examination of the data through weekly phone and written updates.

Participants and their identities were protected as demographic information was used for the purpose of identifiers only, and participants were allowed to choose a pseudonym to protect their actual identities. No monetary compensation was offered, nor provided to participants, and measures were taken to ensure that no physical or psychological harm came to either direct or indirect participants in this study. Finally,
steps were taken to ensure the proper containment and dissemination of collected data, with all hard data maintained in a secure location within my private residence, and digital data maintained in secure password protected computer and/or cloud storage.

An evaluation of the findings as presented below is based upon the experiences of six secondary literature teachers, to include myself as both, participant as well as investigator, provided needed insight into this study of racial dialogues with secondary students. The research questions presented were used to explore the phenomenon under investigation. The analysis of the findings is presented according to themes that emerged from the written data as well as direct interviews with participating teachers. Recommendations are addressed based upon the experiences and perceptions of challenges faced by these secondary literature teachers. Conclusions for this study were drawn after a thorough analysis of the data that involved long periods studying all the data obtained from participants as well as my own experiences and perceptions as both participant and investigator in this study.

Implications

The qualitative study explored the lived experiences of public secondary literature teachers’ perceptions of challenges relative to teaching literature in which racism is the topic. Participants for this study were six secondary literature teachers, to include myself as both participant and investigator, who taught a work, or works of literature in which racism was the topic.

The quest of this hermeneutical study was to gain understanding and meaning through the interpretation of the reported lived experiences of teachers participating in their daily practices with me, as both researcher and participant, interacting and
intersecting with those individuals, situations, or phenomenon in the midst of these practices (Vannini, 2009; Westerman, 2004). Based upon the findings in this hermeneutic study, teachers participating in *Racial Dialogues* found there were many challenges related to the discussion of race within their respective classrooms. These challenges are depicted within the emergent themes based upon data collected from individual interviews and journal accounts of each teacher involved in *Racial Dialogues*.

**Thematic Presentation of Analysis of the Findings**

**Perceived challenge: The power and ownership of words: Teachers and the strange evolution of the “n-word.”** Teachers participating in this study teach classes they described as racially imbalanced with White students being the minority in each. These teachers found that discussions surrounding the use of the “n-word” seemed to take center stage in their classroom discussions and prompted a range of emotions to include enthusiasm, pride, discomfort, and anger from the students within their classes. Each of the teachers addressed students’ need to discuss this word in a variety of ways that may have been influenced by each teacher’s own level of racial awareness and comfort regarding use of the “n-word” and other issues of race. Some teachers provided information in the form of documentaries and other informational sources such as interviews with icons of popular culture, and some through simple class discussion of the word as used in the reading text as well as teachers’ personal feelings toward the word.

Sue et al. (2008-2010) asserted that in order to establish open racial dialogues, teachers must not only be knowledgeable of historical, sociological, and psychological context, but must also have an awareness of personal biases. While the literature teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* researched and incorporated contextual materials from a
variety of media, they all voiced their own level of inadequacies in discussing the “n-word” and other issues of race relative to these resources and their selected work of literature. Pedagogical researchers (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b: Lopez, 2011) as well as critical race theorists (Burton et al., 2010) have recognized these inadequacies as problematic as many teachers of minor children lack the educational and psychological preparedness to deal with issues of race presenting themselves in public school classroom settings.

Due to discomfort or feelings of inadequacy, some teachers avoided use of the word, or dismissed the potential harm of the word today by references to how the word was meant in the past. Of the six teachers involved in this study, only two, one White and one Black, did not use the word, “nigger,” as written in the texts, or else brought up in class discussions. While other teachers, both White and Black, admitted to varying degrees of discomfort with the word, they agreed it was important to use the word within context of the novels and other texts in order to maintain historical as well as current authenticity.

Teachers also found that there was a general sense of ownership and even pride associated with the word “nigger” with many Black students; however, there was a general consensus among the teachers of the desire to purge the word from casual usage. Nonetheless, as one teacher noted the word seems to be as much a part of the Black culture as music and style of dress, which may cause conflict in teachers who wish to redirect students who use it as a term of endearment. As asserted by Kennedy (2002), the use of the word “nigger” has so saturated the lexicon of Black youth today that this word that was once only heard whispered or used by racist White individuals is now viewed by
the post-Civil Rights generation as a new form of pronoun and even as a form of endearment.

While many teachers, Black, Hispanic, and White cringe at the use of the “n-word,” or wetback, or even cracker, the level of comfort in correcting these could be directly tied to the teacher’s racial awareness as well as lack of knowledge concerning the origins of such words. Findings from Racial Dialogues support my previous assertions that students themselves are often ignorant to the etymology of the word “nigger,” and teachers, who are equally ignorant or uncomfortable discussing this word, may give voice to misconceptions and stereotypes through their very own silence.

Teachers participating in Racial Dialogues found that just as in a similar study (Roberts et al., 2008) conducted in an urban high school setting, Black students seemed eager for opportunities to use this word. Black students in the prior study (Roberts et al., 2008) tested teachers by using these words to see how comfortable these adults were with not only hearing the use of such words, but also how comfortable they were discussing these words.

Interestingly, teachers involved in Racial Dialogues, found Black students open to discussions on how their teachers felt about the word and even granted permission and encouragement to White teachers who voiced discomfort to use the word when reading. However, as one African American teacher observed when a White female student in her class disclosed her discomfort in using the word “niggardly” as she was reading aloud in class, “….Black students laughed at her ... it was funny - why do ‘we’ laugh [at other’s discomfort] rather than feel threatened or feel angry?” As with Roberts et al.’s (2008) findings, the implication of this is that along with the sense of ownership and pride
associated with the use of this word among Black students, there also seemed to be a sense of empowerment derived when observing the discomfort of some White individuals regarding the use of the word.

Based upon White teachers’ accounts of Racial Dialogues, their Black students seemed to respect them and boundaries established regarding usage of the word. It is of note that in Roberts et al.’s (2008) study, the teachers were not classroom teachers for the students in the study, but participants recruited from a teacher workshop. There was no relationship between the teachers in Roberts et al.’s study and these students and the “testing” that took place was very similar to what many teachers experience with new students at the beginning of a school year or new semester. The negative reactions of Black students to a White student teacher in my own classroom, who read a passage containing the word “nigger” the first day she was in the classroom lends further support to these implications. The inference therein is that the establishment of teacher and student relationships may have a bearing upon how well Black students receive this word when used by their White teachers, or how much they respect a teacher’s discomfort with the word. As Roberts et al. asserted, the ability of teachers to not only hear, but also respond to students in a supportive and informative manner regarding issues of race will garner the trust and respect of the students in their charge.

**Perceived challenge: Bridging the racial divide vs. crossing cultural lines:**

**Challenging the values of other people’s children.** One challenge faced by teachers involved in Racial Dialogues was an awareness that the responsibility to address the wrongness of racism, even subtle forms (i.e., objections to interracial dating and marriage) may contradict, as some suggested (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding,
London, & Safer, 2001), values established in homes of some of their students. These challenges resulted in moments of what LittleJohn (2006) described as intense moral conflict for some teachers over how to address issues of race and/or culture. All teachers in this study voiced concerns of, or an awareness of, the potential for professional consequences regarding their classroom discussions on race. Their concerns were largely associated with concerns of potential “fallout” related to parental objections to content, discussions, or how or if teachers expressed personal views that were in conflict with those established in students’ homes. However, many (Bolgatz, 2005a; Bolgatz, 2005b; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006) agree that racial dialogues as well as discussions of culture and social injustice are critical to the expansion of racial and cultural awareness in children and adolescents.

Teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* voiced acute awareness that they teach other people’s children in a public school setting. While each one in her own way seemed to take an activist approach to addressing issues of race, some White as well as Black teachers were more timid than others in their approach due to concerns of parental and/or student complaints; as one teacher stated, “crossing lines.” These concerns may be due in part to rules regarding the discussion of controversial topics (see IKB-R, CCSD, 2012; DeCrescio, 2006) that are somewhat ambiguous as literature teachers realize that many seminal and contemporary works containing racial content are required or recommended readings which by their very nature lead to controversial discussions.

Discussions of racism, as teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* found, are unavoidable in the literature classroom where most works have some level of controversy whether it is racial, cultural, political, religious, or a diverse range of values represented
in the public K-12 classroom. Subsequently, some teachers found that discussions of racism and other social injustices led to further topics also considered controversial, such as religion. An awareness of controversies related to discussions on religion, especially those that denigrate the dominant religion, can be very difficult for teachers to address (Kohli, 2008). In establishing background for a work of literature, it is often necessary to understand the beliefs of the people represented in that work and how these beliefs provide motive for actions and reactions to events. In doing so, teachers can face much opposition from not only their students who are products of their upbringing, but of course, their parents, and administration.

Studies (Brown, 2008; Roccas et al., 2006) conducted in areas that have a history of wrongs perpetrated against an oppressed group (i.e., genocide; slavery) have demonstrated that people within these areas have difficulty getting past historical wrongs. One of the difficult topics noted by teachers participating in Racial Dialogues is that many historical as well as recent wrongs are deeply rooted in religious beliefs (i.e., the Ku Klux Klan; Hitler; 911; bombings of abortion clinics; anti-Gay rights). Due to an awareness of this, some teachers involved in Racial Dialogues voiced discomfort in addressing these wrongs, but also felt conflicted in not doing so. These identified feelings are what LittleJohn (2006) described as intense moral conflict, as most teachers realize their responsibility in helping to raise the moral consciousness of students in their charge (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001).

In all the classes represented by the teachers participating in Racial Dialogues, American born Black students were the majority. In some cases as shared by two African American teachers, these students, perhaps feeling their place in the majority in these
classes presented what has been defined by many (Boysen et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2008-2010) as microaggression toward their White peers, thus causing them to feel uncomfortable with the class discussions. Even though the two African American teachers involved in the study strove to remain neutral in their stance, these students may have felt safe or empowered to voice their feelings, perhaps as suggested (Smith & Redington, 2010) due to the perception that if their teachers are Black, then they share anti-racist views, and thus may condone such behavior. However, as found in Sue et al.’s (2008, 2009, 2010) studies conducted primarily in teacher education programs, White teachers often feel they are too white to discuss race, or to confront racist views for fear of appearing ignorant; alternatively, Black teachers often fear accusations of racial militantism. Perhaps due to these concerns, many teachers participating in Racial Dialogues adopted a neutral stance, refusing to “take sides” in the guise of promoting what one teacher referred to as “universal truths.”

Teachers involved in Racial Dialogues all voiced awareness that they have within their classrooms children of parents who belong to organizations or groups, whose beliefs are contradicted by lessons that focus on racism and other social injustices. One teacher voiced conflict over providing comfort to a child who told of how she and her mother had been “kicked out” of a relative’s house because of their religion. This teacher stated she wanted to provide comfort, but did not wish to “take sides,” and that when it comes to these types of situations she prefers to “stick to universal truths.”

Within much of the American culture, there is an expectation of belonging to the dominant Christian religion. Kohli (2008) asserted that the expectation for persons of color to join or belong to the dominant [White] religion is another form of racism or
cultural discrimination. Kohli further asserted that many teachers of color in an effort to fit in, promote dominate views and unknowingly endorse the racist views of the dominant group. Most of the teachers involved in this study voiced conflict over how and when to address issues of such a controversial nature, one stating she was aware that parents would ask “Who is she to…..” However, as French et al. (2006) suggested it is during adolescence that a child begins developing a sense of ideology regarding political, societal, and religious matters; the classroom is the first place in which many children have the chance to experience exposure to diverse ideologies and gain the opportunity to compare these with those of his or her upbringing. Some (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008; Harding et al., 2001) have recognized teachers do have some level of responsibility into providing a safe environment where students can explore these values and compare them to their own, and even to those of their parents.

**Perceived challenge: Socio-political factors and other outside forces:** The impediments and instruments to the facilitation of racial dialogues. Recent studies found that high school literature teachers are often burdened with other tasks not related to the curriculum; therefore, finding time to plan for the teaching of multicultural literature is often a very low priority (Bolgatz, 2008; Lopez, 2011; Roberts, 2008). Additionally, Lopez as well as others (Agirdag et al., 2012; Banks, 2009; Carter & Forsyth, 2010; Diemer et al., 2006; McCarthy et al., 2007) asserted that concerns over socio-political stances of parents and even administration may have a negative influence on teacher confidence in facilitating racial dialogues in the classroom. These influences can create, as has been suggested (Kumashiro, 2000), an oppressive environment which has a direct bearing on what teachers teach and how they teach it.
Teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* agreed that time is always the largest factor in bringing in additional resources necessary to build background for racial or other controversial topics. Some offered that due to class size, demographics, student ability, and maturity levels that there was hesitancy involved in prompting discussions of a controversial nature. Additionally, all agreed socio-political factors, that either directly affect their students (i.e., immigration laws), or those that are simply most prominent in the media and politics (i.e., Trayvon Martin; Donald Sterling; President Obama) are influential on, and are often necessary to classroom dialogues on race and a range of topics.

Lopez (2011) stressed the importance of incorporating multicultural texts and sources into lessons, but also recognized that many teachers are most comfortable with cannons of literature, or what Roberts et al. (2008) referred to as stock stories. Teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* admitted that they did teach works with which they were more comfortable due to having taught them in prior years. Nevertheless, because of their participation in the study, they provided more by way of building historical and contextual background, as well as incorporating media of events that were more current to their lessons to lend support to the readings.

Another factor that many teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* voiced as a concern was that of upsetting some students who may have felt threatened by the discussions. As suggested by Roccas et al. (2006), an individual’s sense of historical self may have an impact upon reactions to discussions on racial and other social injustices. As teachers provided historical and contextual background for their selected novels, some students had negative reactions to what was presented in the classroom. These reactions
may have been instigated due to cognitive dissonance over information presented and what they have been taught at home. These reactions are consistent with assertions (French et al., 2006) that students of this age are still developing their sense of moral identity, and are subject to periods of conflict over right and wrong.

Some teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* voiced that teaching a work of literature that deals with certain wrongs can create an air of tension in the classroom when there are students from various backgrounds and cultures. For some events in history and the present, certain societal wrongs may have been justified by the teachings of religious texts, and even from modern pulpits, or from key political figures (Bernstein, Young, & Claypool, 2010; Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Kosloff, Greenberg, Schmader, Dechesne, & Weise, 2010). These justifications by persons or entities of authority may engender feelings of moral superiority over oppressed or wronged others (Roccas et al., 2006). In the high school setting, these feelings of moral superiority derived from belonging to a dominant group (Kohli, 2009) can lead to bullying or to more subtle assaults called microaggressions (Sue et al., 2009) in classroom discussions, or other psychological costs (Spainerman et al., 2009) to both teachers and students who experience dissonance over addressing these assaults.

While some teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues*, voiced hesitancy in openly expressing their own personal views on racism, others were quite open in their views on the topic. However, teachers used outside sources, historical documents, and even poetry from various sources outside the novel of instruction to aid students in making connections with racial events and themes as presented in the novel. Researchers agree
that in order to increase interest of students in literature classes, the literature must be relevant to their lives (Epstein et al., 2011; Halliday & Moses, 2013; Kerns, 2011).

Teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* may have found their students with a lower interest level, or inability to connect with Shakespeare’s Othello, or Black and White characters from depression era *Of Mice and Men* (Steinbeck, 1937) and *To Kill a Mockingbird* (Lee, 1960) had they not provided historical as well as contemporary resources to aid in making these connections. Some of the documentaries and news clips these teachers provided were controversial in nature, but as one teacher stated of an Obama and 50 Cent clip, she described as being about Black men in a game “not created for them”, “it was relevant.”

Rothschild (2003) asserted that the current socio-political structures in place are of importance when conducting racialized dialogues. However, race discussions pre-Obama brought different results. Pre-Obama teachers were not teaching children whose parents may have made a voting decision based upon race alone. This includes Blacks as well as Whites. Jeffries (2010) described the 2008 election “as a force that fosters conversations that cross academic boundaries, and cascade down from the ivory tower to newsrooms, living rooms, churches, and cafes below” (p. 404). Even though Rothschild conducted her study in the early 2000s, it lends proof to the reality as asserted by Bonilla-Silva (2010) that issues of race did not start nor end in 2008. As teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* voiced, they need not only the support of administration, but also, the collaborative support of one another in order to be successful in facilitation of difficult topics.
When teachers do not feel comfortable teaching accurate history and remaining authentic to literature, or honestly addressing current history in the making, then they are in essence “white-washing” American History (Jackson, 2010); they are not serving the best interest of their students. As asserted by some (Boysen et al., 2009), political correctness and a denial of the past may be more damaging to the learning environment, and to persons of color (Smith, 2008) than the more blatant forms of racism. Teachers participating in Racial Dialogues realize they have a responsibility to bridge the gap between history, literature, and current events; to do so they must feel a level of comfort and professional as well as personal support in their efforts (Bolgatz, 2005b; Lopez, 2011). With diverse student populations, there is a two way street; teachers cannot always teach or say what is in agreement with everyone’s value systems, religious, and political beliefs, rather as Lopez (2011) and Scarlett (2009) asserted we are to expose students to various socio-political systems, cultures, and beliefs in order to prepare them to be global citizens.

**Perceived challenge: The Socratic method of self-discovery: Assessing students’ level of racial and cultural awareness.** Teachers involved in Racial Dialogues found as prior researchers (Deimer et al., 2006; Roberts et al., 2008) have that oftentimes students, especially Black students, lack knowledge regarding the history of slavery, the Civil Rights Movement, and other key eras and figures in Black history. When students lack this foundation, it becomes the responsibility of their teachers to fill in these historical and literary gaps. With this responsibility often means taking personal as well as professional risks when attempting to fill in gaps left by former teachers and as found by Deimer et al., (2006) even students’ own families.
One means used by teachers participating in *Racial Dialogues* of avoiding personal conflict during classroom discussions of race was to incorporate the use of the Socratic seminar. Three teachers involved in the study found these to be empowering to students, and in the same sense keeping them on the periphery of the controversy. Socratic seminars are a means of taking teachers out of the limelight, and allowing students to share their thoughts, feelings, and opinions in an atmosphere where the teacher is facilitator rather than instructor (Alfonsi, 2008). Based upon the experiences of teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues*, the use of Socratic seminar is most effective with mature or advanced placement students. Two of the teachers incorporating use of Socratic seminar did so with juniors and seniors of both on-level and honors, while one teacher stated she introduced this method of discussion to her on-level sophomore class for the first time, stating she had never before attempted this due to behavior of her students. According to the sophomore teacher, the biggest challenge was in getting the students to follow the rules, which include taking turns speaking. She stated the students were so excited about the topic, that it was hard for them to wait their turn, however, once they became accustomed to the process the discussions went very well. She described this as an interesting and rewarding experience. Additionally, she found with her on-level students, she had to be more involved than she had when conducting seminars with her honors students, but that the students’ level of engagement was largely increased.

There are many factors contributing to the success or failure of classroom dialogues of any nature. Student maturity and ability seem to be positive factors, while younger, less mature students of lower ability a negative factor. Research studies in urban as well as suburban schools found that teachers of on-level classes, where Black
and Hispanic students are the majority, often do not attempt to engage their students in meaningful dialogue due to their (teachers’) perceptions of increased discipline problems with this population (Bolgatz, 2005b; Deimer et al., 2006; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008). As previously iterated, the classes represented in Racial Dialogues were comprised of the same demographics as represented in the above referenced studies; and while these teachers recognized the challenges presented in their classes, they found ways of engaging their students.

As noted three of the teachers, two African American teachers of juniors and seniors, and one White teacher of sophomores incorporated the use of Socratic seminars in their class discussions. Other teachers with students in the three classes where Socratic seminar was not employed stated this was due to such factors as maturity and behavior. None of these teachers attributed behavioral issues to the classroom demographic relative to race; however, all agreed that in honors level classes, which are primarily of the White demographic, even of the same grade level, having meaningful dialogue goes more smoothly.

Researchers have suggested that if students feel their teachers are not supportive or if the teacher lacks the skills to facilitate, or even mediate difficult classroom discussions relative to racial issues, then students are likely to have increased race-related stress (Davies, 2009; Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006; Kreyling, 2005; Smith & Redington, 2010). Race related stress has been found to be the cause of decreased academic success in children and adolescents (Reynolds et al., 2010), stress that may lead to increased social conflict (Boysen et al., 2009), a possible impetus to classroom disruptions and issues with discipline. What some teachers involved in Racial Dialogues
found, was that many White students found themselves in their classrooms as the minority, and some did react, one in my own classroom, in an aggressive manner causing disruption to instruction and class discussions.

Sometimes teachers will use behavior as an excuse for not incorporating classroom dialogues of a deeper nature with their students, or expanding the curriculum beyond the basic cannons of literature (Bolgatz, 2005b; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008). When students are considered unteachable due to behavior, and that behavior is in turn attributed to the demographic makeup of schools and classes, and advanced placement classes where the demographic makeup is largely White, are considered teachable, many schools adopt the tactic of rationing the curriculum (Agirdag et al., 2012; Kerns, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008). Students of color as well as their parents can perceive this as a more insidious form of segregation. For example, the school where Racial Dialogues was conducted is an AP (Advanced Placement), STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math) certified Magnet school, and as studies in other urban and suburban schools have found students in honors and advanced placement classes are predominately White and Asian, with very few Black or Latino students. Students not in these classes are in the on-level classes and often have teachers who are ill equipped to meet the needs of students of color who predominate these classes (Agirdag et al., 2012; Kerns, 2011; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008).

Advanced placement and honors level students exist in a completely different world from the on-level students taking courses in the regular curriculum. So do the teachers. Teachers of honors and AP students know that their students have been taught how to use higher order thinking skills; conversely, in order to pass the same end of
course exams as their advanced counterparts, on-level students as well as teachers are expected to simply rise to the task (Halladay & Moses, 2013). Often on-level students are passive in their learning and teachers find they run a teacher-centered classroom in order for any learning to occur (Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008). In a conversation with a fellow teacher of on-level students, she remarked that student-centered for on-level students usually means the students are “climbing the walls.”

Emerging demographic and social realities change what was once accepted practice in English classrooms. Lopez (2011) asserted students of non-White cultural backgrounds often suffer academically with literacy rates much lower than that of their White counterparts. Lopez, as well as others (Bolgatz 2005b; Ladson-Billings, 2005, Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008), believe this is due to a lack of multicultural pedagogy in classrooms in which the standard works of literature are British and White American writers, and these are taught rather than introducing newer and multicultural works. When teachers do not feel comfortable introducing multicultural works, or allowing their students to take a responsible role in classroom discussions, this places the responsibility of not only leading racial dialogues, but also oftentimes introducing the topics. This places teachers, rather than on the periphery, in the middle of controversial topics, thus increasing stress.

Teachers involved in Racial Dialogues who did not incorporate Socratic seminar into their classroom discussions did find themselves in the middle. Some reported finding ways of deflecting difficult questions or changing the topic when the discussions became too intense, and as a result experienced stress due to what LittleJohn (2006) called moral conflict in knowing they should not have avoided the topic. Alternatively,
others, while they allowed discussions to continue, found themselves stressed over
student reactions and concerned over potential parent complaints. Teachers clearly find
themselves caught between two opposing forces when it comes to this dilemma.
Researchers (Banks-Rogers, 2008; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008; Segal & Garrett,
2013) realize this dilemma, but also have recognized the dangers posed by the avoidance
of racial dialogues and suggested this avoidance further perpetuates the growing issue of
what some have phrased as “contemporary racism” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 337). Further
avoidance of these issues can lead to microaggressions in the classroom (Sue et al. 2008-
2010). However, when teachers do not have the professional training to conduct these
discussions, and have concerns of administrative backlash due to student and/or parent
complaints, they find themselves as teachers involved in Racial Dialogues did, feeling
conflicted and unsure.

Teachers involved in Racial Dialogues admitted they incorporated more resources
and prompted more racial discussions in their classes than they had done in the past due
to their participation in the study. These teachers voiced, as has been suggested by others
(Bolgatz, 2005b; Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008), the reason for failing to do so in the
past was due primarily to the time it takes to prepare for texts that are viewed as
alternative texts into a standardized curriculum upon which standardized tests are based.
As research supports (Halladay & Moses, 2013; Kearns, 2011), students from lower
socio-economic backgrounds are marginalized by these types of tests; they are also
marginalized in classrooms that “teach to these tests” rather than teaching to the students.

What teachers participating in Racial Dialogues found was that their students
were interested in what they, as teachers had to say, and that many students did learn to
listen to one another. The experience of these teachers supports Lopez’s (2011) as well as others’ (Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2005; Ladson-Billings & Brown, 2008; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2005) assertions that there is a relationship between pedagogy and critical literacy and increased academic achievement. All teachers, not just those who teach a literature course labeled “multicultural literature” must realize the importance of not just including, but infusing their curriculum with multicultural works and feel a level of comfort with ensuing discussions. In order for any sort of classroom discourse to be effective, the teacher has to take command and be the leader of the expedition to discovery. He or she should be able to comfortably draw cues from the reading and introduce those topics that will ignite interest and promote inquiry.

The perspective of student engagement as reported by these teachers involved in Racial Dialogues supports the theory that students thrive when exposed to learning relevant to their personal lives (Epstein et al., 2011; Halliday & Moses, 2013; Kerns, 2011). This holds especially true in literature classes where the readings must be relevant in order for students to maintain interest. It may well be that students in academic or advanced classes who are predominately White middle class excel academically as well as socially because the curriculum appears tailored for their lives, their worlds (Kearns, 2011). This provides further support for the need for racial and cultural dialogues in classes with students of diverse backgrounds, as asserted by Lopez (2011), when teachers strive toward culturally relevant pedagogy and critical literacy, students are empowered and teachers find themselves risk-takers.

Some teachers involved in Racial Dialogues admitted they are afraid to take risks with their students, and avoid straying outside the curriculum lines. Data collected from
teachers who were timid in their approach did not reflect as great a passion for the topic and there was little that was observed by way of students having a raised level of awareness. Whereas teachers who were more bold in their approach, although they spoke of emotions they experienced as a result of the classroom dialogues, reflected passion and an eagerness to take their experience in the study a step further. In the body of work produced by such researchers as Ladson-Billings (2005, 2009, 2013) there is consensus that when culturally relevant pedagogy informs literacy practices teachers take a more critical approach to include the cultural experiences of all students with the realization that literacy occurs in social, historical, and political contexts (Choules, 2007).

**Perceived Challenge: The audacity to be authentic: Making the vulnerable, venerable: Finding comfort within the discomfort of racial dialogues.** According to Lopez (2011) even when a teacher is racially and culturally aware, and may possess an intuitive ability to make connections, these are still conscious actions and a desire to affect change that “prompts reflection, transformation, and growth” (p. 80). This idea of reflection, transformation, and growth was vital to *Racial Dialogues* for this was the end goal of the project, for teachers to reflect upon how, why, and even why not when it comes to racial discussions in the classroom.

Although teachers participating in *Racial Dialogues* were able to provide their own definitions for what it means to be racially aware, and even though most were able to voice a level of confidence in their personal racial awareness, they each admitted to moments of discomfort, especially regarding the “n-word.” At times Black and White teachers recognized and were able to address these discomforts with their students; however, at other times there was evidence of deflection and minimizing of racial issues
as being in the past. As asserted by several (Bolgatz, 2005a, 2005b; Kohl, 2008; Lopez, 2011; Sue, Lin et al, 2009), awareness of racial issues and one’s own biases relative to race plays an important role in the dynamic of the classroom when racially and culturally sensitive discussions occur.

A review of the literature revealed various and often-conflicting theories as to why White teachers, especially, do not feel comfortable engaging in racial discourse with their students. Some propose these feelings of discomfort are due to a general lack of knowledge on issues of race; as a result, teachers have a fear of appearing either racist, ignorant, or both (Sue et al., 2008, 2009, & 2010). While others found some view racism as a thing of the past and feel if it exist today, it is outside and distinct from their lives (Boysen et al., 2009; Cobb-Roberts, 2011; Spanierman et al., 2009; Todd et al., 2010; Tummala-Nara, 2009). Teachers who lack racial awareness, or feel that racism is a thing of the past, may find themselves in extreme discomfort when students raise questions for which they either lack knowledge or feel uncomfortable answering.

Although White teachers involved in Racial Dialogues took somewhat of an activist stance in presenting historical and contextual background for the racial issues addressed in their novel of choice, some held to a view of “that was back then” and much of what was presented to their students addressed the past, rather than current issues of race. The projection of racism as a thing of the past could be due to some level of denial of race as an issue in our current society (Boysen et al., 2009; Segal & Garrett, 2013). Alternatively, as expressed by one African American teacher involved in Racial Dialogues, these could be due to discomfort associated with taking sides in socio-political debates. Political debates that in post-Obama America mean classroom
discussions of racism may involve addressing racist comments and actions directed
toward the president; what has been asserted as commonly held views in many areas
among some Whites (Bonilla-Silva, 2011; Walton et al., 2008), and spur feelings of
invalidation (Tummala-Narra, 2009) or the denying of the dream in Blacks (Ladson-Billings, 2009). According to some, the avoidance of discussions on current events
because it appears to be taking political sides (Walton et al., 2008) is cowardly (Ochoa,
2009) and harmful to students. When teachers do not voice their opposition to racism, no
matter to whom it is directed, they may be viewed as not having opposition, the results of
which are damaging to teacher-to-student relationships as well as student-to-student
relationships.

Based upon the findings of *Racial Dialogues* teachers who felt the least comfort
in discussing present day racism used tactics to divert the attention of the students back to
classwork or other topics. These teachers admitted to doing this due largely to
discomfort, or as one White teacher stated, being “a bit of a wimp” when it comes to such
discussions. Segal and Garrett (2013) sought to challenge the views that White teachers
avoid discussions of race due to a lack of knowledge, and found their assertions
confirmed when White student teachers participating in their study did not simply avoid
the topic of race, but rather used sophisticated maneuvers to ignore the topic. As one
White teacher participant in *Racial Dialogues* disclosed when the topic of race became
too uncomfortable or she was afraid students would “get out of hand,” she would divert
attention back to the novel reading by saying, “turn back to page ________,” or some
other means of changing the topic. Another White teacher stated that she did not wish to
appear biased by providing her opinion, so she would use examples outside the current situation in an effort to share what she called universal truths.

These teachers did not do these things due to a lack of personal racial awareness; each discussed an acute awareness of their whiteness and of being different from their students who are largely of color, with one White teacher openly admitting that she knows she fits the stereotype of White privilege. The decisions made by both Black and White teachers in this study were either to avoid, or to forge ahead in spite of intense discomfort. Each decision made due to an awareness of the ambiguities associated with controversial topics in public schools.

A sense of one’s own racial self does not guarantee an awareness of, or a comfort in discussing the racial realities of others. Segal and Garrett (2013) asserted that when a person claims a lack of awareness of racism, they are essentially saying they have not been affected by it personally. Segal and Garrett further asserted, that given the advent of the internet and mass media, in Western civilization for anyone to lay claim to a lack of awareness, or a denial of racism’s existence, past or present, is simply dishonest. The implications of Segal and Garrett’s study is that there may be a whole new population of teachers entering the public school system who through choice ignore the role race plays in many events occurring in past and recent history, and may in the process of ignoring race, also ignore the educational, cultural, racial, and personal needs of their students. This “ignore-ance” is a form of color-blind racism and according to some (Boysen et al., 2009) is more damaging to persons of color than blatant name-calling.

White teachers are not the only ones who feel discomfort in discussions of race. Sue and Torino et al. (2009) and Sue and Rivera (2011) explored the experiences of
White and Black faculty in university settings finding that these teachers faced both similar as well as unique challenges related to their respective race. Both African American teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* voiced differing levels of discomfort. While one initially denied feelings of discomfort, during the final interview she did admit there were certain times that she felt her race would make her appear biased toward the topic of racism. The other African American teacher voiced similar concerns in that she felt uncomfortable discussing interracial dating and marriages when these became topics in the classroom and students subsequently voiced their parents’ opposition to these. This teacher further stated she is careful in how she approaches controversial topics as “discussing race without thought or strategy can cause students to shut down or hesitate to share their truths.”

Studies conducted by university professors (Cobb-Roberts, 2011; Tummala-Narra, 2009) found that being of color can present a barrier to White students sharing their own experiences when discussing race and culture in the classroom. Both of these professors, African American and East Indian, respectively, found White students anticipated them taking sides with students of color in class discussions on race, and while they found themselves frequently feeling empathy for students of color who were often in the minority in these discussions, each voiced discomforts in expressing these feelings.

Kohli (2008) conducted a study with student teachers of color that was the parallel opposite of Segal and Garrett’s (2013) study with White student teachers. Participants in Kohli’s study were asked to share their experiences with racism or cultural discrimination and relate their experiences to how they would address issues of race or
cultural discrimination with their future students. These student teachers felt very strongly that they would not be afraid to address these issues because they had strong memories of how they felt as students in the classroom as well as socially. While the goal is for teachers to feel confident in discussing issues of race in the classroom, Kohli (2008) asserted Black teachers and teachers of other cultures who are not yet healed from their racial pasts can do more harm than good in the classroom. This could potentially be as harmful as Segal and Garrett suggested of White teachers who ignore racial realities and thus cause students of color to feel invalidated.

Todd et al. (2009) found that White students often do not feel comfortable voicing their thoughts on race, and as others (Spanierman et al., 2010; Tummala-Narra, 2009) found this can often create tension in the classroom for both teacher and students. Both African American teachers as well as White teachers involved in Racial Dialogues were aware of the few White students and students of other cultures in their classrooms, and while the topic was not meant to exclude anyone, they felt often that White or non-Black students were, as one teacher expressed, “on the fringes” in class discussions.

Based upon the findings of Racial Dialogues, it seems that the African American teachers were more aware of the White and non-black students’ discomfort than White teachers were. This could be because African American teachers are aware of what it feels like to be in the minority, alternatively, they may have simply been more aware of themselves and the appearance of taking racial sides in the class discussions. One African American teacher shared that in her classroom when White students denied that racism was a problem, that “of course” this upset the Black students who would often become very vocal. Based upon her accounts, she did not address the denial; she instead
allowed the students to debate the topic, as long as they allowed “each student’s voice to be heard.” She shared that she did not assert her views, but rather focused her attention upon students’ reactions.

Bonilla-Silva has long addressed the dangers in color-blind ideologies. Similarly, Boysen et al. (2009) and others (Spanierman et al., 2009; Sue et al., 2008; Sue, Capodilupo, & Holder, 2008), addressed these dangers and suggested that along with the verbal denial of color and bias there is possibly a greater danger posed by those who both see and hear, but say nothing, thus as Sue (2005) asserted, propagate racism through silence. None of these teachers would knowingly advance racism; however, they may due to their discomfort in addressing and confronting the denial of racism do just that.

As previously iterated, teachers who voiced the most confidence regarding parental/student complaints and support from their administration, also voiced the least confidence in themselves as risk-takers when it comes to the discussion of race or other social injustices in the classroom. As asserted by Lopez (2011), teachers who are risk-takers when it comes to multicultural texts and classroom discussions find their students of color feel empowered. However, when one group feels empowered, the inference therein is that another feels a loss of power.

A primary discomfort voiced by teachers involved in Racial Dialogues was that of student and/or parental complaints, and cited this as the reason for not voicing personal objections to racist views expressed by students – of color or White. It has been asserted by some (Boatright-Horowitz & Soeung, 2009; Cobb-Roberts, 2011), teachers of multicultural subjects may fear broaching topics of race or confronting racist and colorblind ideologies for fear of receiving unfavorable evaluations from their students.
This is of great concern to teachers in the public school system as these evaluations are considered in some districts as part of their performance evaluations.

Initiating discussions on difficult topics is an uncomfortable task for most anyone; for teachers in a public school setting, it can be even more so. However, based upon the findings of *Racial Dialogues*, those teachers who as Lopez (2011) demonstrated through her case study, took the risks appeared to experience personal as well as professional growth. Most of the teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* stated their involvement proved a positive experience for themselves, as well as for the students involved, whom teachers observed moved from disengaged, to discomfort, to hopefully the beginnings of disruption to previously held notions of race and culture.

**Recommendations**

 Teachers involved in *Racial Dialogues* found they faced many challenges in their classrooms relative to racially and culturally themed texts, supporting resources, and the discussions that evolved from these. Additionally, there were issues from forces outside the classroom dynamic affecting comfort level in the ability to facilitate racial and cultural dialogues. Following are recommendations posited based upon the experiences of these teachers.

**Collaboration, support, ongoing education, and the future.** As Lopez (2011) and others (Bolgatz, 2005b; Roberts et al., 2008) asserted, teachers need to have time built into their days to plan lessons around multicultural works. In addition to multicultural literature, it is important that teachers also select and feel comfortable with discussions of works that address relative social injustices (Diemer et al., 2006; French et al., 2006) and they need to be able to collaborate and form, as cited by Lopez “critical
friends” in order to support and share resources with one another. Additionally, teachers need ongoing education relative to diverse student populations, yet few programs exist (Lopez, 2011). Burton et al. (2010) acknowledged a need to increase critical race studies into the public K-12 settings to meet burgeoning demographic needs. However, research in public K-12 settings will only be successful if school districts and their administration are willing to improve their efforts in order to meet the needs of their teachers, who in turn must meet the needs of their diverse classrooms.

**Administrative support and confidence in teachers.** Teachers voiced a lack of overall confidence in support by their administration in the event of parental and/or student complaints, as evidenced by their acute awareness of being public school teachers, and of the ambiguities associated with district strictures relative to controversial topics. Teachers may have more confidence in how their administration would support them in these instances if they felt the confidence of their administration in them as teachers. Administration should trust their teachers, who by their very definition are expected to be ethical human beings operating upon the best interests of the children under their instruction and guidance (Cochran-Smith & Demurs, 2008). As such, teachers have awareness that they are not only instructors of standards-based curriculum, but also moral models for the students who occupy seats in their classrooms on a daily basis.

**Ongoing diversity awareness and teacher education programs.** Administration may lack trust in their teachers when it comes to the discussion of controversial topics such as racism and other social injustices, because they are themselves unsure of how to interpret rulings on these topics, and they themselves lack racial and cultural awareness.
Additionally, as found in prior studies (Lopez, 2011; Roberts et al., 2008) many districts fail to provide ongoing training and professional development of both teachers and administration to meet the growing needs of diverse schools and classrooms. Many schools feel they are promoting inclusion and diversity if they hold cultural fairs allowing students to wear their cultural garments, display art, music, dance, and food. Embracing diversity goes beyond these things; inclusion is more than recognizing religious holidays and customs of “others.” As Boysen et al. (2009) argued in reference to universities’ attempts to embrace diversity, they feel they have met their obligation by holding training workshops and implementing inclusion policies. As Boysen further offered, it is as if no one seems to know what the next step is; however, some have asserted that meeting the needs of growing diverse communities and workplaces begins in the public school classrooms (Burton et al., 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2005), and teachers need ongoing education to meet these needs.

**Expansion of studies.** It is important that further studies be conducted in elementary through high school public school settings from not only the perspective of teachers, but also from students to explore their perceptions and experiences with difficult racial and cultural dialogues. Additionally, this study should be expanded into social studies classrooms where history, different cultures, political systems, and differing religions are taught and thus may result in difficult classroom dialogues.

**Conclusions**

The findings of this study are consistent with the research questions for the study in that secondary literature teachers explored challenges faced during the facilitation of difficult racial dialogues, as well as challenges associated with outside influences such as
parental complaints or administrative concerns relative to the instruction of literature wherein racism is the topic. Based upon the findings of this study, teachers experienced varying degrees of discomfort related to the facilitation of racial dialogues. These levels of discomfort may be due in part to teachers’ level of racial awareness, as well as an awareness of the influence of socio-political factors that are often controversial, yet relevant to the topic of instruction, in addition to a lack of clarity regarding topics considered “taboo” in the public school setting.

A key factor identified in this study was that of the time it takes to prepare lessons that stray outside the traditional cannons of literature; teachers not only need more time to prepare lessons associated with literature that focuses on race and culture, they need the support of collaboration with other teachers. Maturity and intellectual ability of students did seem to be a factor in the success of students taking a responsible role in discussing race and other controversial topics. This is not to suggest that teachers should not broach relevant topics with less mature or less academically inclined students; however, teachers of these students may need even more support and collaboration than teachers who teach more mature and academically advanced students.

Additionally, heuristic analysis of the data indicated that teachers who take more risks in the classroom relative to discussions of race might have a higher level of student engagement, but also potentially face more discomfort relative to concerns of parent and/or student complaints and resulting administrative action. While teachers, who take fewer risks relative to racial dialogues, may have decreased concerns regarding parent and/or student complaints, student engagement may also be lower; subsequently, some teachers recognized discomfort relative to their failure to address issues. Finally, while
teachers who voiced taking fewer risks were more confident in the support of administration relative to student and/or parent complaints than their counterparts who reported taking more risks, they voiced that fewer incidents of parent and/or student complaints may be due to their taking a more conservative approach when it comes to controversial discussions.
References


Chapter DOI: 10.4135/978-1-41297-617-6.n14


Appendixes
Appendix A: Initial Online Interview Questions

Initial interview questions address basic demographic information (i.e., name, age, race/ethnicity, years teaching in a *secondary environment) as well as the following open-ended responses to determine racial awareness and prior experiences in the facilitation of difficult racial dialogues:

1) What does it mean to be racially aware? 2) How comfortable are you relative to teaching a work of literature in which race and racial injustices are the topic? 3) Describe a time when you felt uncomfortable discussing race in the classroom. 4) To what degree do you feel supported by your administration in relation to parental concerns regarding the discussion of race and other sensitive topics in the classroom?

*Only secondary literature teachers will be recruited for this study.
Appendix B: Daily Journal Guide

The purpose of the daily journal is to provide each participant’s personal and subjective account of lived experiences leading secondary students in discussions involving the topic of race. There is no script of questions, merely guidelines as the responses should provide an authentic account from teachers’ perspective and not be orchestrated in any way.

Items to include in daily journal:

1. Subjective as well as objective observations of classroom discussions.

2. End of week summary of events to provide a retrospective account of daily entries.

3. Copies of any collected student written work that caused discomfort or otherwise provided insight into students’ level of comfort. Note: Teachers are to write a response to these entries. Remove or cover any information that would identify student by name.

4. Copies of emails or a narrative of correspondences or discussions held outside the classroom with students, parents, administration, colleagues, or any other parties as related to classroom discussions. Note: Teachers are to write a response to these entries. Remove or cover any information that would identify any corresponding parties by name.

5. Copies of any other materials collected (notes, doodles, etc.,) pertaining to classroom discussions. Note: Teachers are to write a response to included entries. Remove any information that would identify owner of items by name.
Appendix C: Online Weekly Discussion Guide

The online discussion questions are intended to be a guide for discussion and are expected to lead to discovery. Note: Question type and order will depend upon the number of weeks spent on the novel or unit of study.

Week 1:

1) What novel or unit of study did you introduce to your students involving racial content?

2) What if anything did you do to provide historical and contextual background prior to beginning the text?

Week 1 and Subsequent Weeks:

3) How would you describe your level of comfort in discussing issues of race related to events or language in your selected text?

4) How would you describe your level of comfort in discussing how these events or language from the selected text relate to race related current and actual events involving? Note: these can be news related items or personal to the students.

5) How would you describe the reactions of students discussions related as they relate to the topic of race?

6) How would you describe your level of comfort in addressing issues as they arise?

7) Describe your level of comfort regarding administrative or parental concerns regarding the racial context and content of class discussions.
Final Week:
  8) Reflecting back to Week 1, you were asked the following question: What if anything did you do to provide historical and contextual background prior to beginning the text? What is your perception of how this affected the discussion of race in the classroom?
Appendix D: Final Interview Guide

The final interview questions are designed to explore teachers’ interpretation of students’ affective reactions as well as teachers’ response or intervention on the following levels: (a) overall emotional response to explicitly addressed racially and culturally sensitive themes, (b) the degree to which awareness and establishment of contextual background affected students’ openness to the material provided, (c) the degree of comfort or discomfort associated with discussing racially sensitive themes in a diverse group setting, (d) the degree to which this experience increased awareness of students’ racial and cultural biases, (e) the degree to which teachers’ effectively mediated potential discomforts and perceptions of student reactions to mediation, and (f) what and how outside factors, such as parental communication or administrative concerns, affected teachers’ overall comfort level in the effective facilitation of classroom dialogues.