

**YOUTH SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT INSIDE AND OUTSIDE OF THE  
CLASSROOM: MAKING SENSE OF VARYING PERSPECTIVES AND  
OPPORTUNITIES**

By

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## **ABSTRACT**

Youth Sociopolitical Development Inside and Outside of the Classroom: Making  
Sense of Varying Perspectives and Opportunities

Ira Emil Murray, M.Ed.

In this dissertation, I focus on students' opportunities to engage in sociopolitical development both inside and outside of school. I focus on adolescent (age 13 to 19) students of color, particularly Black<sup>1</sup> students. I interrogate what is known in the extant literature about how youth develop their sociopolitical consciousness and inclinations to engage in social action (chapter two), teachers' beliefs about engaging students in dialogues about critical social issues (chapter three), students' perceptions about how educators can support their development into engaged social actors (chapter four).

Findings from chapter two indicate that to be successful in helping youth develop their sociopolitical consciousness, educators should attend to three domains of sociopolitical development – critical reflection, sociopolitical motivation, and transformative social action – in ways that acknowledge the intersectional nature of all three components. In chapter three, I found that the racial composition of classrooms, rather than the racial identification of the teacher, was related to teachers' beliefs about discussing racial violence with students. And, furthermore, teachers who reported believing in talking about racial violence with students seemed less concerned about inviting emotional conversations into the classroom than non-believers, were attentive to students' interests in having these conversations, and valued the experiential

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<sup>1</sup> I use the term Black to represent people of African descent. I recognize that Black encompasses numerous distinct ethnicities and cultural identities.

knowledge students of color possess as legitimate sources of data to be examined. In chapter four, findings indicated that adults can support the sociopolitical development of Black youth by creating mutually supportive environments, providing opportunities for youth to have their voices heard, and supporting holistic development of youth beyond their sociopolitical aims. This dissertation demonstrates the need for broader ecological considerations of youth sociopolitical development, in-depth interrogations of how educators' beliefs shape opportunities for youth to engage around critical social issues, and deeper strategies to help educators integrate support for youth sociopolitical development into their professional practices.

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## **1.0 INTRODUCTION**

During the summer of 2016, I co-facilitated with Dr. Rich Milner a one-day seminar with seven middle and high school students and their four undergraduate mentors through a Center for Urban Education program that provided tutoring and mentoring for students in a local 6-12 public school. In this session, Dr. Milner and I posed questions to the students pertaining to how they perceived social issues that impact their families, communities, and themselves as well as their perceptions of which adults in their schools and communities they could look upon for leadership in addressing social issues. As some of the students seemed to struggle to name adults upon who they could rely as well as name some of the broader social issues negatively affecting their lives, Dr. Milner and I were stunned at what appeared to us to be their lack of knowledge of – or lack of comfortability with discussing – these matters (Ready to Learn Summer Institute, 2016). A few weeks later, we met with the four mentors in the session to reflect upon this experience with the students. As we asked the mentors about their interpretations of the event, one exchange between Lindsay – a White female mentor – and Dr. Milner especially stood out to me:

Lindsay: I remember, this summer at the seminar, Kisha [pseudonym] brought up these issues. I think, like, she knew what's up with social justice pretty much. I mean, I never did – not 'til I got to college. And, you know, like she's living it. But some of the other kids, they seemed just as in the dark as I was, you know what I mean?

Dr. Milner: I wonder, too, if they were, like, oblivious to it or if they just were not used to engaging in conversations that way?

Lindsay: That's why I think the nudge is important occasionally, because they're important issues to talk about.

This conversation made me wonder, *are educators not engaging students in conversations about social issues in school?* If not, why would educators choose not to engage students in this way, especially given the multitude of stories about racial violence and social injustice across both mainstream and social media outlets (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Hill, 2016; Milner, 2017). Was Lindsay's personal reflection of being “in the dark” (no pun intended) about social justice issues indicative of a more general situation in schools where students are not being exposed to societal issues related to race and justice? What role do teachers play in cultivating justice-centered discourses with students to enhance their knowledge, understanding and consequently their discursive participation on difficult issues? What role might teachers’ or students’ race play in opportunities for students to critically engage issues of race, racism, and White supremacy? This dissertation is an attempt to begin to answer such questions. Using a three-article dissertation (TAD) format, this dissertation centers on whether, how, and why adults can and do create sociopolitical development opportunities for youth of color, generally, and Black youth in particular. In the following section, I outline the purpose and format of the proposed TAD with more specificity.

## **1.1 PURPOSE OF THE DISSERTATION**

This proposed three article dissertation (TAD) focuses on students' opportunities to engage in sociopolitical development centered on race, racism, and White supremacy, both inside and outside of school. I focus on adolescent (age 13 to 19) students of color, particularly Black<sup>2</sup> students. I focus on this specific age group because decades of research on adolescent development has found adolescence to be a time when individuals begin to explore and examine psychological characteristics of the self in order to discover who they really are and how they fit in the social world in which they live (Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Researchers have posited that adolescence is a good developmental stage in which to study sociopolitical development (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002) in part because of the vast individual and ecological changes characteristic of this stage, in addition to the increased contribution to their own development that many youth make during this period (Lerner et al., 2011). Furthermore, adolescence is a period where identity and cognitive development intensifies for many youth, enabling them to better understand how they are situated in larger social systems (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). I focus primarily on the experiences of youth of color, particularly Black youth, because these students experience some of the most severe educational and social inequities resulting in schooling experiences that often underserve far too many of them (Howard, 2010; Milner, 2015). Lastly, I center race in this examination of youth sociopolitical development because I believe, as I will illustrate below, that the schooling and educational experiences of Black youth are a result of centuries of compounding public policies that have created educational and economic opportunities for White children and their families at

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<sup>2</sup> I use the term Black to represent people of African descent. I recognize that Black encompasses numerous distinct ethnicities and cultural identities.

the expense of most Black children and families (Feagin, 2000). Thus, I agree with bell hooks (1994) and other critical scholars who regard education as a “practice of freedom” and I position critical examinations of the social construction of race and systems of racism and White supremacy as central to education (both inside and outside of school) as a liberatory practice.

## **1.2 MY POSITIONALITY AS A RESEARCHER**

I am Black. I am African-American. I am male and a man. I am a son, brother, husband, and father. I am middle-class and well-schooled. I am a critical theorist. I am a survivor of White supremacy. I am a recovering hetero-patriarch. These “I am” statements are not merely descriptors; they are the foundation of my positionality as a researcher. I agree with Janesick's (1994) assertion that “there is no value-free or bias-free design. The qualitative researcher early on identifies his or her biases and articulates the ideology or conceptual frame for the study” (p. 212). Qualitative researchers of any paradigmatic provenance understand that research is ideologically driven. The worldview, values and biases of researchers carry through the entirety of the research experience, including the research design, knowledge creation, and representation (Muhammad et al., 2015), and color every decision researchers make and interaction researchers have with co-collaborators and, most importantly, participants. The understanding, acknowledgement of, and critical reflection upon researchers' worldviews and biases constitutes researchers' *positionality*. That researchers have a critical understanding of how they are positioned within their research is imperative because researchers' backgrounds greatly influence their knowledge construction (Banks, 1998). This point is especially important in research involving diverse and historically oppressed communities because of the possibility that

researchers bring to their work potentially hegemonic and oppressive ideological conceptions that may serve to further marginalize these communities (Adamson & Donovan, 2002). Therefore, researchers must consider several important aspects of their positionality, including: emic and etic perspectives, how positionality shapes research, and reflexivity (Hopkins, 2007).

The study of researcher positionality is heavily based upon understanding the locus of the researcher or interpreter in relation to the participants and context of the study. Building upon the insights of Clifford Geertz (1983), Denzin (1994) argued that there are two types of interpreters – local and scientific. The local interpreter (researcher) – the insider or emic – uses words and meanings (“experience-near concepts”) of the world under study. Conversely, the scientific interpreter – the outsider or etic – uses “experience-distant” terms that lie within the interpreter’s own paradigm or theoretical orientation. Thus, etic interpretations become “abstract” and lack participants’ context.

To consider researchers of different racial, cultural, or other backgrounds than their participants to be outsiders and researchers of similar backgrounds as their participants to be insiders would be to overly simplify the spectrum of possible relationships researchers have with their participants. Researchers embody a multitude of positionalities that can emerge depending upon the context of the research. Building upon Robert K. Merton’s and Patricia Hill Collins’s problematization of the dichotomous conceptualization of the emic-etic perspectives, Banks (1998) developed a typology of cross-cultural research that complicated the insider-outsider concept. Banks noted that researchers could, depending on the time, context, or situation, hold one of four different positions vis-à-vis their research context, including:

- The *indigenous insider*: a researcher who is indigenous to the community/cultural context of her research and embraces the epistemological and cultural norms of the community and is seen by those within the community as a legitimate member.
- The *indigenous outsider*: a researcher who is indigenous to the community but does not embrace the norms of that community and/or is not seen as a legitimate member of the community by community members.
- The *external insider*: a researcher who is not indigenous to the community and was acculturated in a different context but, nevertheless, is “adopted” by the community because she endorses the norms of the community under study.
- The *external outsider*: a researcher who is from and was acculturated in a different community, does not embrace the norms of the community under study, and, therefore does not understand or appreciate the studied community.

Banks's typology underscores important concerns of researcher positionality. For instance, Banks illustrates that researchers must *know* and be conscious of their own paradigmatic orientations and how those orientations shape their interactions with participants and communities. This knowledge of self includes an understanding of how the dynamic, changing nature of positionality; that sex, race or other categories are shaped by shared meanings and practices within specific historical or power contexts (Muhammad et al., 2015).

Furthermore, researchers must also be conscious of the values, norms, beliefs, and culture of participants and their communities. Third, the researcher should subsequently be aware of how they are “read and interpreted” (Hopkins, 2007, p. 387) by participants and their communities.

To address the above mentioned positionality concerns, Milner (2007) proposed a framework to help researchers become more cognizant of how their positionalities (paradigmatic

orientations, cultures, and experiences) might shape their research in and with culturally and racially diverse communities. Centralizing issues of race, racism, and culture, Milner provided a conceptual tool for researchers that would enable them to avoid “dangers seen, unseen, and unforeseen” that might do further, albeit unintentional, harm to historically marginalized communities. Milner delineated this framework in four components, outlined below:

- a) Researching the self: researchers engage in evolving and emergent critical race and cultural self-reflection, consisting of researchers posing “racially and culturally grounded questions about themselves.” (p. 395)
- b) Researching the self in relation to others: researchers acknowledge the varying roles, identities and positions they and their participants bring to the research
- c) Engaged reflection and representation: co-reflection by researchers and participants about what is happening, centering race, culture, representation, and shared experiences
- d) Shifting from self to system: researchers develop a more contextualized consciousness, taking into consideration policy, institutional, systemic, and collective issues that impact people and communities of color

The Milner framework problematizes notions of detachment and “objectivity” in research with communities of color, instead prioritizing researchers developing a holistic understanding of how their positionalities shape the questions they pose, their interactions with communities, their conceptualizations of social phenomena, and knowledge construction. This framework is designed to assist researchers in acknowledging, appreciating, and valuing the voices of communities of color through critical reflection. Summarily, it is important for researchers to be reminded that positionality is in large part about the power the researcher holds in the research

process. The negotiation and sharing of that power, particularly when working with historically marginalized communities, is an ethical imperative (Maxwell, 2012).

I am a son of the south. I grew up in an all-Black, middle and working class community in Columbia, SC and lived the first 34 years of my life in urban, southern cities. I grew up during an era where crack cocaine and the spread of HIV and AIDS ravaged Black communities across the country. Race and class have been front and center in my personal and professional development since my earliest memories of attending an Afrocentric day care and preschool. My best friend, James, and I would write rap songs about Black history and the Black experience in the second grade. I attended all-Black public schools for 14 of my 16 years of elementary school through the completion of my undergraduate degree. I witnessed one of my best friends, Steve, be abandoned by our public school system for smoking cigarettes and marijuana, despite being an honor student with an SAT score of over 1300 and scholarship offers to multiple universities (he ultimately died while executing a botched robbery at age 17). Brandon, another of my best friends, was beaten by two White police officers in a major southern city during the summer before our senior year of college. Experiences such as these foreground my research on the sociopolitical development experiences of Black youth. I embarked upon this research wanting to know how adult allies can help young people of today make sense of the broader systemic and institutional elements of social issues like inequitable educational opportunities and police brutality. I bring these experiences and interests to my research and remain cognizant of the fact that they influence how I see the world and wish the world to be. My background is critical to this research. My lens as a racial being who has had to make sense of my own racialized experiences were invaluable to this dissertation and allowed me to explain the richness of the data presented throughout.

### **1.3 RATIONALE OF THE DISSERTATION**

In my three-plus years in Pittsburgh, I have met and worked with multiple community-based programs that focus on youth sociopolitical development. During these three years, I have learned from adults and youth in these programs about how young people and their adult allies engage issues of racism and social injustice. This work helped inform my own research on the pedagogical principles adults in youth sociopolitical development contexts employ (Murray & Milner, 2015) as well as why some adults chose to work with and mentor youth activists (Murray, 2017). I have learned through my relationships and research that youth are indeed conversing with one another about issues of race and justice. I was privy to multiple conversations about race, racism, hegemony, and White supremacy at two recent local youth-led convenings, for instance. Given the engagement of young people around these issues and the personal narratives they shared, I learned that youth are conversing with each other in ways that might be helping them process and make sense of their racialized experiences. However, it remains unclear what factors coalesce to create sociopolitical development opportunities for youth. In other words, what sociopolitical “resources” exist that educators could pull from to better engage students in sociopolitical consciousness development, particularly as it pertains to issues of race, racism, and White supremacy? For educators who are reticent to engage students in ways that help students develop a) a critical lens through which to view racial injustices and b) orientations toward acting to address these issues – what Roderick Watts and colleagues (2003) termed *sociopolitical development* – why might educators not endeavor upon this work? Specifically, what role might educators’ beliefs about broaching these topics in the classroom play?

**My search of the literature revealed no syntheses of studies that uncovered and explicitly examined various spheres of sociopolitical influence that come together to create opportunities for young people to develop their sociopolitical consciousness.** By spheres of sociopolitical influence, I am referring to various environments, relationships, and experiences that contribute to youth developing sociopolitical consciousness. For instance, from where do youth receive messages about society, particularly social systems that perpetuate oppression? What people (peers, teachers, family members, etc.) are instrumental in youth sociopolitical consciousness development? What cultural resources do youth utilize? Studies that examine spheres of sociopolitical influence could inform teaching practice by illuminating different ecological, relational, educational, and/or experiential factors from which educators could draw in their work. Furthermore, race, racism, and White supremacy remain largely elusive constructs in YSD research. Indubitably, much of the sociopolitical development literature centers the experiences of youth of color from historically oppressed groups, particularly Black and Brown youth. My critique, therefore, does not center on the inclusion of youth of color. Rather, the heart of my critique centers on what I view as the undertheorization of the role(s) race, racism, and White supremacy play in the field. Thus, this dissertation contributes to the field of education by examining, from an ecological view, what resources, relationships, and experiences youth draw from to build sociopolitical consciousness as well as the role(s) that race might play.

### **1.3.1 Sociopolitical (Consciousness) Development**

Sociopolitical consciousness entails the development of knowledge, skills, attitudes, beliefs, and dispositions that enables one to critically analyze and act to address oppressive social conditions (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Critical theorist Paulo Freire (1970) termed pedagogies that

help students raise their critical awareness of adverse social conditions and inclinations toward social action to address those issues as *conscientizacão*. The extant literature on sociopolitical development outlines at least four central tenets, including: 1) critical reflection and analysis; 2) collective solidarity with oppressed people; 3) a sense of political efficacy to affect sociopolitical change; and 4) social action toward transforming oppressive conditions (Murray & Milner, 2015; Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). Adopting Watts, Diemer, and Voight's (2011) descriptions, *critical reflection* refers to consciousness, critical analysis, and refutation of inequitable sociopolitical conditions, resulting from "an analysis of the structural causes of racial/ethnic, socioeconomic, and gendered disparities in health, well-being, educational attainment, wealth, and other domains" (p. 47). *Political efficacy* refers to a person's perception of their individual or collective ability to enact sociopolitical change. Additionally, according to Ginwright and James (2002), centralizing and developing *collective identity* is critical in youth SPD. The authors referred to identity as "complex ways that young people...identify themselves, as well as how they are seen by the larger society (p. 36), noting that identity is often the basis upon which power and privilege are distributed. By identifying with a larger collective, youth have the potential to leverage social capital through shared identity in ways that can increase ability to fight for social change. The fourth element of SPD involves *sociopolitical action*. Sociopolitical action refers to participation in social action as a result of feelings of efficacy regarding one's ability to be an agent of change (Watts, Diemer, and Voight, 2011).

Although race is not presented in the literature as a central tenet of sociopolitical development, in a society built upon the social construction of race operationalized as a tool to oppress people of color, I assert that examinations of race and systems of racism and White supremacy are central to the development of consciousness around the systemic and institutional

nature of social injustice. According to Watts (2004), sociopolitical development is increasingly important for Black youth because it “is relevant to the question of developing an activist orientation and its links to racial identity theory, political socialization, intergroup theory, moral development, and youth civic engagement” (p. 861). That is, it is important to understand sociopolitical development as a critical process in connecting and helping to foster several other developmental realms that coalesce to build activist orientations in Black youth. This coalescence was illustrated by Diemer and Hsieh (2008), who presented four elements of sociopolitical development specifically for youth of color in lower-income communities. These four components include:

- a) An awareness of and motivation to change social and economic inequality (Ginwright & James, 2002),
- b) A growing recognition of the connection between external sociopolitical events/issues and one's own life (Watts & Flanagan, 2007),
- c) A motivation to help others in one's community (Watts et al., 1999), and
- d) The expression of this motivation to reduce sociopolitical inequity through participation in community/social-action groups (Morsillo & Prilleltensky, 2007). (p. 259)

Again, while race was not central in Diemer and Hsieh’s (2008) description, it is clear that sociopolitical development for youth of color in the U.S. context is firmly rooted in the historical struggles of people against racism and White supremacy. For example, (Watts & Flanagan, 2007) explicitly connected youth sociopolitical development in the U.S to the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. During that summer, nearly 1,000 children and youth (in addition to over 1,000 adults) attended one of 41 “freedom schools” in which Black (and White) students were exposed to a curriculum centered on critically analyzing the systemic and institutional nature of racism and

oppression, understanding the “real world” ramifications of racial oppression, and studying nonviolent social movements (Payne, 1997). Students “graduated” from these “schools” equipped with skills to critically engage and fight against racial oppression.

### **1.3.2 Teachers’ Beliefs about Race**

Teacher education literature has provided an extensive and significant corpus of examples of various ways in which teachers’ beliefs shape their interactions with students, including teachers’ decision-making and instructional practices (Eisner, 1994), development of curriculum practices that are both culturally relevant (Ladson-Billings, 2009) and responsive (Gay, 2010), cultural competence (Banks, 2015), expectations of students (Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001) and engagement with historical and contemporary race-related issues (Milner, 2010b, 2015). Educators’ beliefs about race, in particular, can shape their attitudes about and dispositions toward engaging, critically, around sociopolitical issues (Banks & Banks, 1995; Howard, 2010). Understanding attitudes and dispositions about critically engaging sociopolitical issues is especially important because many sociopolitical issues are directly or indirectly shaped by racism and White supremacy (Feagin, 2000; hooks, 1994). In my analysis of data derived from the Milner, Delale-O’Connor, Murray, and Alvarez Teachers and Race Talk Survey (TRTS; 2016), I learned that an overwhelming majority of educators in the study (77%) claimed to be racially aware in that they said they believe race is salient in their students’ educational experiences and believe race is important to discuss and should be discussed between teachers and students in the classroom. However, fewer educators (67%) believed that they should engage students in conversations around racial violence as it pertains to the killing of Black males at the hands of White citizens or police officers. Conversely, young people are having these (racial violence) conversations with

and amongst each other and adults in outside of school spaces. Moreover, many youth are participating in various sociopolitical demonstrations and protests, including #BlackLivesMatter rallies in urban centers across the country. For many youth, critically examining racial violence may be part of their sense making about broader issues of race and racism as evidenced by their willingness to engage dialogical with others about various racial killings in their local communities and nationally.

How, then, do educators in both inside and outside of school contexts create environments wherein young people engage in critical conversations about race, racism, and other salient sociopolitical issues? As Ladson-Billings (2014) lamented in her *Harved Education Review* article reflecting upon the two decades since she first introduced her culturally relevant pedagogy framework, it is evident that many teachers are not engaging students in ways that are directed toward building students' sociopolitical consciousness. This absence may be due, in part, to curricular demands and constraints faced by educators within public schools (Bianca J Baldridge, Hill, & Davis, 2011), teachers' obliviousness to the outside of school factors that shape their students' experiences (Milner, Murray, Farinde, & Delale-O'Connor, 2015), or teachers lacking the cultural competence to attend to the developmental needs of culturally and racially diverse students (Zion, Allen, & Jean, 2015). It remains unclear, however, what potential roles educators' beliefs play in many educators' disinclinations toward engaging students in racial violence conversations. For educators who do engage these conversations, from what experiences do they draw to inform their beliefs and approaches? To answer these questions, Chapter 2 of this dissertation investigates relationships between educator's beliefs about race in the classroom and their beliefs about engaging students in racial violence discussions. I use engaging students around issues of race/racism awkward wording as a proxy

for sociopolitical development given the pervasiveness of race as a social construct and racism as a sociopolitical reality (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Milner, 2015; Omi & Winant, 1994) in the lives of Black youth.

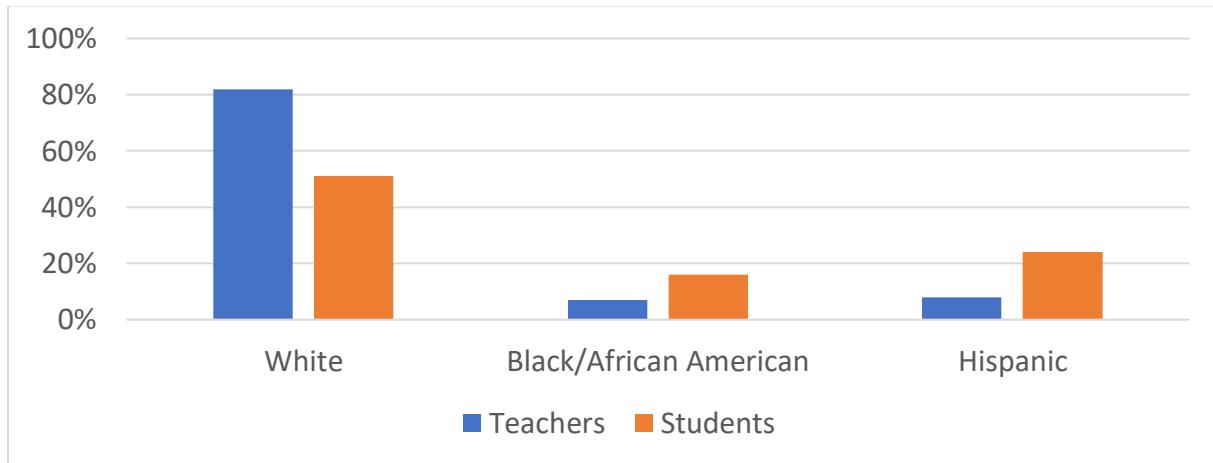
### **1.3.3 Studying Sociopolitical Development Opportunities**

Critical scholars argue that education for Black, Brown, and indigenous students should focus, in large part, on students becoming knowledgeable of and empowered to fight against systems of oppression (Jeffrey Michael Reyes Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; hooks, 1994; Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). Freire (1970) emphasized that although students should be empowered to counter oppressive structures, they must also be able to operate within these systems in order to change them. Such arguments are grounded in critical and post-colonial traditions exemplified by the sociological research of W.E.B. Du Bois (1903:2008) and the psycho-social theories of Frantz Fanon (1963), both who argued that oppressed people (particularly Black people) in societies dominated by White, western European colonizers often develop a “dual” or “double” consciousness wherein they are forced to negotiate conflicting perceptions of themselves as dehumanized and culturally deficient (views of the oppressor) and fully humanized and agential (views of the oppressed). Black (2007) argued that unilateral double consciousness, where only the oppressed recognize both views, is inherently harmful and perpetually oppressive. On the other hand, multilateral double consciousness, where oppressors develop the ability to see their racial positions from the perspectives of people of color, can create opportunities for critical interracial dialogue.

Studying sociopolitical development opportunities, including how they might be developed and instituted, is important to the development of Black youth (and Brown youth for that matter)

for several reasons. First, there currently exists a racial mismatch between the P-12 teaching workforce and students in the classroom. According to the U.S. Department of Education (2016), White teachers comprise over 80% of the public school teacher workforce while White students comprise only about half of all students (see Table 1). Because U.S. public schools are chiefly organized around and perpetuate White, middle class social norms (Anyon, 1980; Milner, 2010b), the overwhelming whiteness of the teaching force juxtaposed against the increasing diversity of the student body can coalesce to produce environments wherein the various cultural wealth (Banks, 2015; Yosso, 2005) and sociopolitical wisdoms (Carmen et al., 2015) students of color possess based, in part, upon their racialized experiences may become marginalized as a result of many teachers not understanding or appreciating the importance of these racialized experiences in the lives of their students and the need to discuss them in the classroom. Second, the threat of racial violence against Black people is omnipresent in U.S. society and, therefore, should be discussed with youth. In 2016 alone, there were over 1700 hate crime incidents perpetrated against 2200 Black Americans in the U.S. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). These figures represent approximately half of the racially motivated hate crimes and victims for that year. Thus, many Black youth may live under the constant fear of being targets of racial violence. Given the salience of the racial violence issue, as well as other racial inequities that impact Black youth, helping youth process, understand, and (most importantly) heal from the trauma imposed upon them from these issues should be an important aspect of teaching practice. Third, schooling, and by extension education, does not occur in a sociopolitical vacuum. That is, students learn from their experiences inside of school as well as their experiences outside of school. Moreover, outside of school factors, such as poverty and discrimination, can negatively impact students' academic performance (Milner et al., 2015), leaving many Black students lagging behind their White peers across several

academic indicators. Thus, helping students make sense of their (personal and vicarious) outside of school experiences can potentially help some students better understand how systemic and institutional factors create conditions that negatively shape their educational and, perhaps, socioeconomic outcomes.



**Figure 1.** Comparison of P-12 teacher workforce and student diversity

Evidence suggests that many youth are actively seeking out opportunities to engage in activism programs and for various reasons. Akiva, Carey, Cross, Delale-O'Connor, & Brown (2017) found, for instance, that youth attend outside of school time activism programs not only to engage in activism, but also seeking safe spaces wherein they can feel psychologically safe and have their various ways of identifying (including their race) valued and affirmed. What is more, given that research has illustrated several important developmental outcomes associated with youth developing a heightened sense of sociopolitical consciousness, such as psychological and sociopolitical empowerment, leadership development, civic development, psychosocial wellness, and academic engagement (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Christens & Peterson, 2012; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012), it makes sense that educators and practitioners inside and outside of school

center sociopolitical consciousness development in their work if they are truly interested in helping Black youth develop into academically successful, civicly engaged individuals.

### **1.3.3.1 Centering Race, Racism, and White Supremacy**

It is logical that issues pertaining to race, racism, and White supremacy (RRWS) are at the center of research with and about Black students in urban contexts. RRWS collectively cast an ubiquitous shadow over all aspects of the experiences of Black people and other people of color in the U.S. Race, according to Delgado and Stefancic (2012) is the “notion of a distinct biological type of human being, usually based on skin color or other physical characteristics (p. 170). In the U.S., race is both a social construct and sociopolitical reality (Bonilla-Silva, 2014; Omi & Winant, 1994). That is, while biologically unfounded racial categories are often indicative and symbolic of “social conflicts and interests” (Omi & Winant, 1994, p. 55) between groups of people based upon physical, social, legal, and historical constructs (Milner, 2015). Therefore, racism can be understood as the implicit and explicit manifestations of these constructs, which benefit those racially categorized as White at the expense of those who are not categorized as White (Mills, 2004). Whiteness, then, can be understood in the words of critical race theorist and legal scholar Cheryl Harris (1993) as “a set of assumptions, privileges, and benefits that accompany the status of being White” (p.1713). Moreover, Whiteness as an ideology and social organization holds value in society, bestowing upon those who “own” it social (Mills, 2004), psychological (Roediger, 1999), and educational (Leonardo, 2002) advantages that benefit White people at the expense of people of color. White supremacy is the social system that encompasses and is organized around these racialized concepts (Bonilla-Silva, 2014). In the sections below, I describe how U.S. policies have historically suppressed Black Americans’ educational opportunities, which

underscore the need for a focus on issues of race and racism in educational and youth development contexts.

### **1.3.3.2        Slavery and Black education**

Black Americans' quest for education and by extension knowledge and self-actualization has historically been a sociopolitical act dating back to the institution of U.S. chattel slavery. In southern slave states, the proscription of teaching enslaved Africans to read and write was explicitly codified in state laws. Slaveholders and other Whites viewed reading and writing as a danger to White supremacy (Williams, 2014). Those invested in maintaining the institution of slavery understood that educated enslaved Africans would threaten the very institution of slavery itself by discrediting the notion that Africans were subhuman and, thus, intellectually inferior (Williams, 2011) as well as empowering their rebellion against their oppressors (Cobb, 2011; Schneider, 2007). Although some slave owners recognized that a certain minimal level of education was desirable in enslaved Africans, such as the ability to add and subtract and a low level of literacy that allowed enslaved Africans to keep accounts and communicate by letter with absentee slaveholders (Gundaker, 2007; Williams, 2011), the formal education of enslaved Africans was still widely prohibited by law, with violators being subjected to harsh physical and economic punishment.

The first such law forbidding the teaching of literacy to slaves was adopted in South Carolina in 1740 (Cobb, 2011; Williams, 2014). As a result of the Stono Rebellion of 1739 (Williams, 2011, 2014), the South Carolina legislature adopted "An Act for the Better Ordering and Governing of Negroes and Other Slaves in this Province", also known as the "1740 South Carolina Slave Code". Other slave states, including Virginia, Louisiana, Georgia, and North Carolina, passed similar pieces of legislation (Cobb, 2011, Gundaker, 2007, Williams, 2011,

2014), with penalties for both slave owners and slaves found to be engaging in teaching and learning to read with comprehension. Even free Black people in the antebellum period were not exempt from education disenfranchisement. In the best cases, free Black people who were legally educated in formal schools suspected White supporters of deliberately providing to them an inferior education, thereby ensuring their failure (Gundaker, 2007). In the worst cases, laws in several states that forbid enslaved Africans from being educated also had provisions to either limit or, in some cases outright bar, the education of free Blacks (Gundaker, 2007; Williams, 2011). For instance, an 1800 law passed in South Carolina, as a supplement to the 1740 South Carolina Slave Code, “declared any assembly of ‘slaves, free negroes, mulattoes and mestizos,’ among themselves or with Whites, for the purpose of ‘mental instruction,’ an unlawful meeting” (Williams, 2011, p. 13). Moreover, as Williams (2011) noted, the 1800 law prohibited the teaching of free African-Americans in addition to those enslaved. Clearly, White supremacy systems emphasized the separation of Blacks from the education franchise. This separation has been evident throughout history, as Black Americans have struggled continuously to receive adequate educational opportunities.

### **1.3.3.3 Socioeconomic policy and education opportunity gaps**

For many Black children, socioeconomic and opportunity gaps that have compounded over time can complicate their educational outlooks. Wealth and housing gaps, in particular, have important implications for the educational prospects of Black children and youth. Research has clearly established correlations between family income and socioeconomic status and developmental outcomes in Black children’s early years (Fryer & Levitt, 2004). The income disparities experienced by most Black Americans, which negatively shape Black children’s early childhood

development opportunities, dates to a string of federal economic policies that benefitted White families and excluded Black families.

Structural racism inherent in U.S. wealth-building policies have resulted in what sociologist Joe Feagin (2010) might describe as an “unjust enrichment” of primarily White elites at the expense of Black impoverishment. As a result, White Americans’ median wealth is approximately 20 times the median wealth of Black families (Shapiro, Meschede, & Osoro, 2013). Particularly, The New Deal, GI Bill, and U.S. housing policies all contained social welfare provisions designed to boost the U.S. economy by helping families and individuals acquire wealth-building resources (Huguley, 2015; Shapiro, 2004). However, Black Americans *en masse* were historically shut out of these wealth-building opportunities for several crucial years.

In U.S. public education, many of the most egregious educational disparities exist largely along racial lines and are influenced by federal government policies that historically discriminated against Black people. As Shapiro (2004) observed, housing policies and wealth have a direct influence on where people live. Many Black people, in particular, find themselves forced to live in communities zoned to underperforming schools that are ill-equipped to successfully meet the educational and developmental needs of Black children. In fact, half of the nation’s Black students attend dropout factories – schools with dropout rates that range from 40% to 50% (Balfanz & Letgers, 2006; Cramer, Gonzalez, & Pellegrini-Lafont, 2014). According to the U.S. Department of Education, Black students perform between 26 to 32 points lower than their White peers in both reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). Moreover, compared to their White peers, Black students are less likely to enroll in advanced placement courses and complete higher levels of math in high school (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Furthermore, Black male and female students suffer disproportionate contact with exclusionary

school punishment practices. Black male students are over three times more likely to be suspended than their White male peers (Aud, Fox, & KewalRamani, 2010; Dancy, 2014) while Black female students are six times more likely to be suspended than White females (K. W. Crenshaw, Ocen, & Nanda, 2015). Staggeringly, almost half of Black students between grades 6-12 have been suspended at least once during their educational careers (Musu-Gillette et al., 2016). Research suggests that these rates of school punishment are more likely to be products of educators' attitudes toward and beliefs about Black students than the objective behavior of the students. Indeed, Skiba, Nardo, and Peterson (2002) found that Black students are more often suspended for subjective reasons (i.e. disrespect, excessive noise, and loitering), while White students are suspended more frequently for objective rule violations (i.e. smoking, obscene language, and vandalism). This paradigmatic difference in the way schools view and respond to Black versus White students' behavior, grounded in White, Western normativity, can play a direct role in the disciplinary choices schools make.

Given the various ways in which social structures and institutions, including schools, reproduce and perpetuate racialized social and educational inequities, engaging Black youth in ways that enhance and develop their sociopolitical consciousness presents important opportunities for youth to critically examine how and why oppressive conditions perpetuate. By centering race, students have opportunities to develop more positive conceptualizations of themselves as racial beings by dispelling notions that the many deficits they might face in life lie within themselves and their cultural ways of being. Rather, students may relocate deficits (Baldridge, 2014) to their rightful locales – namely White supremacist institutions and systems with which Black students interact.

#### **1.3.3.4 Positive racial identity development matters for Black youth**

For Black youth, engaging in conversations about social issues centered on critical analyses of the structural nature of racism and White supremacy can be essential in their development of a positive racial identity. Carter and Goodwin (1994) defined racial identity as “one's psychological response or resolution to one's race” (p. 308). Omi & Winant (1994) posited that racial (identity) formation is shaped, in large part, to the relationship of one's race to larger social systems and interactions. In other words, how one perceives her own race can often be shaped by messages she receives and experiences she has based on her race. Racial identity theorists have argued that children in the early grades of elementary schools will probably exhibit a level of racial identity similar to that of their parents (e.g., see Katz, 1982). Caughy et al. (2002) found that Black parents who socialized their preschool children to have positive perceptions of their racial heritage reported their children having fewer behavioral problems in school while developing better problem-solving skills and factual knowledge.

Adolescence, on the other hand, is a period where many Black children begin to develop their own racial identity, sometimes in “conscious confrontations” as they make sense of their racialized experiences and sociocultural expectations (Gay, 1978). In early adolescence, for instance, Gay (1978) noted that children of color often experience “initiations and confrontations” that accentuate cultural differences and raise their racial or ethnic consciousness to higher levels. These initiations and confrontations can include competing demands of group conformity by racial or ethnic group and the larger society, new restrictions placed on interracial interactions, self-consciousness about appearance (e.g. skin color, hair texture, or body type), and a surfacing of “racial attitudes, values, myths, and stereotypes” (Gay, 1978, p. 652). In short, many Black youth begin to build consciousness around themselves as racial beings in relation to their ecological

system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). From this perspective, adolescence is a period where many Black youth are making sense of their interpersonal, institutional, communal, and societal relationships both historically and contemporaneously.

Positive racial identity has been shown to have positive effects for Black youth and other youth of color. Chavous et al. (2003), for instance, found that centralizing race as one's identity and having positive perceptions of one's race and how one's race is viewed by society was positively related to youth having positive academic beliefs and attachment to school. Centralizing racial identity was also positively related to educational attainment. These findings contradicted earlier findings in studies by scholars including Ogbu (1983) and Fordham (1988), who argued that strong racial identification often resulted in Black youth forming an oppositional culture to schooling and that these youth may have to deny their race in order to achieve academically.

### **1.3.3.5 Racial Violence as a (Potential) Curriculum Site**

For the purpose of this dissertation, I build upon Apple (2004) and Milner (2010a) to broadly define the curriculum as *what* students have the opportunity to learn. Eisner (1994) described three particular forms of the curriculum, including the explicit curriculum (what students are overtly taught), the implicit curriculum (what students are tacitly taught) and the null curriculum (what students do not have the opportunity to learn). Furthermore, scholars like Rosenbaum (1976), Anyon (1980) and Wren (1999) articulated the existence of a hidden curriculum defined as the culture or ethos of a school. Given that curriculum decisions, then, are reflections of what schools view as essential or inconsequential for students to know, the crafting and implementation of curricula are inherently political (Apple, 2004; Popkewitz, 1997). That is, curricula reflect what public schools – who are institutions of the state – regard as important and

necessary for the continued function of society. The subject of racial violence against Black people could, then, be considered primarily a part of the null curriculum in that students may not be provided opportunities to engage racial violence as a topic of discussion in the classroom. From a conflict paradigm perspective (see Hurn, 1993), the lack of opportunities to learn about, dissect, and critique important topics can further perpetuate racial inequities by signaling to Black students that their experiences are unimportant subjects to be analyzed.

The lack of integration of contemporary and historical racial violence in many schools is unfortunate, as there is a long, documented history of racial violence in the U.S. Instances of racially-motivated brutality and murder directed toward people of color, particularly Black people (Fryer, 2016; Hill, 2016), litter news reports and history books. Violence perpetrated by primarily White men on indigenous people and enslaved Africans, post-Civil War extrajudicial murders of Black Americans at the hands of the Ku Klux Klan, race riots in cities like St. Louis and Tulsa, the brutal treatment of civil rights advocates marching across the Edmund Pettis Bridge in Selma, AL, and innumerable hate crimes have characterized an extensive history of the violent subjugation of people of color since the first European imperialists arrived in the late 1400s. Recent instances of hate crimes and police killings of African-Americans have permeated mainstream news and social media (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Hill, 2016), thus informing a new generation of social justice activities directed toward addressing issues of police brutality and racialized oppression (Hill, 2016).

K-12 classrooms offer potentially powerful opportunities to discuss these issues in ways that might help students develop a sense of social consciousness about issues of racism and injustice. As Milner (2017) noted, race and racism *are* the curriculum of many students' lives and, therefore, should be discussed in classrooms. However, it is not clear that schools *writ large* are

engaging students around these issues in a critical way (Milner, 2015). For instance, evidence suggests that when historical instances of racial violence appear in K-12 school curricula, these events are often presented in ways that detach these events from structural and institutional ties, including White privilege and racial inequities (A. L. Brown & Brown, 2010; K. D. Brown & Brown, 2010). Furthermore, Woodson (2015) found that social studies curricula that discussed African American victims of racial violence often portrayed them as either martyrs or messiahs, thereby reducing such instances to isolated incidents detached the sociopolitical context in which they occur and which still persists to this day. Thus, an opportunity exists to connect recent instances of racial violence to historical and contemporary issues regarding institutional and systemic oppressive structures (King, 2016; Woodson, 2015).

#### **1.4 STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION**

In chapter two, I systematically review youth development literature to answer the guiding questions: *What educational conditions support youth sociopolitical development? How do adults support youth sociopolitical development?* By educational conditions, I am referring to the characteristics of education and youth development programs. The review focuses primarily on outside of school time youth development programs as sites for youth sociopolitical development because of the structural limitations in place that restrict many inside of school educators from engaging their students in critical consciousness development and promoting action against social injustices. I narrow my search to 55 empirical articles published in peer-reviewed education and/or youth development journals. I focus on articles published from 2000 to 2017. I chose this timeframe for two reasons: 1) to insure timeliness and relevance of the research with regards to

current YSD theories and practices; and 2) many recent studies of YSD build in part on Watts et al.'s (1999) conceptualization of sociopolitical development. I used two complementary frameworks, critical consciousness (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016; Diemer et al., 2015) and sociopolitical development (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts et al., 2003) as analytic tools. From this review, I present a typology of supportive conditions for youth sociopolitical development which includes the following domains (sub-domains): (a) critical reflection (positive identity development; healing spaces; and institutional critique); (b) sociopolitical motivation (solidarity with oppressed communities; feelings of efficacy, agency, and empowerment); and (c) transformative social action (artistic expression; use of technological tools; and embracing historical methods of resistance).

Chapter three provides a mixed methods analysis of responses to the Teachers and Race Talk Survey (TRTS; Milner, Delale-O'Connor, Murray, & Alvarez, 2016) – a multimodal exploratory survey of pre-service and in-service teachers in the U.S. that captured teachers' feelings and beliefs about engaging in conversations about race and racism and sociopolitical development with students. This study was guided by the following research questions: *What is the relationship between race and teacher beliefs about engaging students in racial violence conversations? What do educators say about why they believe or do not believe that teachers should discuss racial violence with students in their classrooms?* To answer the first question, I used logistic regression analysis; to answer the second question, I employed inductive thematic analysis using the academic protocol tenet of Sue's (2013; 2015) race talk framework as an analytic tool. I found that the racial composition of the student body, grade level, and teaching in the Northeastern region of the U.S. were all predictors of teacher beliefs about racial violence conversations with students. Differences in teacher beliefs centered on three prominent themes:

Classrooms as spaces of emotive opportunities for students of color, teacher perceptions of students' abilities to meaningfully engage racial violence discursively, and perspectives on the practice of teaching. These findings shed further light upon how differing concepts of teaching, classroom control, and students' abilities might either support or impede engaging in critical conversations about important issues of race and racism with students in the classroom.

In chapter four, I present a case study of a youth organizing program guided by the research question: *What are youth's perspectives on what educators can do to support youth activism and sociopolitical development?* Using observational data, focus groups and program artifacts, I attempt to make the case that educators who may not believe they have the skills or expertise to support youth sociopolitical development can become allies for youth who want to be actively engaged in transforming adverse conditions in their schools and communities by creating environments wherein: (a) youth feel supported to discuss critical social issues; (b) youth feel that their voices are heard and have opportunities to disseminate their messages to larger audiences; and (c) youth feel supported to achieve personal goals that are not directly related to their organizing or activism. These findings show that, for some youth, sociopolitical development can be a multi-faceted process that involves not only support for organizing and activism, but also holistic self-fulfillment. Thus, educators do not have to be experts on social issues to support youth sociopolitical development. Rather, educators can support youth organizers and activists in multiple ways centered on creating a sense of solidarity with youth, providing space for youth to make sense and share their experiences, and helping youth plan and work toward personal developmental and career goals.



## **2.0 CHAPTER TWO: YOUTH SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

In this chapter I present a systematic review of youth development literature to examine what is known about contours and characteristics of youth sociopolitical development (YSD) in educational contexts. Although there is an emerging body of literature from which educators might draw that illustrates processes, principles, and practices that might help youth become engaged, transformative actors in their communities (Murray & Milner, 2015), it is unclear whether or not educators understand how to apply this research to their practices in support of youth social action engagement. To understand how youth arrive at engaging in sociopolitical action, it is reasonable that one must first understand the varied contexts and processes in which youth develop their critical lenses and dispositions toward such action. For this analysis, I define YSD as sociopolitical or critical consciousness development processes and practices that occur in youth development contexts. These contexts include both school- and community-based environments that serve youth ages 13 to 18 with an explicit focus on helping youth develop critical or sociopolitical consciousness. I focus on youth development contexts because, as Baldridge, Hill, and Davis (2011) noted, youth development programs often deal with fewer bureaucratic obstacles, enabling them “to function with greater curricular and programmatic flexibility. In addition, most...have less hierarchical structures, enabling them to engage in more democratic forms of interaction with program workers and students” (p. 126). The guiding question for this review is: *What conditions support youth sociopolitical development? How do adult educators and allies support youth sociopolitical development?*

The overarching goal of this review was to uncover and conceptualize YSD opportunities – conditions and factors that might play a role in nurturing sociopolitical development in youth of

color, particularly (but not exclusively) Black youth. To be clear, the intent of this review was not to develop a new conceptual framework of YSD. Scholars have endeavored upon that inquiry and numerous scholarly works have been published that largely advance that goal<sup>3</sup>. Rather, this review synthesizes the YSD literature to explicate opportunities youth encounter that might be potential sites for engaging in enhancing their sociopolitical consciousness and translating that consciousness into social action. I use two intersecting theories to conceptually frame this review: a) the conceptualization of critical consciousness as articulated by Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, and Rapa (2015), and b) the eco-transactional tenet of sociopolitical development (SPD) as theorized by Watts, Williams, & Jagers (2003).

In the section below, I provide a brief framing of YSD. In the subsequent section, I outline the two conceptual frameworks employed as analytic tools. Next, I outline my review method. In the final section, followed by a synthesis of extant YSD literature. In the final two sections, I discuss the key findings and limitations of the reviewed literature and conclude with final thoughts and next steps for this work.

## **2.1 YOUTH SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT IN OUTSIDE OF SCHOOL TIME CONTEXTS**

Youth development programs can be an important site for YSD work with African American youth for various reasons, including programs' primary foci on development (Baldridge, Hill, & Davis, 2011), the increasing salience of youth development programs in the lives of African American

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<sup>3</sup> For instance, see the edited volume by Noguera, Ginwright, and Cammarota (2006) and the 2015 *Urban Review* special issue edited by Kirshner, Hipolito-Delgado, and Zion.

youth (Hynes & Sanders, 2011), and positive developmental and educational outcomes associated with attendance in many of these programs (Woodland, 2008), as well as flexibility characteristic of youth development programs with regards to what and how opportunities are offered to youth relative to school limitations (Baldridge, Hill, & Davis, 2011; Milner, 2013; Noguera & Wells, 2011). By youth development programs, I am referring to afterschool, weekend, and summer programs that adolescents (13-19 years old) and offer varying developmental opportunities for youth, including academic support and enrichment, cultural activities, arts/crafts, athletic programs, arts education, and curricular-specific activities (Halpern, 2003). A 2014 report by the Afterschool Alliance estimated over 10 million children attended some form of afterschool program in 2014, a figure representing nearly one in every five school-age children in the United States. According to the report, Black children and youth comprised an estimated 15% of attendees, or 1.5 million participants, and were twice as likely to attend an afterschool program than White children (Afterschool Alliance, 2014; Hynes & Sanders, 2011). For Black children and youth, frequent attendance and participation in high quality programs have been correlated with several positive developmental and behavioral outcomes, including improved academic performance, self-esteem, interpersonal skills, initiative, communication, leadership, connection to community, school conduct, and peer relations (Strobel, Kirshner, O'Donoghue, & McLaughlin, 2008; Woodland, 2008). Additionally, qualitative and quantitative studies have shown frequent attendance in youth development programs to be associated with decreases in teen pregnancy, juvenile arrests, and drug activity (Halpern, 2003; Lauer et al., 2006; Woodland, 2008).

Increasingly, many afterschool and summer programs are incorporating varying models of positive youth development (PYD), a youth developmental concept that emerged in the 1990s and moved the youth development field from a deficit-oriented view of working with youth to an

emphasis on accentuating youths' assets (Catalano et al., 2004; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Gilgoff & Ginwright, 2015; Lerner et al., 2011). Generally, PYD posits that youth development can be optimized when youths' assets are emphasized and aligned with resources available in their ecological contexts (Lerner et al., 2011). Over the past two decades, scholars have increasingly critiqued the utility of PYD models for African American youth, however. Critiques of PYD have included arguments that the PYD perspective's focus on individual assets could potentially overlook serious negative ecological influences on youth and PYD formulations tended to be based on White, middle-class cultural values (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). Furthermore, Watts and Flanagan (2007) noted that PYD does not focus on institutional and structural practices that negatively impact youth in oppressed communities. Lastly, considerable PYD scholarship has not adequately taken into account the ability of youth to become actors in reforming oppressive policies, rather treating them as mere objects of those policies (Noguera, Ginwright, & Cammarota, 2005; Watts & Guessous, 2006).

These critiques of PYD underscore the notion that focusing merely on developing the positive attributes of youth is not sufficient for youth who must deal with structural and institutional barriers to sociopolitical advancement, many of whom are African American. More recent youth development scholarship has attempted to address these perceived shortcomings by embracing various forms of YSD, providing evidence of YSD's effectiveness in youth development, and offering numerous models and practices that can be undertaken to help youth mobilize for community change (Gilgoff & Ginwright, 2015). I define YSD as processes and/or practices that promote sociopolitical development in youth development contexts. Youth development contexts can either be inside or outside of school. Common across these contexts, though, is that they center youth development and offer varying developmental opportunities,

including academic development, support and enrichment, cultural activities, arts/crafts, athletic programs, arts education, and curricular-specific activities (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Halpern, 2003).

Developmentally, YSD describes a process by which youth experience growth in both critical consciousness and agency, fostering an ability to engage in action oriented toward positive social change within oppressive and marginalizing social and political systems (Diemer, Hsieh, & Pan, 2009; Watts et al., 2003). YSD builds upon African-American traditions of emancipatory and liberation models of youth development (Payne, 2003), as well as Paulo Freire's concept of *conscientizacão* – the development of critical reflection and analysis, and a commitment to social action (Freire, 1970: 2003). As such, researchers have identified at least four key aspects of sociopolitical development in general, including: *critical consciousness, political efficacy, collective identity, healing, and social action* (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015).

Philosophically, YSD differs from other youth development frameworks in its intentional and explicit focus on moving youth toward critical social action, with the goal of empowering youth to disrupt and dismantle oppressive conditions (Ginwright & James, 2002). Thus, YSD work is often grounded in critical or poststructuralist paradigms, focusing on helping youth examine and make sense of systems of oppression and marginalization from the standpoint of the unique epistemologies youth possess while critiquing and working to transform those systems. Principles such as collectivity, youth-centeredness, egalitarianism and power-sharing, empowerment, social justice, and positive identity development characterize much of the philosophical underpinnings of YSD work (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002; Jennings, Parra-Medina, Hilfinger Messias, & McLoughlin, 2006; Katsarou, Picower, & Stovall, 2010).

Pedagogical and programmatic practices employed within YSD contexts are unique developmental contexts because these programs focus on empowerment, liberation from oppression, and social action to address oppressive systems and institutions. While some schools and youth development programs may employ some of the same practices, YSD programs tend to employ practices specifically aimed at supporting critical consciousness development and social action. Taken together, YSD involves processes, approaches, and practices that motivate young people to learn more about themselves and others, critically analyze culture and society, and act, individually and collectively, to change inequitable social conditions.

Although previous YSD studies have been undoubtedly informative and helped advance social justice work inside and outside of schools, this body of research remains incomplete in that it under-conceptualizes how various aspects of youth's lives coalesce to create opportunities for youth to develop their sociopolitical consciousness. Thus, the central questions guiding this review are: What themes develop from the literature concerning YSD opportunities? What roles do adults play in creating opportunities that support YSD?

## **2.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMING: CRITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

To conceptually frame this review, I place into conversation two complementary conceptual frameworks useful for understanding how youth develop their critical understandings of social issues, inclinations toward act upon addressing those issues, and engagement in social action. These frameworks include critical consciousness (Diemer, Rapa, Voight, & McWhirter, 2016;

Diemer et al., 2015) and sociopolitical development (Watts, Griffith, & Abdul-Adil, 1999; Watts et al., 2003). Below, I briefly delineate each framework.

### **2.2.1 Critical Consciousness**

Diemer, McWhirter, Ozer, and Rapa (2015) built upon the work of Brazilian educator Paulo Freire to define critical consciousness as learning to perceive and take actions against the oppressive contradictions of social, political, and economic systems. Citing Diemer's earlier collaborative work (see Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011), the authors identified three core tenets of critical consciousness: *critical reflection*, *critical motivation*, and *critical action*. Critical reflection refers to processes through which people come to understand themselves within the world they exist, including the moral, political, and ethical (Howard, 2003; Milner, 2003) contradictions within institutions and systems that (re)produce inequitable and/or oppressive conditions for minoritized people. Critical motivation refers to individual commitment and agency in addressing perceived injustices. Critical action refers to those actions people take in response to injustices with a focus on liberation from unjust conditions.

Diemer et al. (2015) noted that the concept of critical consciousness shares a theoretical orientation with the construct of psychological empowerment – “the process by which people and communities work to gain mastery over issues of concern to them” (p. 812). The authors noted, however, that although both constructs are chiefly concerned with critical reflection, agency, and critical action, they differ in focus. Namely, psychological empowerment focuses primarily on agency and action while critical consciousness focuses primarily on “the awareness of structural injustice and taking action to change systemic inequality” (p. 812).

Diemer, Rapa, Voight, and McWhirter (2016) stressed that fostering critical consciousness often features collaborative, small group dialogues and promote a “shared sense of values and commitments among participants” (p. 217), resulting in a sense of collective identity. Furthermore, critical consciousness interventions can span from long-term, intense interactions to one-time, carefully curated field experiences. Ultimately, critical consciousness is heightened as one increases their level of knowledge about the structural mechanisms of inequities and oppression, gains a sense of efficacy, agency, or empowerment to address issues, and engages in action to transform inequitable conditions.

## **2.2.2 Sociopolitical Development**

Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) conceptualized sociopolitical development as “the psychological process that leads to and supports social and political action” (p. 256). The authors juxtaposed sociopolitical development from critical consciousness by describing the latter as the “cognitive cornerstone” (p. 257) of the former. Watts et al. originally conceived sociopolitical development using a stage model. This model included: 1) an *Acritical stage*, in which one believes society to be organized according to real differences in group competencies; 2) an *Adaptive stage*, in which one acknowledges social inequities, yet takes no action to provide for the common good of marginalized groups; 3) a *Precritical stage*, in which adaptive behaviors are questioned and replaced by concerns for marginalized communities; 4) a *Critical stage*, in which one challenges the inequitable organization of society and recognizes the need to engage in social change efforts, and; 5) a *Liberation stage*, in which social action replaces adaptive behavior in order to disrupt oppression and marginalization.

In later work, Watts, Williams, and Jagers (2003) advanced an eco-transactional approach to examining sociopolitical development, wherein transactional and ecological experiences provide important contexts for analyses. This eco-transactional approach complicated and ultimately advanced the earlier stage theory model. Based on interviews with 24 social activists in the U.S., Watts et al. (2003) posited that sociopolitical development transcends traditional notions of cognitive development, which tend to reward knowledge “banking” (Freire, 1970; 2003) wherein pupils simply retain and reiterate information. Noting that sociopolitical development is a “relative notion” subject to one’s “unique circumstances and context,” they found that researchers must also consider the potential influences of both transactional and ecological factors on sociopolitical development. Transactional factors, according to Watts and colleagues, consist of the cumulative effects of life experiences. They stated, “The circumstances of one transaction (e.g., events, insights, actions, influences, and attitudes) shape subsequent thinking and behavior and thereby decrease or increase the likelihood of experiencing or creating certain future transactions” (p. 191). Therefore, transactional factors represent a compound interest accrued to life experiences and relationships that contribute, epistemologically, to the formulation of one’s sociopolitical viewpoints. Ecological factors include social and environmental influences. These factors, according to the researchers, “stress the role of settings and their social dynamics” (p. 192). Altogether, these authors re-conceptualized sociopolitical development as a cumulative and recursive process where future transactions are guided and given meaning by previous ones, and future ones can alter the interpretation of past ones. Moreover, each transaction is a unique situation; it is a combination of an experience venue, aspects of the self, social influences, significant events, and functioning in an organizational role. (p. 192)

These findings complicated Watts and colleagues' initial stage theory, particularly pointing out that stage theory "did little to capture the role that settings, roles, and specific experiences played" (Watts et al., 2003, p. 190) in sociopolitical development. Indeed, these findings suggest that SPD is a dynamic process that can be influenced, both positively and negatively, by various individual experiences and environmental influences.

In essence, critical consciousness and sociopolitical development are complementary frameworks in that both are concerned with one's movement from an "acritical" state that lacks understanding of the oppressive consequences of social organization to a state wherein one both understands the nature of social injustices and engages in social action to combat them. These frameworks differ, however, in that critical consciousness, Watts and Griffith argued, is grounded in theories of cognition and is, therefore, more concerned with knowledge acquisition, whereas sociopolitical development is grounded in psychological theory and is, thus, more concerned with how one comes to view themselves and their place in society with particular emphasis on issues like culture and spirituality. Moreover, the emphasis of the later eco-transactional tenet of sociopolitical development necessitates a more contextual analysis of both frameworks, bringing to the fore an examination of relationships and experiences in the developmental process. Thus, this literature review utilizes both conceptual frameworks to not only examine what YSD looks like in practice, but also how the literature describes the experiences and relationships that researchers determined were most pertinent to YSD.

## **2.3     METHOD**

For this analysis, I conducted a systematic review of YSD literature, whereby I organized literature thematically (Cooper, 1988; Randolph, 2009). Cronin, Ryan, and Coughlan (2008) described systematic literature reviews as “more rigorous and well-defined” (p. 39) approaches to reviewing research literature than narrative reviews characteristic of most empirical studies. The overall goal of systematic reviews is to answer well-focused questions regarding a specific topic of scientific inquiry. Citing Parahoo (2006), Cronin et al. (2008) noted that systematic literature reviews should delineate the time frame of selected literature “as well as specific methods used to evaluate and synthesize findings of the studies in question (p. 39).

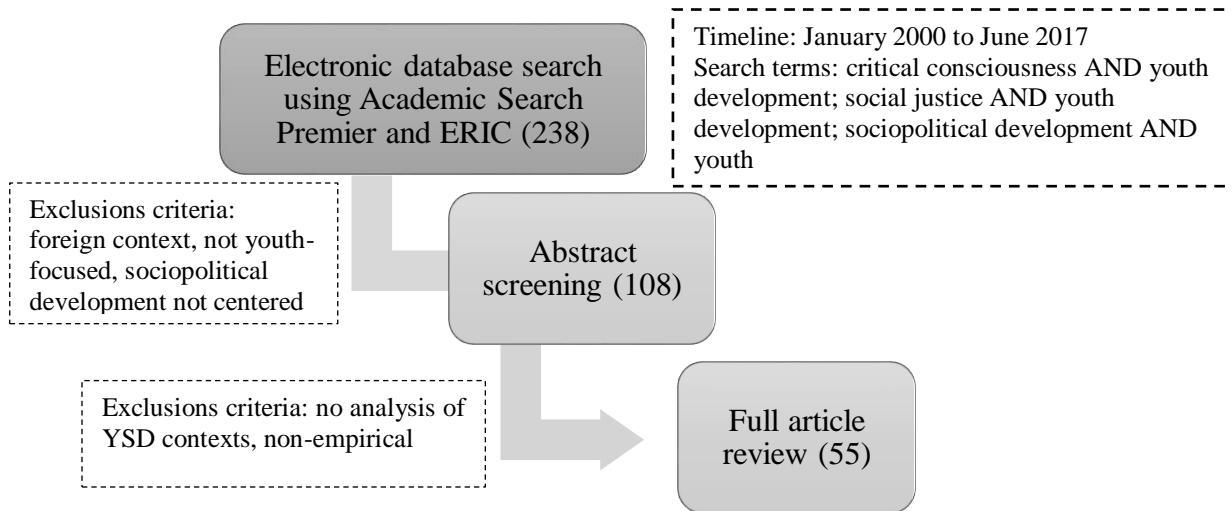
Cooper (1988) offered a useful taxonomy of systematic literature reviews that characterized reviews by their focus, goals, perspectives of the author(s), coverage of the literature, organization and target audience. In Table 1 below, I adapt Cooper’s taxonomy to organize and characterize this review. As noted below, the focal areas of this review are research outcomes and practices found in empirical YSD studies. The goals of this review are to integrate the extant YSD literature to identify and examine contexts conducive for youth developing sociopolitical consciousness while also identifying central issues inherent within the literature. Because I identify as a critical theorist, I could not approach this review under a cloak of neutrality. Rather, my positionality informed my interest in the topic, the formulation of my research question, this review process, and, ultimately, my espousal of the need for educators to better understand how to engage youth in this work. The coverage of this review is exhaustive within specific selection criteria delineated below. I organize this review conceptually, based upon emergent themes. Lastly, the audience for this review consists of scholars and educators interested in understanding

contextual factors that might help youth develop critical lenses through which to view and act upon addressing social inequities that are personal, institutional, and systemic.

**Table 1.** Review method matrix using Cooper's Taxonomy

<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Categories</b>	<b>Categories in this Review</b>
Focus	Research outcomes Research methods Theories Practices or applications	Outcomes and practices
Goal	Integration a) Generalization b) Conflict resolution c) Linguistic bridge-building Criticism Identification of central issues	Integration and generalization
Perspective	Neutral representation Espousal of position	Neutral
Coverage	Exhaustive Exhaustive with selective criteria Representative Central or pivotal	Exhaustive with selective criteria
Organization	Historical Conceptual Methodological	Conceptual
Audience	Specialized Scholars General Scholars Practitioners or Policy Makers General Public	YSD scholars and practitioners

This review consisted of a multiphase process which included a systematic electronic database search, abstract screening for relevance to the topic, and full article screening to determine article inclusion. Figure 2 demonstrates the process I used to narrow my search for this review. I delineate the research process below.



**Figure 2.** Review method matrix

### 2.3.1 Electronic Database Search

I conducted a search of two online databases, Academic Search Premier (ASP) and the Education Resources Information Center (ERIC). I used ASP because it is an interdisciplinary database and includes fields and topics relevant to this review, including education, sociology, and psychology. I used ERIC because of its extensive collection of education – related research articles. I accessed these two databases through the University of Pittsburgh online library system, specifically using the EBSCO database search engine. Because I was particularly interested in youth development programs that foster sociopolitical development, I limited this search only to those studies that were centered on youth critical consciousness development leading to some kind of social action. Thus, of the four forms of youth civic engagement identified by Checkoway and Aldana (2013) – citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development – I focused my search on studies that included youth organizing, engaging in critical dialogue about social issues, or building toward and participating in some form of critical social action aimed at systemic or institutional change. In order to ensure research studies were academically rigorous

and met the standards of contemporary scholarly research, search results were limited to peer-reviewed publications published between January 2000 and June 2017. I chose this timeframe for two reasons: 1) to insure timeliness and relevance of the research with regards to current YSD theories and practices; and 2) many recent studies of YSD build in part on Watts et al.'s (1999) conceptualization of sociopolitical development. I utilized a Boolean search using the following specific combinations of keyword search terms that were most prevalent across the YSD literature: critical consciousness AND youth development, social justice AND youth development, sociopolitical development AND youth. These searches yielded 238 non-duplicated articles for review.

### **2.3.2 Abstract Screening**

After the electronic database search, I reviewed the abstracts of each of the 238 articles in the search results for relevance and appropriateness for this inquiry. After locating the references, I imported them into Mendeley Desktop, a bibliographic software system, which allowed me to organize the sources by author, title, year, and publication. Each imported resource also contained additional pertinent information, including abstracts, keywords, and publication details. I then organized the collection of resources in a general folder as well as several subfolders delineated by search terms within Mendeley Desktop and began reviewing each abstract. I created an additional folder in which I saved resources that I would include in the next phase of the review. I narrowed the abstracts by eliminating articles that were beyond the scope of this literature review. For instance, I eliminated articles that did not include descriptions or analyses of YSD contexts (i.e. articles that examine the conditions that might contribute to YSD). Thus, conceptual pieces that did not contain an analysis of original empirical research were excluded as well as studies that

focused on the construction of scales to measure critical consciousness, social justice orientation, or similar constructs. Additionally, because this review centralized YSD work located within the U.S., studies conducted with non-U.S. youth in foreign countries were also excluded. Although studies conducted in foreign contexts have been useful in informing and extending the research and literature bases of the YSD field, this review explored the unique sociopolitical contexts of the U.S. and thus only considered studies conducted domestically. Articles with abstracts that were inconclusive regarding the selection were included in the full article review. This abstract screening process eliminated 130 articles, leaving a total of 108 articles eligible for full review.

### **2.3.3 Full Article Review**

For the full article review, I was primarily interested in understanding contexts in which youth sociopolitical consciousness development might occur. Specifically, I wanted to know how young people might engage with people, places, and what Doane (2006) described as the collective talk and text of society (e.g. artifacts, implicit or explicit social messages, and representations) in processes that included the identification of a critical social issue of interest to young people, developing a critical understanding, and developing the capacity and efficacy to ultimately act toward addressing the issue. I began this phase of the review by importing the list of resources with attached copies of each article from Mendeley Desktop into NVivo 11, a popular computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS). While CAQDAS like NVivo are becoming increasingly popular for iterative qualitative data analysis, these programs also hold utility for analyzing literature for the purpose of systematic reviews of this type. Bringer, Johnston, and Brackenridge (2004), for example, described how one graduate student utilized NVivo to review literature for a doctoral thesis. The authors noted that the use of NVivo helped provide

transparency in the student's account of their review method, analysis, and synthesis. Moreover, because of the large corpus of literature to consider, NVivo offered an attractively efficient way of organizing, managing, and analyzing this form of data (St. John & Johnson, 2000).

I read each of the 108 remaining articles and excluded qualitative studies that did not contain a rich description of young people's experiences in a sociopolitical development process as well as quantitative studies that did center on critical or sociopolitical consciousness as an outcome variable. I also excluded articles that were not empirical studies, including commentaries, essays, literature reviews, and conceptual pieces. I excluded non-empirical studies because the central focus of this review was to delineate, through scientific evidence, conditions that support YSD. Thus, non-empirical articles, although useful conceptually, did not provide the descriptive or statistical evidence needed for this review. Finally, I excluded studies that did not include some form of sociopolitical action on the part of youth participants. This final exclusion criterium was an important, yet difficult decision for me to make. Indeed, many studies about the development of critical consciousness have been useful for moving the field forward in thinking about ways to engage youth as critical thinkers. However, I ultimately decided that the action component of this work was critical although it is often de-emphasized in the critical consciousness and sociopolitical development literature (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015). This process resulted in the elimination of 53 articles, leaving 55 articles included in the final review.

### **2.3.4 Coding and Analysis**

To analyze and synthesize the literature, I used a two-cycle coding schema outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's (2014). Cycle I consisted of an open cycle in which data (e.g. findings, methods, theories, etc.) were coded using descriptive terms and phrases. In Cycle I, I coded

methods and key findings for each study using a descriptive coding schema (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014). Initially, I used open coding to characterize methods, conceptual frameworks, and key findings for each study. I used simultaneous coding, applying two or more codes to the same datum as necessary. After open coding the entire set of literature, I then returned to the initial open codes and re-coded responses as needed to include initial codes created after a particular response was coded. In this way, I was able to ensure that each study had the same opportunity to be coded using emergent nodes.

Cycle II included an axial coding phase in which I identified themes that emerged from coded data (Patricia Bazeley, 2013; Berg, 2009). This coding schema was inductive in nature – meaning I focused on themes emerging from the data instead of approaching the analysis of literature with an a priori conceptual framing (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013; Strauss, 1987). I utilized NVivo throughout the entire coding process (screenshots are available in the chapter two appendix). I created higher level codes<sup>4</sup> that synthesized coding in Cycle I to begin developing themes across the literature. I grouped nodes into categories first by identifying similarities. As I began grouping the literature by nodes, it became evident that studies focused on various aspects of sociopolitical development. For instance, some studies focused on the role of identity, youth-adult relationships, critical consciousness development, or youth empowerment. Therefore, I grouped studies by their focus using Diemer et al.’s (2015) critical consciousness framework and then characterized the literature in each category of Diemer et al.’s framework using Cycle II codes that emerged from the review.

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<sup>4</sup> “Node” is the term used in place of “code” in NVivo. I will use “codes” and “nodes” interchangeably when discussing data analysis in NVivo.

## **2.4 EMERGENT THEMES**

In this section, I synthesize the literature in two ways. First, I present a synthesis of the literature focused upon youth-centered findings. In this section, I focus on conditions for youth sociopolitical development across three major aspects that emerged from the literature: a) critical reflection, b) sociopolitical motivation, and c) transformative social action (see Table 2). In the subsequent section, I synthesize the various ways that adults, who emerged as central figures in YSD, discussed and made sense of their pivotal roles in this work. This section focused upon two key aspects of adults' work with young people in YSD contexts: a) creating and making meaning of space; and b) engagement with youth.

**Table 2.** Conditions for youth sociopolitical development.

<b>Critical Reflection and Healing</b>	<b>Sociopolitical Motivation</b>	<b>Transformative Action</b>
Youth develop positive self-perceptions and identities	Personal connections to or collective identification with oppressed communities	Use of artistic expression to engage key constituents, including decision-makers
Creation of spaces to explore feelings/emotions and engage in healing practices	Feelings of efficacy, agency and empowerment	Use of traditional and newer technologies
Critique of institutional and systemic inequities and oppression		Traditional/historical modes of resistance

### **2.4.1 Critical Reflection**

Upon reviewing the literature, it became clear that a plurality of studies focused primarily on processes that youth engaged to heighten their critical consciousness around specific social issues young people identified as germane to their educational, economic, or social conditions. This finding was not surprising, as it is consistent with Watts and Hipolito-Delgado's (2015) less comprehensive review of sociopolitical development literature. In their review, the authors

lamented a lack of focus on sociopolitical action in the extant studies. Similarly, I found that over half of the studies in this review focused on the critical reflection and/or critical analysis components of sociopolitical development. While some of these studies chronicled specific actions that youth took to engage communities and institutions around various issues, these studies were generally attentive to processes and contexts supportive of youth critical consciousness development. Three themes regarding studies' emphasis on critical consciousness development emerged. Critical consciousness development centered primarily on: a) positive identity development; b) engagement in healing process by making sense of feelings and emotions; and c) critiquing institutional and systemic inequities and oppression. Below, I delineate each of these emergent themes.

#### **2.4.1.1 Positive identity and self-perception development**

For many young people who engage in sociopolitical development activities, a foundational aspect of their experience involves developing positive self-perceptions of themselves and others who identify similarly. In most studies, these identities centered either on race (Cammarota, 2011; Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Christens & Peterson, 2012; Clay, 2006; M. A. Diemer et al., 2009; Hope, Skoog, & Jagers, 2015; L. R. Johnson & Rosario-Ramos, 2012), immigrant status (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Ngo, 2017; Patel, 2012), or sexuality (Cruz, 2013; Wernick, Kulick, & Woodford, 2014). Across these studies emerged an indispensable need to create opportunities for youth to critically reflect upon how they might experience marginalization or oppression based on the (intersecting) ways they identified, particularly how they might have internalized deficit notions of themselves. The ability of youth to critically reflect upon how they experience oppression and marginalization based upon how they identify is integral to sociopolitical development (Watts, Diemer, & Voight, 2011; Watts & Griffith, 1999) as this reflective practice

can help young people relocate deficit notions from themselves to systems and institutions of oppression that operate against their identities (Baldridge, 2014).

As Cammarota and Romero (2011) noted, deficit models have “prejudicially labeled communities of color as places of inherent inanity and futility” whereas YSD models that center positive racial identity formation for youth of color identify communities of color as “inherently perseverant, imaginative, and highly intellectualized” (p. 492). For Black youth in particular, the experiences of navigating a society that has historically (and contemporaneously) discriminated against Black people can negatively shape Black youth’s self-perceptions. This is especially pertinent during the adolescent years, where many Black youth begin to formulate their own ideas of what it means to identify as Black separate from the influence of their parents and families in large part due to their increased interactions with and understanding of various sociopolitical layers of society (Gay, 1979). This does not mean that adult support, including support from parents, is not essential during this period, however. For instance, Diemer et al. (2009) found that parental support during adolescents can help Black youth positive self-definitions. In support of Diemer et al.’s findings, Hope et al. (2015) also found that parental racial socialization was an important factor in Black youth developing a critical understanding of racial inequalities. The totality of these findings suggests that although Black adolescents may be forming understandings of themselves as racialized beings independent of their parents, adults in general and parents in particular, still play a key role in helping Black youth critically analyze racialized social conditions in ways that help Black youth develop positive racial identities.

An infusion of positive identity development throughout YSD activities can be accomplished in various ways. For instance, utilizing the wealth of cultural epistemologies, knowledge, and resources (Yosso, 2005) that youth of color possess presents opportunities for

young people to combat their oppression while simultaneously crafting counter-stories that reaffirm both their humanity and sociopolitical agency (Clay, 2006). Cruz's (2013) research with LGBTQ youth evidenced that creating opportunities for "storying of the self" through poetry and video documentation can allow young people who identify with historically marginalized groups to feel more empowered to integrate their own perspectives and understandings into their educational experiences. Likewise, Ngo's (2017) study illustrated that similar practices employed through theatrical performances can be effective for youth in immigrant families by providing opportunities for them to understand how their racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds are storied in often derogatory ways by mainstream society while simultaneously writing and performing their own lives in culturally reaffirming ways. Hope et al. (2015) used on-going critical exploration of race through youth participatory action research to provide their Black adolescent participants with a method for constructing and deconstructing messages they received about being Black from their experiences in schools and communities. Through this (de)constructing, youth in their study were able to identify and evaluate issues of school climate that were deleterious to their educational experiences.

#### **2.4.1.2        Emotional Engagement and Healing**

Mostly implicit in much of the critical consciousness literature was the attention placed upon youth having adequate spaces and opportunities to engage the diverse feelings and emotions with which they might be grappling as a result of experiencing oppression. For many students, experiencing discrimination, identity-related violence, and other forms of sociopolitical assaults can often result in emotional wounds (Christens & Dolan, 2011). In many YSD programs, the responsiveness of adult practitioners to sociopolitical assaults in ways that allow youth to have opportunities to engage in healing practices constitutes a core aspect of the work and reflects a critical trauma-

informed praxis (Ginwright, 2010). However, the need for such practice may not always be apparent initially. Christens and Dolan (2011), for example, examined a youth organizing program spurred by the failure of adults' previous efforts to help youth of color heal from the aftermath of a drive-by shooting that took the life of a teenage girl. In their case study, the authors noted that only after inviting young people to write their thoughts and feelings on paper did adults come to the realization that youth had, to that point, never been invited to engage their emotions about the event. Subsequently, youth were able to place the shooting within a broader sociopolitical context of violence in their communities and begin to consider ways in which they could mobilize to have their collective voice heard. Moreover, this initial engagement with their emotions, the authors argued, impelled youth to undertake research resulting in uncovering, critically analyzing, and mobilizing to address inequitable policing policies in their city.

Wounds inflicted upon youth who identify with marginalized communities may also be psychological (Ngo, 2017) or ontological – relating “to one’s existence as an agential subject in the world” (Carmen et al., 2015, p. 826) – in nature. In these circumstances, young people may experience assaults upon their cultural and experiential ways of knowing. These assaults may occur when young people’s wisdoms go unacknowledged and their trauma goes untreated (Carmen et al., 2015). As Sánchez Carmen et al. (2015) contended, treating psychological and ontological assaults requires that adults “(re)center focus on [sociopolitical development] as collective, dialectic and involving Sociopolitical Wisdom (i.e. social analysis and other insight gathered through embodied experience and other forms of knowing) held and expressed in diverse ways, and...include deliberate and thoughtful attention to ontological healing—healing related to one’s existence as an agential subject in the world” (p. 826). Thus, it is imperative that educators see beyond the more obvious emotional distress that many youth in marginalized communities my

exhibit to recognize and attend to the various ways that young people's cultures and experiences might also be under attack.

#### **2.4.1.3 Systemic and institutional critique**

Critiquing systemic and institutional inequities emerged as the most explored and perhaps most salient aspect of critical consciousness development for youth. Some adults' emphasis on processes over outcomes in YSD work (Murray, 2017) centralizes this core element, characterized by youth identifying connections between their own experiences and broader systems (e.g. social, economic, education, etc.) and institutions that perpetuate discrimination, inequities, and oppression (Watts et al., 2011). Young people utilize a multitude of tools, methods, and cultural epistemologies to inform their critiques, including youth participatory action research (YPAR), photovoice methodology, and hip hop culture. Because YPAR was an overwhelmingly salient critical analysis tool employed in the studies I reviewed, I concentrate much of this section on YPAR, although I will also briefly discuss other less salient critical analysis tools I observed in the literature.

YPAR involves youth-adult partnerships throughout the entire research process, from the formulation of research questions through the collection, analysis, and presentation of research data (Kirshner, Pozzoboni, & Jones, 2011). Michelle Fine (2009) described YPAR as a “tool of research for social protest and action” (p. 2). YPAR can be utilized as both a methodological and epistemological tool (Cammarota & Romero, 2011) to validate youths’ insights into their own sociopolitical experience (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR is unique in that it not only supports young people’s “inquiry, discovery, problem solving, and knowledge construction” (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 24) around issues directly related to their and others’ lives and their communities, but also helps youth develop sociopolitical skills, increases participatory behavior, and engages

youth as change agents, empowered to actively participate in the transformation of their communities (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Ozer & Douglas, 2013; Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Yang, 2009). YPAR pedagogies typically involve immersion in literature of relevant topics, followed by a systematic investigation of identified issues, data analysis, and a student-centered production of knowledge, all within a culturally relevant context. Stovall and Delgado (2009), for example, employed YPAR strategies to assist youth in exploring legal issues that had direct sociopolitical implications on their lives. Through a weekly law class, the researchers built on youths' existing knowledge of law and the criminal justice system to develop a list of the types of legal cases they were interested in researching. After developing the list, the young people were then taken through a process of increasing their legal knowledge in a way that allowed them to examine and critically analyze and reflect on the sociopolitical implications of laws. This process included a field trip to a courtroom, the careful selection of cases for mock trials, and youth preparing for the mock trial as if they were actual trial participants. As the authors noted,

students were taught how to spot the issues, rules, and holding of a case. Just as in law school, where pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the plaintiff, our cases were actual court cases that went to trial. From review of the issues, rule, and holding, we generated a vocabulary list and defined each word. As our vocabulary list grew, students were equipped with a working knowledge of the legal system that they were able to use in their final presentation... (p. 75)

Stovall and Delgado's (2009) study illustrated how experiential learning can augment academic texts in helping youth develop critical analytical skills. By ushering youth through the legal

process, youth were able to better process implications of laws and legal decisions, and what roles different stakeholders might play.

Photovoice presented an additional methodological layer to participatory action research conducted by youth. Photovoice refers to the use of photographs taken by youth researchers to identify, dialogue about, critique, and make sense of relationships between their environments and broader sociopolitical issues and influences (Cammarota, 2011; Foster-Fishman, Law, Lichy, & Aoun, 2010; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; L. Smith, Bratini, & Appio, 2012). In studies across the literature, youth participants would often take photographs to document important aspects of their schools or communities and were then encouraged to talk about what those photographs meant to them. Primary outcomes of photovoice projects included youth understanding places within their communities as evidence of oppression or spaces of opportunity and cultural significance (Cammarota, 2011; Carmen et al., 2015; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010). Moreover, Smith et al.'s (2012) study with Latinx and Chicanx teens illustrated that photovoice could be used as a methodological and epistemological site to help young people interrogate their own biases, increase their knowledge of a critical issue, make decisions grounded in research-based evidence, and communicate with diverse audiences, including peers and community members.

Critical consciousness development involves not just a cognitive focus, but also an epistemic centrality that honors and builds upon the cultural ways of knowing that young people of color possess. For many Black youth in particular, hip hop represents the epicenter of their cultural experiences and frames of reference (Akom, 2009; Baszile, 2009; Kirkland, 2008; Petchauer, 2015; Stovall, 2006c). In some ways, hip hop culture can provide Black youth with the vocabulary and expressive forms to communicate their perspectives and experiences to the world. In YSD research, the use of hip hop culture is not only intended to honor and privilege young

people's cultural and communicative traits, but to also provide youth with an analytical frame through which they might examine both historical and contemporary social activism. To illustrate, Clay's (2006) case study of Black youth activists noted

...hip hop was important for them because they were able to write and express, free from judgment, the things that happened in their communities. For them, it served as an outlet and a reaffirmation of their political consciousness. More important, their use of hip-hop to connect with other youth and talk about racism, violence, and other realities of the youths' lives helps to reveal where social movement organizing and activism has failed in recent years.

Clay's finding suggests that hip hop culture can have both cultural and epistemological significance in YSD work with Black youth. In short, hip hop culture can serve as a tool for expression, provide a critical lens through which to make sense of society, and a serve as an antidote for ontological and epistemological assaults for Black youth. This is not to say that there may not be some problematic aspects of tributaries of hip hop culture (i.e. misogyny, homophobia, violence glorification). However, what is central is the opportunity that the utilization of hip hop as a multifaceted cultural tool provides Black youth in YSD contexts. This use of the cultural machineries of hip hop, furthermore, is adaptable for youth of color from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Central to this work is the centering of the diverse cultural assets youth possess in ways that help them connect to their sociopolitical worlds.

## **2.4.2 Sociopolitical Motivation**

In much of the YSD literature, particularly in conceptualizations of sociopolitical, social justice, and critical consciousness development, the focus of studies typically centers on young people's processes of consciousness development and/or the sociopolitical actions in which youth engage. However, in this scan of the literature, it became apparent that there was at least one additional aspect of YSD that bridged consciousness and action: critical motivation. This finding was consistent with Diemer et al.'s (2015) observation that critical consciousness development necessitated a critical motivation or "perceived capacity or motivation to produce social change" (p. 815). Diemer et al.'s delineation was published in recent years, thus most studies in this review did not explicitly refer to critical motivation. Rather, studies included discussions of concepts closely related to motivation, such as connectedness, empowerment, agency, efficacy, or capacity (Cruz, 2013; Forenza, Rogers, & Lardier, 2017; Godfrey & Grayman, 2014; Kelly Pryor & Outley, 2014; Kwon, 2008; O'Donoghue & Strobel, 2007; Pérez-Gualdrón & Helms, 2017; Ross, 2011; Russell, Muraco, Subramaniam, & Laub, 2009). Below, I further delineate how critical motivation emerged in this review.

### **2.4.2.1 Personal connectedness**

Young people in oppressed communities seeing themselves as personally connected with other oppressed people and communities can be an essential component of their motivation to engage in social action. Watts et al. (2003) referred to personal connectedness in sociopolitical work as *collective identity*, which they described as "complex ways that young people...identify themselves, as well as how they are seen by the larger society" (p. 36). The authors noted that identity is often the basis upon which power and privilege are distributed, and by identifying with

a larger collective, youth have the potential to leverage social capital through shared identity in ways that can increase their ability to fight for social change. In the studies under this review, authors often cited a sense of connectedness between youth and other marginalized communities. This connectedness typically centered on similarities in identity and/or condition. Fullam (2017), for example, found that caring and interdependent relationships were instrumental in the connectedness and fidelity that one youth activist felt with individuals and groups with which the youth activist identified; and that this connectedness was instrumental in the youth activist's commitment to engaging in transformational social action.

The literature also evidenced that adults can be contributory in youth activists' sense of connectedness. The relationship between youth activists and the adults with which they engage in sociopolitical developmental activities might be particularly important in young people's motivation to engage in social action. For some youth, adult mentors can actively engage youth in conversations and help them build the skills and capacity to act upon those issues (Shiller, 2013). Additionally, youth might also become motivated to engage in social change by observing adults who model transformative or social justice behaviors and efforts (Seider, Tamerat, Clark, & Soutter, 2017). O'Donoghue and Strobel (2007) found that young people's perceived trust in adult mentors as well as mentor's ability to help youth develop their capacity to act on social issues were positively related to their identifying as youth activists.

#### **2.4.2.2 Empowerment, efficacy, and agency**

Studies also suggested that youth feelings of empowerment, efficacy, and/or agency are essential to their motivation to help transform their communities. Jennings et al. (2006) described empowerment as youth "gaining control and mastery, within the social, economic, and political contexts of their lives, in order to improve equity and quality of life" (p. 32). Efficacy in the

political domain refers to a person's or group's perception of their individual or collective ability to enact sociopolitical change (Murray & Milner, 2015). Pérez-Gualdrón and Helms (2017) defined personal agency as young people's "beliefs in their capabilities to pursue their plans for action and have control over their environments" (p.7).

In a study with LGBTQ youth in a Gay-Straight Alliance, Russell et al. (2009) found that youth pointed to a sense of empowerment as key to their motivation to try to transform conditions of homophobic oppression in their school. The youth described their empowerment in three inter-related ways: a) personal empowerment; b) relational empowerment; and c) strategic empowerment. Personal empowerment referred to youth feeling good about themselves, having a voice, and possessing agency. Relational empowerment consisted of youth feeling like they were part of a group with a greater cause, having commitment to that group, and having the ability to empower others. Strategic empowerment was characterized as having and using knowledge to further their sociopolitical aims, including effective organization for social transformation. Taken together, youth empowerment for transformative action could be considered a multi-dimensional, multi-layered construct that incorporates personal feelings, interpersonal connectedness, and the ability to acquire knowledge and translate that knowledge to transformative action.

Evidence suggests that young people's motivation to engage in transformative action might also be contingent on the type of organizing experiences they have. For instance, in a comparative study of youth in a government-sponsored city youth council and those in a youth organizing program, Conner and Cosner (2016) found that youth in the more justice-centered organizing program were more motivated to engage in transformative social action than the youth council participants. This finding suggests that young people's motivation to engage in social action could be shaped by being in an environment that promotes a critical analysis and social transformation

versus a context that is more focused on helping youth identify and problems on a micro, but not critically analyze systemic or institutional aspects.

### **2.4.3 Transformative Action**

Youth acting upon critical social issues in ways that seek to transform oppressive conditions represented the outcome of interest in most studies. Indeed, both Diemer et al.'s (2015) and Watts et al.'s (2003) conceptualizations positioned action stages as ultimate outcomes of critical consciousness and sociopolitical development, respectively. The action stage in both conceptual frameworks as well as in the literature were chiefly concerned with the abilities of young people to translate their knowledge and critical understandings of social issues into some form of action to address the systemic or institutional aspects of those issues. Thus, there were two key aspects of this process: knowledge translation and practical application (Iwasaki, 2016). Knowledge translation refers to young people making sense of and incorporating their research, experiences and interpretations (Patel, 2012). Practical application, then, is the ability to advance knowledge into action (Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Tintiangco-Cubales, Daus-Magbial, Desai, Sabac, & Von Torres, 2016). In this review, transformative action emerged, most prominently, in the form of creative expression, the use of "new" technologies, and engagement in traditional activism.

#### **2.4.3.1 Creative expression**

Opportunities for youth to creatively express themselves, including their perspectives, insights, and feelings, are critical to helping youth develop activist orientations, particularly because many of these opportunities are being eliminated in school-based settings (Stovall, 2006). Creative expression in YSD is presented in various forms in the literature, including through poetry (Dover,

2013; Foster, 2012; Stovall, 2006) and visual and performance arts (Duncum, 2011; Hanley, 2011). Creative expression can be used to both support critical developmental processes as well as allow youth to engage in sociopolitical action. For instance, Cammarota and Romero (2009) utilized both poetry and photography as means for both critical reflection and critical action. The use of poetry in YSD is an important practice because of poetry's emancipatory potential as a "conscious-raising, politicized process that challenges young people to develop understandings of their world and begin to engage the world as agents of change" (Stovall, 2006, p. 63). Youth in Cammarota and Romero's project were introduced to social justice-themed poetry as a means for critically analyzing societal conditions and used those poems as models for creating their own poetic works that explored their own ecologies. The student's poems would ultimately help them generate topics for their YPAR projects. As a critical action tool, participants created poems that drew from their research findings and allowed them to not only relay the knowledge developed from their research but also engage in social action by sharing their own feelings, experiences, and insights to decision makers. Students also used photography in much the same way as they used poetry. One student, in particular, used his own photographs of disengaged Latina/o students sitting in the back of a geometry class to generate a critique of the state's ban on bilingual education, which the students argued left Spanish-speaking students behind. The photos were later used in research presentations to school policy-makers and stakeholders.

Hanley (2011) chronicled how theatre helped African American youth critically explore their lived experiences through critical inquiry, analysis, and creative sharing of their insights by theatrical performances based on their critical analysis of their community. Students were supported in their theatrical endeavors through "the equitable distribution of resources and the affirmative recognition of culture" (Hanley, 2011, p. 424), which entailed adults intentionally

ensuring that students had “access to people, places, funds, and materials that are often enjoyed by students in school settings with more wealth and cultural capital” and an intense focus on the “affirmation of individual and collective identity” (Hanley, 2011, p. 423) of youth.

#### **2.4.3.2        Critical “new” media**

Lombardo, Zkus, and Skinner (2002), in a study of domestic and international youth activist organizations, found that young people utilize a variety of communication technologies to engage one another around critical social issues with both national and global implications. The authors noted that communication practices included traditional methods like face-to-face interactions (e.g. conferences and workshops), mailings, and telephone calls. Moreover, youth also utilized the newer technologies at their disposal, including the use of emails/listservs and internet discussion boards. More recent research has included young people’s employment of social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) and digital mobile applications (“apps”) as organizing tools (Fullam, 2017; Lee & Soep, 2016; Vakil, 2014) that can allow youth to situate their sociopolitical experiences in technological forms. Given the proliferation of new technologies that act as communicative instruments connecting people across the globe in real time, these digital spaces provide innumerable opportunities for youth activists to engage others in transformative action at multiple levels.

For example, Stovall, Calderon, Carrera, and King’s (2009) research regarding a youth digital media project documented how youth and adults partnered to use media production as a way to counter negative media narratives of minority youth in Chicago. In this school-based project, student and adult researchers utilized videography to capture students’ and community members’ expertise on a range of social issues that negatively affected their community. Students began by examining social dynamics of power through various readings and films. Experts were

brought in to help ground students in sociological theories and film production techniques, which informed students' framing of interview questions and videography methods. Through collecting interviews and production of the documentary, as well as the development of critical analytical skills, students in this project were able to create videos that explored community issues from their own perspective, caused students to think critically about issues negatively affecting community conditions, and encouraged many who viewed the documentary and related videos to act in their own ways to critically analyze and change negative community conditions.

Vakil's (2014) study, which worked with four African American students, reported that mobile app development could be used as a critical pedagogical tool for cognitive youth engagement. Vakil noted that the mobile app development project allowed youth to situate the app development in a broader sociopolitical context, which helped sustain student engagement by making the app development more meaningful to the lived experiences of the young people. Youth were able to connect the app's purpose, to connect peers with afterschool programs and community resources, with broader sociopolitical issues effecting their community. Conversations about these issues occurred simultaneous with the app development process, which informed the content of the app as well as helped connect youth, emotionally, with other sociopolitical issues that occurred during that time, such as the killing of unarmed African American teenager Trayvon Martin. Additionally, young people were able, in one instance, to connect the need for connecting peers with afterschool opportunities and resources to the budget cuts at their school that prompted the need for the app. In other words, the project both allowed and encouraged participants to "derive meaning from, as well as give meaning to, the sociopolitical context framing the project" (p. 40).

Young people are also using social media to connect and engage one another in sociopolitical action. This has been illustrated, most recently, in multiple sociopolitical

movements regarding police violence against African American men, women, children, and youth. Vromen, Xenos, and Loader (2015), in their international study of youth in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia, observed that youth increasingly used social media and decreasingly utilized email to organize and maintain their social and political action groups. The authors also found that youth were using social media in four primary ways, including to broadcast information, access information, political talk, and political activity. It is important to note, however, that social media can act as both a driver of youth activism and as an additional organizing tool that young people employ. The youth activist in Fullam's (2017) case study, for instance, placed little emphasis on social media and more emphasis on the activist's motivations to engage in some type of action. In this case, the activist chose social media as a method of social action, rather than becoming motivated to act by social media.

#### **2.4.3.3 Traditional resistance**

Although many studies emphasized youth using creative avenues of expression related to modern youth culture and the use of new technologies like social media and mobile app development, some studies illustrated that traditional methods of resistance (e.g. marches, advocacy and boycotts) were still relevant for this generation of youth activists (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Otis, 2006). These studies point out that although we live in a more technologically-advanced, digitally-connected world, many youth have not completely abandoned some of the older methods of organizing and political engagement. Rather, youth organizers and activists have found ways to incorporate older methods with newer technologies to engage different audiences in their organizing work.

Otis's (2006) study provides an example of how youth continue to utilize older resistance methods. One group of youth participants in this study, for instance, created a news team that

conducted background research and conducted investigative interviews of school stakeholders around the issue of gaps in academic outcomes between white students and racialized minority students in their school district. The young people disseminated their findings using traditional forms of media including holding a press conference as well as radio, television, and print media interviews. Another group of participants in this same study organized community forums and town hall meetings around anti-racist practices across their state. Across both groups of participants, the researchers noted that these different processes and forms of engagement led to youth expressing more confidence in themselves as social change agents and increased commitment to engaging in social causes. The study illustrates that while an emphasis across much of the YSD literature has been placed on more creative and technologically-advanced methods of transformative engagement, less-technological engagements continue to be useful for youth in their activism work.

#### **2.4.4 Adults' Values and Beliefs in Youth Sociopolitical Development**

To this point, this analysis has focused on ecological components of YSD. That is, I have mostly discussed experiences that youth have in YSD contexts that promote their critical reflection, sociopolitical motivation, and transformative action. In reviewing this body of literature, it also became evident that relationships with key adults are also salient to YSD, consistent with the Watts et al. (2003) model. In examining the relationships with adults that were discussed in the literature, it was clear that an understanding of how and why adults engage youth in this work is important in clarifying considerations educators should have as they embark in this work. Thus, the following section explicates adults' values and beliefs in YSD work. Overarching themes that

emerged in this review include: Making meaning of space; roles; and critically reflecting on the implications of YSD work.

#### **2.4.4.1        Developing and Making Meaning of Space**

Across the YSD literature, adults working with youth often had to navigate the creation of spaces in the context of their work. Space, in this sense, refers to places socially constructed through social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use into scenes and actions that convey symbolic meaning (Low, 2009). That is, physical places become meaningful spaces when they come to embody mutually determined meanings within sociopolitical and cultural contexts. YSD workers and activist scholars often wrestled with the spatial needs of youth participants, as well as their own responsiveness to those needs. Being responsive often required adults making meaning of spaces and being adaptable and attuned to young people's needs enough to know when spaces came to symbolize different meanings than previously held. The meaning-making of spaces fell within three predominant frames: spaces of opportunity, spaces as freedom, and spaces for healing. Each of these themes is further discussed below.

#### **2.4.4.2        Opportunity Spaces**

YSD workers most frequently discussed or alluded to their views of YSD spaces as opportunities. This included opportunities for youth psychological development, knowledge construction, apprenticeship, and relationship building that often intersected within particular environments. Akom et al. (2008), for example, emphasized the importance of creating spaces as opportunities for young people to develop positive racial and cultural identities about themselves and their peers. They posited that purposefully creating spaces that centralized youth culture was essential in helping youth develop critical consciousness and engage in social action. The authors termed these

spaces “Youthtopias,” describing them as spaces that are “created, constructed, and designed by young people themselves,” providing “opportunities for young people to connect with peers, adults, ideas, experiences, and activities that address pressing social and community problems” (p. 114). These spaces, theoretically, would capitalize on existing social and cultural capital that youth possess in helping them to develop sociopolitically. O’Donoghue and Strobel (2007) observed that adults’ intentional practices of sharing their family histories and traditions, personal feelings, the influence of the youth on adults’ lives, and admissions of their own “failures” positively shaped young people’s sense of reciprocity in relationship building with adults in YSD spaces.

Multiple studies conveyed insights about adults’ intentions to create spaces for co-constructing sociopolitical knowledge with young people that were grounded in a sense of experiential or ontological connectedness and privileged the diversity of young people’s sociopolitical wisdoms (Carmen et al., 2015) while still granting adults opportunities to avail their own knowledge and expertise (Hanley, 2011; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Murray, 2017; Ngo, 2017; Stovall, Calderon, Carrera, & King, 2009; Vakil, 2014). For instance, in his life history interviews of youth activist mentors that examined their pathways to YSD work, Murray (2017) found that these adults explicitly connected their lived experiences of ontological marginalization with creating developmental spaces for youth that centered and privileged young people’s ways of knowing and knowledge. Similarly, in a statement on his positionality and involvement in a social justice youth media project, Stovall (Stovall et al., 2009) noted that his creation of a collective space for knowledge co-construction and media production stemmed from a sense of “solidarity” with youth participants based upon his “experiences as a college professor, a former high school student, and a resident in a similar neighborhood” (p. 54).

#### **2.4.4.3 Emancipated Spaces**

Creating spaces that embraced a culture of freedom was another conspicuous theme of this review. Manifest freedoms included freedoms of exploration and expression and freedom to question and disrupt conventional wisdoms, as well as freedom *from* silencing and marginalization. Iwasaki and colleagues (2014) referred to such spaces as “growth-oriented enabling space” wherein young people are free to express themselves without judgment. For many adults, these freedoms were central in their conceptualization and development of spaces co-created with young people. Some adults created “liberated” spaces characterized by egalitarianism, creative freedom, and opportunities for youth to push back against adults’ views and pronouncements (Murray, 2017; O’Donoghue & Strobel, 2007). Freedom did not necessarily mean the absence of adult presence or influence, however. In O’Donoghue and Strobel’s (2007) mixed method study of a community based youth activism organization, the researchers noted that youth and adults did not always share a clearly defined concept of freedom, with some youth viewing adult practices that pushed youth out of their comfort zones as infringements. Still, adults continued to positively challenge youth, partially because adults viewed supporting youth as their “most important role” that required “continued intentionality” (p. 473). Furthermore, adult modeling of empowering behavior within space co-inhabited by adults and youth was shown to positively influence young people’s own sense of empowerment. To illustrate, Shiller (2013) shared the following observation and analysis in her case study of a community-based youth empowerment program:

Using homophobia as an example was particularly engaging since it was an issue on which all of the young people had clear positions. When the facilitator came out to the group, several young people felt that they could also “come out” to their peers, something they had said they were not

sure they would have done before that moment. By modeling in this way, SBU became a safe space for the young people to discuss all kinds of oppression and identity openly. (p. 80)

#### **2.4.4.4        Healing Spaces**

It became evident across the literature that many YSD workers and scholar-activists were intentional about creating spaces where youth could not only critically examine social and political structures in society that negatively influenced their communities, but also engage in practices and processes to facilitate healing from the myriad social, cultural, and ontological wounds inflicted upon them (Ginwright, 2010; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Murray, 2017; Ngo, 2017; Sánchez Carmen et al., 2015). Ginwright (2010) described healing from traumatic experiences of oppression as a “political act” that occurs “when we reconcile painful experiences resulting from oppression through testimony and naming what may seem to be personal misfortune as systemic oppression” (p. 85). To illustrate, in an ethnographic study of the culturally relevant practices of an after school theatre program for Hmong immigrant youth, Ngo (2017) observed that the program’s director and teaching artist intentionally set out to create a theatrical space that allowed Hmong youth to “name their world” which included critical examinations of society’s acculturation expectations, confronting racial and ethnic stereotypes, and co-constructing a positive ethnic identity for themselves. Quoting the teaching artist, Ngo highlighted prompts the teaching artist used as part of a humanizing pedagogy that encouraged young people to reflect upon the emotions they experienced growing up as a Hmong immigrant in society. Ngo wrote, Some of the prompts Jane used for youth writing included “tell me a time when you were sad, tell me a time you felt left out, tell me a time you were incredibly happy.” She encouraged the youth to “go into detail” and “take down all their sensors and all of their vulnerabilities and put them on the page.” (pp. 43-44)

In this narrative, the teaching artist encouraged youth participants to bring often suppressed emotions to the fore of their YSD experience in order to situate a healing process through naming their wounds to peers who were able to relate to their experiences due to shared identities. The Ngo study, particularly the creation of a space for youth to share their experiences with and within groups that helped reaffirm positive concepts of themselves and their culture, underscored what Sonia Sánchez Carmen, Michelle Fine, Kris Gutiérrez and colleagues (Carmen et al., 2015) referred to as “safety from ontological violence” – the space to operate, reflect, grow, and heal, without the added tension of validating their experiences and wounds to outside parties” (p. 842).

Research also suggests that YSD work can be important healing spaces for adult allies in addition to young people. Murray’s (2017) study found that activist mentors both explicitly and implicitly connected their own experiences with racial, gender, and sexuality oppression with how they conceptualized spaces for youth, with mentors paying particular attention to everyone in these spaces (including the adults) having the opportunity to heal from ontological wounds (Carmen et al., 2015). One activist, an Afro-Latino transsexual activist mentor marginalized within his adoptive white family to the point that he became homeless as an adolescent, noted receiving social and psychological support for healing through his interaction with youth activists. Another participant in the Murray (2017) study, a white female activist mentor, shared that she created spaces for youth activists to be free to communicate openly and engage issues of gender oppression because she, as an adolescent, felt silenced as a result of gender expectations (i.e. “quite little white girl”) in her religious, Midwestern community. Noting that she would “probably spend the rest of her life working through issues of gender expectations of white girls and women,” Murray observed that part of this participant’s conceptualization of youth activist space was connected to

her own desires to make sense of her gendered experiences in a collaborative environment with young people.

#### **2.4.5 Adults' Roles in YSD**

I was also interested in understanding how educators and adult allies conceptualized their interactions with young people. Throughout the literature, adults engaged with young people in a multiplicity of ways influenced by the type of program/initiative, pedagogy employed, insider/outsider status, and role of the adult in the context of the work. In discussing potential roles of adults in YSD programs, Wong et al. (2010) stated, “adults can serve as resources and collaborators – versus being the experts – by facilitating critical dialogue, awareness, and building skills towards critical consciousness in partnership with young people” (p. 105). By observing that adults can be “resources and collaborators” as opposed to “experts” the authors noted a fundamental difference in approach between instructors and facilitators: Instructors may often see themselves as disseminators of knowledge, whereas facilitators may work from more of a constructivist paradigm where knowledge is co-constructed by both youth and adults. A facilitative approach to YSD work can also entail a higher degree of power sharing by adults.

Adults’ formal roles in YSD literature include: tutors (M. R. Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008), mentors (Shiller, 2013), teaching artists (Hanley, 2011; Ngo, 2017; Stovall, 2006b) and research consultants (Iwasaki et al., 2014; Kirshner et al., 2011; L. Smith et al., 2012; Yang, 2009). These varying educational and advisory roles are multi-layered and indicate that adults who work in YSD contexts bring a variety of experiences and expertise to their work and, thus, are able to guide youth sociopolitical development in a broad spectrum of ways. Below, I describe three emergent

themes about adults' roles in YSD work and research: progressive power sharing, research-focused pedagogies, and 21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogies.

#### **2.4.5.1 Progressive Power Sharing**

Adults across various roles progressively shared power with their youth participants. Indeed, at the onset of several initiatives many adults took on more traditional roles as instructors while orienting young people to some of the more mechanical aspects of the work. To be clear, in almost all cases, youth chose the topics most salient in their lives to investigate. However, adults often took leadership roles after topic selection in order to prepare and help equip youth with the tools necessary to engage in effective investigations and examinations. For example, because of the methodological and epistemological intricacies of youth participatory action research (YPAR), adults typically served as instructors teaching youth the technical and methodological aspects of YPAR (Kirshner et al., 2011; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009; Yang, 2009), relegating themselves to lesser roles as projects progressed. Yang's (2009) YPAR project in East Oakland, CA included an intensive initial phase consisting of the researcher purposefully selecting and teaching youth how to read texts on sociological theories, as well as math-related texts that would form the foundation of their quantitative research methods. Similarly, O'Donoghue and Strobel (2007) observed that youth who came to the community-based youth organization in their study often came with "little sense of their own power" (p. 474), which required adults to assume more assertive roles early in their engagement with youth. In both of these (and other) studies, however, as young people's sense of efficacy and technical knowledge increased, adults assumed more complementary roles as opposed to the leadership roles they occupied earlier.

#### **2.4.5.2 Research-Focused Pedagogies**

Research, particularly community-based research most prominently in the form of YPAR, was a central theme in adults' approaches to YSD work (Cammarota & Romero, 2011; Foster-Fishman et al., 2010; Groves Price & Mencke, 2013; Iwasaki et al., 2014; Ross, 2011; Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Yang, 2009). Rodriguez and Brown (2009) described participatory action research as "an empirical methodological approach in which people directly affected by a problem under investigation engage as co-researchers in the research process, which includes action, or intervention, into the problem" (p. 23). YPAR, as an extension, involves youth-adult partnerships that center the experiences, diverse sociopolitical wisdoms (Carmen et al., 2015), and desires of young people (Kirshner et al., 2011), and is widely used in YSD programs to help youth investigate sociopolitical issues. A "tool of research for social protest and action," (Fine, 2009, p. 2), YPAR can be used to validate youths' insights into their own sociopolitical experiences (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR is unique in that it not only supports youths' "inquiry, discovery, problem solving, and knowledge construction" (Rodriguez & Brown, 2009, p. 24) around issues directly related to people's lives, but also helps youth develop sociopolitical skills, increases participatory behavior, and engages youth as change agents, empowered to actively participate in the transformation of their communities.

To illustrate the use of research-based pedagogy, consider Stovall's and Delgado's (2009) use of YPAR strategies to assist youth in exploring legal issues that had direct sociopolitical implications on their lives. Through a weekly law class, the researchers built on youths' existing knowledge of law and the criminal justice system to develop a list of the types of legal cases they were interested in researching. After developing the list, the young people were then taken through a process of increasing their legal knowledge in a way that allowed them to examine and critically

reflect upon and analyze the sociopolitical implications of laws. This knowledge construction process included a field trip to a courtroom, the careful selection of cases for mock trials, and youth preparing for the mock trial as if they were actual trial participants.

#### **2.4.5.3        21<sup>st</sup> Century Pedagogies**

It also became evident that some YSD practitioners and scholar-activists engaged in pedagogical practices centered around young people utilizing the technological tools they employ on an almost daily basis to investigate their sociopolitical contexts (Lee & Soep, 2016; Stovall et al., 2009; Vakil, 2014). I will refer to the centering and use of technologies in this way as *21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogy*. Adults conceptualized their work around and utilized technologies in various ways. For example, Lee and Soep (2016) developed critical computational literacy as a pedagogical and conceptual framework to situate and promote youth agency through digital media and technology production. Situating themselves as “scholars-in-residence” for this project, the researchers engaged youth in critically examining sociopolitical issues salient in young people’s lives and “telling” their stories across a combination of multifarious formats (e.g. text, audio, photo, animation), delivery mechanisms (e.g. live encounters, mobile apps, media screenings), and narrative structures. Lee and Soep shared that they designed this practice with the intention of creating an interactive experience for adults and youth who co-created knowledge and media products, as well as for audiences, focusing not on what audiences might learn from their production, but rather on what audiences might *do* with it.

Builidng upon Paulo Blikstein’s work, Vakil (2014) expanded critical pedagogy principles beyond the traditional academic venues of reading, writing and language to include technology, particularly the development of mobile apps. Vakil conceptualized his project in two ways: First, as a sociopolitical community-based project co-constructed with youth built around young

people's passions and concerns, and second, as an egalitarian space that eschewed knower-learner hierarchies and was responsive to young people's sometimes changing needs and desires. The scholar-activist noted that conversations around relevant sociopolitical issues occurred contemporaneously with app development, which informed the content of the app as well as helped connect youth, emotionally, with other sociopolitical issues that occurred during that time. This practice both allowed and encouraged participants to "derive meaning from, as well as give meaning to, the sociopolitical context framing the project" (p. 40).

21<sup>st</sup> century pedagogies, as analyzed in this review, appeared to be multilevel, multilayered, and complex. Indeed, these pedagogies required more than simply *using* technology. Instead, these practices interpolated technological and sociopolitical knowledge construction, so that the two knowledges entered into a dialectical relationship wherein each informed and helped produce the other. In this way, media did not simply tell stories, but were part of the stories themselves. For example, in Stovall et al.'s (2009) article, the voices of youth and community members captured in videos constituted both text youth analyzed to inform their thinking as well as part of the product youth shared with the public.

#### **2.4.6 Critical Reflections on the Implications of YSD Work for Youth**

Adults critically reflecting upon the possible negative implications of their YSD work with youth emerged as a less prevalent, yet crucial theme in the ways researchers and scholar-activists engaged and came to understand their positionality. Only a few scholars discussed tensions between their roles as researchers, the relationships they formed with their communities of study, and the goals of their YSD work (Akom et al., 2008; Groves Price & Mencke, 2013; Stovall et al., 2009; Stovall & Delgado, 2009; Tilton, 2013). Moreover, some scholars did not assume that their

“good” work (i.e. raising young people’s critical consciousness and awareness of systemic and institutional natures of inequities) would necessarily work to the absolute benefit of youth, at times questioning the implications their work may have on youth who are often marginalized in environments outside of their YSD spaces. For example, in their case study of a summer camp they developed for US indigenous (Native American) youth, Groves Price & Mencke (2013) lamented their struggles with the consequences of their YSD work. In this reflection, they shared The critical consciousness that emerges as a result of inquiry based research and pedagogy creates students who ask critical questions and are dissatisfied with traditional banking models of education. They are students that will thrive in college environments, but placed back into traditional K-12 school environments, their critical questioning coupled with their racialized bodies often places students in positions where they are viewed as “trouble makers” or problems. The authors openly problematized the potential implications of their work, noting that the tools and sense of empowerment indigenous youth might develop in camp could be countered in more hegemonic spaces (i.e. schools) thereby leaving students in potentially worse situations within those spaces on account of their anti-oppressive inclinations. Tilton (2013) underscored a similar point in her YSD work in the context of a juvenile detention center. Tilton noted that youth expressing their voices was not always empowering in and of itself, in part because institutional and systemic forces that serve to maintain subjugation can leave some socially conscious youth “disempowered and hopeless about the possibility of change” (p. 1190). Furthermore, she observed that engaging in empowering, agential work within the highly oppressive structure of youth prisons “poses particular problems because of the extreme coercive power of the institution and its institutionalized discomfort with youth resistance or opposition in any form” (p. 1190).

The observations of these and other scholars underpin an inconvenient truth that many adult allies in YSD undoubtedly wrestle with, namely the potential that helping youth become more socially conscious and empowered to act for social change could lead to more oppressive actions toward young people. This de-romanticized view of YSD work stands in stark contrast to most of the reviewed literature, which failed to critically examine possible negative experiences youth may encounter as a result of their development and action. This is not to say that the endeavor of helping young people develop critical consciousness and inclinations toward social action is in any way insalubrious or detrimental. However, as Tilton's (2013) and Grove Price and Mencke's (2013) observations illustrate, adult YSD allies should critically reflect upon all possible implications of their work.

## **2.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

In this paper, I synthesized empirical studies within recent youth sociopolitical development (YSD) literature to uncover and characterize the contours of YSD opportunities as well as illustrate complexities that adult allies in this work face. Using the complementary conceptual frameworks of critical consciousness (Diemer et al., 2015) and sociopolitical development (Watts et al., 2003) as organizational and analytic tools, this systematic review painted a picture of what YSD looks like “on the ground” by elucidating the often-opaque links between critical consciousness-related theories and practice. The primary aim of this review was to present various possibilities for educators in both community-based and school contexts who want to engage students in YSD. I entered this review with an understanding that not all educators are willing or feel that they are able to engage this work. However, I hoped to present to educators who are either contemplating

or currently endeavoring upon helping youth develop as agential social agents a foundation upon which they can build a praxis that is responsive to the desires of many youth to engage with their communities, schools, and society in positive, transformative ways.

This review delineated various aspects of the critical consciousness domains of reflection, motivation, and action outlined by Diemer et al. (2015). The reflection domain was characterized primarily by young people developing positive self-conceptions, engaging in healing from the trauma inflicted upon them through experiencing oppression, and engaging in knowledge-building and critique of oppressive systemic and institutional structures. The motivation domain was characterized by youth having both a personal connectedness to oppression through personal experiences and/or collective identification with other oppressed people as well as youth feeling efficacious, agential, and empowered to engage in and be successful in transformative social action. The action domain consisted primarily of youth using their cultural and epistemological tools to transformatively engage their environments through creative expression, the use of technologies, and employing more traditional acts of resistance. Furthermore, because adults work in partnership with youth in these efforts, this review sought to illuminate various ways in which adults make sense of their work. This review uncovered that adults in YSD work paid particular attention to the types of spaces they created for youth, the different roles they might play in their engagement with youth, and their own critical reflective practices.

Two decades ago, Ladson Billings and Tate (1994) observed that race was under-theorized in education research. Their call to action spurred the growth of critical race theory in education, an off-shoot of critical race theory as conceptualized for the study of law and policy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Similarly, I found in this review that race appears to remain under-theorized in YSD research. While the literature focused primarily on youth from numerous historically and

contemporary marginalized communities, most studies in this review centered on racialized minority students. However, few studies employed racial theories to explicate the experiences of racialized minority youth through a racial lens. That is, the racial identification of youth in several studies was treated by researchers as more of a “variable” than a defining factor of their existence. The lack of the use of racial theories as analytic tools was a troubling, particularly because race significantly shapes the ways in which youth experiences the world and are viewed by society (Chavous et al., 2003; Gay, 2010; Ginwright, 2006; Howard, 2008; Milner, 2015). Thus, this research points to the need for more empirical studies that accentuate how race shapes the analysis of social issues and engagement in social action by youth of color.

Furthermore, YSD opportunities are important for youth of all backgrounds including those backgrounds that are socio-politically dominant (e.g. those racialized as White, gendered as male, or heterosexual; Jemal, 2017). Lasting transformative resistance has historically included both the oppressed and those of the oppressor class who have renounced their power and privilege in favor of egalitarianism toward a more equitable and just society. Thus, the methods, considerations, and implications of this body of literature bear meaning and utility for a diversity of educational contexts. For White students, for instance, a critical examination of the power and privilege they possess and how that power and privilege functions to oppress racialized minorities may be a critical step in helping them to identify, make sense of, and heal from the epistemological assault that White supremacy commits against White people (Feagin, 2000; hooks, 1994).

To be clear, painting a rosy picture of sociopolitical youth development work was not the purpose of this study. YSD is inherently difficult work. It is complex, multi-layered, and multi-faceted. It involves responsiveness on the part of adult allies to both cognitive and psychological aspects of development and the integration of older and newer methods of engagement. Not all

educators can, nor should, engage this work. Educators who, themselves, have not contended with their own understanding of critical social issues may not be equipped to help youth develop their critical consciousness. Adults are very pertinent to the YSD experience, as their experiences and social position can be assets for young people in this work. Thus, educators and allies who wish to engage youth in this way must understand the varying ways that young people can be engaged, the different components to critical consciousness development, how their positionality in this work might shape young people's development. It is my hope that this review aids in this practice by illustrating the complexities and possibilities for educators in this work.

### **3.0 CHAPTER THREE: TEACHERS' BELIEFS ABOUT HAVING RACIAL VIOLENCE CONVERSATIONS WITH STUDENTS IN THE CLASSROOM**

In this chapter, I use Derald Wing Sue's (2015) conceptualization of *race talk* as an analytic tool to understand educators' beliefs about engaging in sensitive racial dialogue with students – namely conversations about the recent deaths of African-Americans Black men, women, and children resulting from racial violence by White citizens and police officers. Recent incidents of racial and police violence against Black people have been prevalent in mainstream and social media discourses (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015; Carter, 2017; Hill, 2016; Milner, 2017). Mainstream conversations around these events have included critiques of the actions of not only police officers involved in these deaths but also of the deceased, protestors, police departments, political leaders, and judicial systems at both the micro and macro levels. While debates and conversations around such incidents and their broader social implications abound, there is little evidence that analogous conversations are regularly occurring inside of schools between teachers and students (Milner, 2015; Pollock, 2004). Moreover, it is unclear whether teachers believe these conversations should occur or what perceived barriers teachers might encounter that prevent engaging in racial violence conversations aimed at helping students develop critical analytical skills and collective agency to respond to racism in their communities. Thus, this study takes a diverse analytical approach to uncovering and understanding contextual factors and personal or professional beliefs that might encourage teachers to or inhibit teachers from engaging in racial violence conversations with their students.

This study was guided by the following research questions: *What is the relationship between race and teacher beliefs about engaging students in racial violence conversations? What*

*do educators say about why they believe or do not believe that teachers should discuss racial violence with students in their classrooms?* Data for this analysis were derived from the Milner, Delale-O'Connor, Murray, and Alvarez Teachers and Race Talk Survey (TRTS) – an exploratory 32-item multimodal survey of pre-service and in-service teachers in the U.S. that captured teachers' feelings and beliefs about engaging in conversations about race and racism and sociopolitical development with students. In the next section, I present a brief review of extant research literature on teachers' beliefs about race in the classroom. Next, I delineate Sue's (2013, 2015) race talk conceptual framework, with a specific focus on Sue's academic protocol tenet. In the subsequent section, I present the methodological grounding and methods used for this analysis. I then share key contextual, statistical and qualitative findings from this study, followed by a discussion encapsulating key analytical discoveries. I end with conclusions and implications for future research.

### **3.1 TEACHER BELIEFS ABOUT RACE**

Eisenhart, Shrum, Harding, and Cuthbert (1988) described a belief as “a proposition or statement of relation among things accepted as true” that hold “value...in some way for logical, empirical, social, or emotional reasons” (p. 53). The authors added that beliefs are often systematized in ways that organize environments into categories that “limit dissonance, contradiction, and chaos” and “take on appealing, compelling, or emotionally-laden dimensions” (p. 54). Essentially, the authors argued that belief (and the systems in which they reside) are an elemental aspect of individual and cultural existence in that belief systems allow for an orderly sense making of the

world that is both cognitively and emotionally ingrained. As such, people often process and interpret information, events, and experiences through the lens of their belief systems.

The examination of teacher beliefs is important because decades of research point to connections between teacher beliefs and classroom practices (Eisenhart et al., 1988; Gay, 2010; Hollingsworth, 1989; Milner, 2005; Pajares, 1992; Tschanen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). Teacher's beliefs can shape teachers' decision-making and instructional practices (Eisner, 1994) as well as teachers' willingness, capacity and skill to develop curriculum practices that are relevant and responsive (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Hollingsworth (1989), for example, found that the beliefs held by preservice teachers prior to their teacher education program mediated the learning opportunities they received in their teacher preparation and informed their subsequent classroom practices. Kagan's (1992) review of early research on teacher beliefs showed that teachers' beliefs tend to be stable over time, resistant to change, and associated with a corresponding style of teaching. Burns's (1992) case study of English language learner classes found that teacher beliefs can manifest in teacher practices in five different ways—what teachers considered as the “correct” knowledge, how and why teachers positioned that knowledge, teachers’ pedagogical moves, teachers’ perceptions of their students’ learning abilities, and teachers’ role within the classroom. Studies have also found that teachers’ self-efficacy beliefs are positively correlated with student outcomes and affect teachers’ investment in their work, goal setting, and aspirations (see Milner & Woolfolk Hoy, 2003).

It is important to recognize that teachers enter the teaching profession from various social, cultural, racial, and ethnic backgrounds which, in turn, inform their belief systems. Therefore, teachers bring varying beliefs about race and racism with them into classrooms. Because the U.S. teacher workforce is over 80% White, while the student population simultaneously is becoming

increasingly racially diverse (U.S. Department of Education, 2016), examining and understanding teachers' beliefs about race and racism becomes more important due in part to potential cultural conflicts (Delpit, 2006; Milner, 2010b) that may arise as a result of racial mismatches in classrooms. Moreover, the importance of understanding teachers' beliefs about race and racism applies to not only schools and classrooms with diverse learners, but to predominantly White schooling environments as well, as the increasing diversity in the school demography will only increase the racial diversity of the nation moving forward.

Multicultural education scholars in the 1980s and 1990s were instrumental in advancing the study of teacher beliefs about race and how those beliefs shape classroom practices (Gay, 2010). Early research by McGee-Banks, and Banks (1995) noted that many teachers lack awareness of the racist attitudes and actions they may project and how those attitudes and actions are entrenched within broader systems of racism and oppression. The researchers stressed that teachers should engage in in-depth reflective self-analysis to better "identify, examine, and reflect on their attitudes toward different ethnic, racial, gender, and social-class groups" (p. 156). Other studies have found that within classrooms, teachers bring their belief systems about race to bear in various ways. For instance, teachers' beliefs inform their cultural knowledge (Howard, 2010) – their understanding of the experiences, strengths, and practices of cultures different from their own. However, teachers often highly value their pedagogical content knowledge (Milner et al., 2015) while placing less emphasis on their cultural knowledge (Brousseau, Book, & Byers, 1988; Gay, 2010; Milner, 2005).

Unfortunately, teachers may at times conflate knowledge with beliefs (Pajares, 1992), resulting in teachers sometimes claiming "to know" when in fact they are relying on a set of unchallenged, untested belief systems (Milner, 2017). The conflation of knowing and believing

can result in teachers avoiding addressing issues of race and racism with students, particularly when these issues contradict the ideals embedded within teachers' belief systems. This avoidance of race and racism manifests in myriad ways. Gay's (2010) review of educational research found that teachers responded to contradictions between their beliefs about racial egalitarianism and racism in society by: (a) trying to find consolation in silence, denial, and social disassociation; (b) emphasizing aspects of diversity (such as gender, social class, and individuality) that are not as troublesome for them; (c) separating themselves from any personal responsibility for causing and correcting oppressions and inequities; and (d) concentrating on what should be to the exclusion of what is. (p. 146)

Gay's observations were consistent with Tatum's (1992) earlier study of college students, which found that people often resist talking and learning about racism because they consider race a taboo topic of discussion, have been socialized to view U.S. society as meritocratic and just, and deny personal prejudice, thereby failing to acknowledge the impact of racism in their own lives. Moreover, research has also found that many teachers take a colorblind approach (Allen, 2015; Milner, 2005) to their work that is entrenched in their belief that society is meritocratic. Through this colorblind ideology, teachers eschew conversations about race in favor of conversations about topics they find easier to discuss, including gender and class (Milner & Laughter, 2015). A potential consequence of teachers' color-blind education approaches is teachers viewing their Black students through the lens of White supremacy culture that ignores Black students cultural endowments and experiential knowledge based upon their racialized experiences. Furthermore, colorblind approaches to teaching diverse students might also result in teachers relying upon implicit racial biases about students to inform their decision making ad classroom practices. Milner (2005) noted that even when educators do "see" race, they often harbor deficit views of

students of color and bring those views with them into the classroom. These deficit views, according to Milner, can result in “inaccurate, incorrect, and harmful perceptions” (p. 771) of students of color which negatively shape their educational experiences.

This is not to say that all teachers, particularly White teachers, harbor negative views of racial diversity or lack cultural knowledge, nor that belief systems in which these views are entrenched are immutable. To the contrary, beliefs and belief systems can change or adapt to new knowledge (Pajares, 1992). Many teachers either develop or already possess beliefs about race and racism that incite them to institute culturally responsive and relevant practices in the classroom (Gay, 2010; Howard, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Milner, 2008). These classroom practices include engagement with both historical and current race-related issues with students (Milner, 2005, 2011, 2015).

### **3.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: RACE TALK IN THE CLASSROOM**

Sue (2013) conceptualized race talk as “dialogues and conversations about race that touch upon topics of race, racism, ‘Whiteness,’ and White privilege” (p. 664). Within race talk, participants engage in critical conversations that include risk taking (Williams, Woodson, & Wallace, 2016), problem-posing (Bolgatz, 2005b), and critical reflection (L. L. Johnson, Jackson, Stovall, & Baszile, 2017; Milner, 2003), resulting in problematizing existing social inequities. The distinction between critical and non-critical conversing about race is crucial for various reasons. For instance, as Milner (2015) noted, students’ social contexts, including their socioeconomic status, are often influenced by the impact of racism on their peers, families, and communities. Therefore, critical examinations of racism can allow students to better understand their social conditions, possibly

decreasing the likelihood of students of color (particularly those who live below the poverty line) internalizing their diminished social status. Engaging in critical conversations about race – particularly for White educators and students – can also improve participants' racial literacies (Winans, 2010), principally because the development of racial literacy is a social process augmented by exchanges of knowledge, ideas, and experiences in racially-diverse settings (Bolgatz, 2005a; Bryan, Wilson, Lewis, & Wills, 2012). Moreover, for students of color, engaging in race talk allows them to articulate their experiences with racism and oppression, thereby providing opportunities to share their perspectives and attempt to heal from emotional pain inflicted upon them.

Over the course of several studies of racial dialogues in higher education settings, Sue (2013) uncovered seven key characteristics of race talk. According to Sue, these studies suggest that difficult dialogues on race

(a) are potentially threatening conversations or inter-actions between members of different racial and ethnic groups, (b) reveal major differences in worldviews that are challenged publicly, (c) are found to be offensive to participants, (d) arouse intense emotions such as dread and anxiety (for White students) and anger and frustration (for students of color) that disrupt communication and behaviors, (e) are often instigated by racial microaggressions, and (f) involve an unequal status relationship of power and privilege among participants.

(p. 665)

When faculty and students of color engage in racial dialogues with White faculty or students, their experiences within such dialogue can often be disparate. Sue (2013, 2015) found that students of color in racial dialogues in mixed-race settings often wrestle with decisions to speak or remain silent about their experiences and perspectives after ascertaining the level of emotional support

they are likely to receive and potential consequences of speaking up. Some students reported feelings of anger that result at times in lashing out or “losing it.” Others reported working to control their emotions and alter the communication styles so that their actions would be more socially acceptable to White people, which elicited feelings of guilt for seemingly compromising authentic emotions and expressions. Faculty of color, in addition to containing their own emotional responses to experiences of racism, also reported struggling with deciding whether and how to address issues of race in the classroom for fear of consequences from administrators as well as the emotional reactions of their students. Moreover, faculty of color often wrestle with being an objective educator and not taking sides between students of color and White students. For White students and faculty, identifying and naming racism can be difficult. Even when White people identify racism, engaging in substantive race talk is often “accompanied by extreme anxiety and dread, and followed by attempts to avoid further discussion” (Sue, 2015, p. 30). Sue (2015) noted that White people often discourage race talk by:

- a) Remaining silent and refusing to participate;
- b) Diverting the conversation to a safer topic;
- c) Diluting or dismissing the importance of the topic;
- d) Instituting restrictive rules for how the dialogue should take place;
- e) Speaking about race from a global perspective or as a bystander and not as an active participant; and
- f) Tabling the discussion.

Sue noted that the avoidance of race talk by White people is often driven by White people’s fears of appearing racist, realizing their own racism, confronting White privilege, and taking personal responsibility to end racism.

### **3.2.1 Race Talk Protocols**

The key tenets outlining Sue's (2015) framework include three protocols for race talk – ground rules that can often serve as impediments to engaging in race talk – that govern the nature, manner, and location of race talk, including: the *politeness* protocol, the *colorblind* protocol, and the *academic* protocol. For the purpose of this examination, I use Sue's academic protocol as an analytic tool for making sense of teachers' reported decisions to avoid engaging in race talk. Below, I briefly describe the politeness and colorblind protocols and, then, present the central characteristics of the academic protocol.

The politeness protocol suggests that race “should be (a) avoided, ignored, and silenced; or (b) spoken about in a very light, casual, and superficial manner. Addressing topics of race, racism, Whiteness, and White privilege are discouraged in favor of friendly and noncontroversial topics” (Sue, 2015, p. 24). Within this frame, race has only a superficial place as a topic of conversation, and should not be engaged in serious, critical ways so as not to offend or make White people feel uncomfortable. Conflict derived from critical conversations about race are to be avoided. For instance, people often do not broach the topic of race or racism at social events populated by primarily White attendees.

In accordance with the color-blind protocol, race talk is considered irrelevant because race does not matter in society and people should be judged by their character and behavior. Educators, particularly White educators, avoid talking about race and racism in order to not be perceived as racist and “appear fair and unprejudiced” (p. 26). Within this frame, educators use universal language that recognizes the humanity of people of color while ignoring their race and the social constructs built upon race that have historically and contemporaneously acted to oppress them.

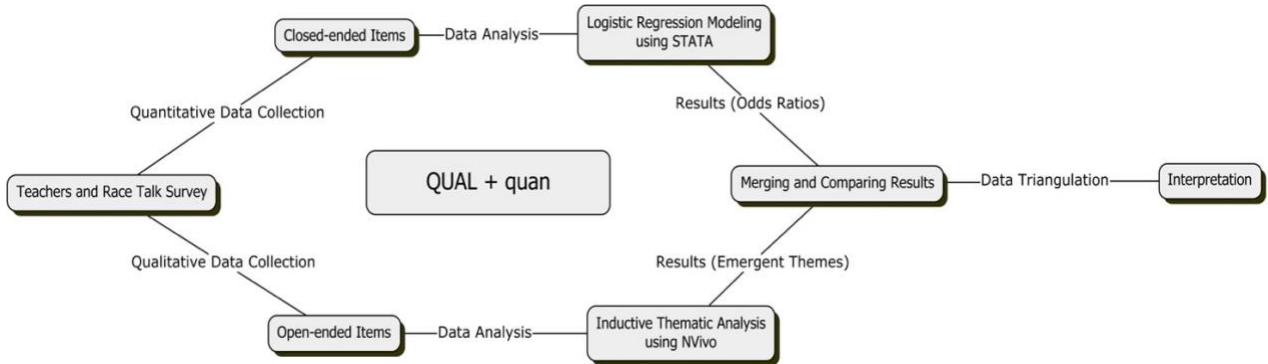
Thus, race talk is eschewed as a way of not addressing institutional and systemic inequities and White people' roles in maintaining these inequities.

The academic protocol suggests that having critical dialogue about race is beyond the purvey of U.S. schools. According to the academic protocol, race talk often relies on the subjective interpretations of the experiences of people of color and can be intensely expressive and emotional. Critiquing the “mind-body dualism” (Sue, 2013, p. 666) of the Western tradition, Sue argued that the social sciences are grounded in several assumptions, including: (a) Basing “reality” upon what can be observed and measured through the five senses; (b) Reliance upon universal principles that often minimize cultural influences; and (c) A centrality of reductionism, allowing for “the determination of cause–effect relationships, the ultimate means of asking and answering questions about the human condition” (p. 666). Therefore, Sue surmises, race talk is often avoided in classrooms due to White, Western notions of school that focus on intellectual inquiry as “characterized by objectivity, detachment, and rational discourse” (Sue, 2015, p. 25). White Western academic discourse values empiricism over experiential knowledge (hooks, 1994); thus many educators believe “reason” to be more academically legitimate than emotion and experience. Within this belief system, race talk is discouraged in classrooms by encouraging students to detach themselves (i.e. their emotions and experiences) from the topic, marginalizing the experiential knowledge of students of color, and concealing the personal meanings that race/racism has for students. As Solórzano and Yosso (2002) noted, storytelling by people of color can be instrumental to critically examining issues of race. However, Western education’s emphasis on empiricism over experiential knowledge relegates stories and experiences to illegitimacy as academic evidence in favor of empirical evidence. Thus, in education “reason” is valued over emotion, which is considered disruptive. Thus, Sue argued that teachers, due to a desire to

“manage” their classroom environment, are often inclined to avoid topics, including race, that might potentially cause “disruptions” in the classroom.

### **3.3 METHOD**

This study centers on two central research questions: *What is the relationship between race and teacher beliefs about engaging students in racial violence conversations? What do educators say about why they believe or do not believe that teachers should discuss racial violence with students in their classrooms?* To answer these questions, I used a convergent parallel mixed methods design (Creswell, 2014) in which both quantitative and qualitative data were gathered simultaneously to guide this study’s framing and analysis (see Figure 3). Creswell and colleagues (2003) described mixed methods studies as empirical research involving “the collection or analysis of both quantitative and/or qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research” (p. 165). In sequential mixed methods designs, researchers either use qualitative data to explain statistical relationships uncovered in quantitative research or use quantitative data to explore the extend of the existence of an emergent phenomenon uncovered through qualitative data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Ponterotto, Mathew, & Raughley, 2013). In concurrent mixed methods designs, such as a convergent parallel design, qualitative and quantitative data are collected simultaneously and analyzed in ways that allow researchers to merge and triangulate findings from both approaches to make meaning from their data (Morse, 1991).



**Figure 3.** TRTS convergent parallel mixed methods design

Using Morse's (1991) notation system for delineating differentiation inherent in methodological triangulation specific to varying types of mixed methods designs, I characterize this study as a **QUAL + quan** design. This notation features an abbreviation of the term *qualitative* in all capital letters to indicate a focus on qualitative data analysis, a plus sign indicating concurrent data collection, and an abbreviation of the term *quantitative* to indicate a less central emphasis on quantitative data analysis (Creswell, 2014; Johnson, Onwuegbuzie, & Turner, 2007; Morse, 1991). The **QUAL + quan** notation signifies four central elements of the research design: (a) the research is driven by an inductive process; (b) theory is developed qualitatively; (c) the quantitative method serves as a complement to the quantitative research; and (d) simultaneous data triangulation (Morse, 1991).

### 3.3.1 Data Collection

Data for this study were collected using the Milner, Delale-O'Connor, Murray, and Alvarez Teachers and Race Talk Survey (TRTS)<sup>5</sup>. The TRTS is an exploratory multi-modal survey (Creswell, 2014; Groves et al., 2009) that utilizes written questionnaires to gather information on

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<sup>5</sup> The TRTS can be accessed at the following URL: [https://pitt.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV\\_cIsNBHIZlAfqx6t](https://pitt.col.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_cIsNBHIZlAfqx6t)

the backgrounds and beliefs (Neuman, 2011) of a sample of pre-service and in-service educators and is systematic in nature (i.e. all participants respond to the same questions). Consistent with Groves et al.'s (2009) delineation, this survey served as "a systematic method for gathering information from (a sample of) entities" (p. 2). In the case of the TRTS, the sample consisted of pre-service and in-service school teachers in classrooms ranging from pre-kindergarten (PreK) through the 12<sup>th</sup> grade. Surveys like the TRTS can provide both narrative and analytic descriptors that illustrate the size and distribution of population attributes and/or relationships between two or more variables (Groves et al., 2009). The TRTS included both multiple choice and open-ended items designed to gather both quantifiable and qualitative data (Miles et al., 2014; Neuman, 2011), allowing for multiple layers of analysis.

This study utilizes TRTS data collected between August 31, 2016 and December 1, 2016. The TRTS was developed and data were collected through Qualtrics (Qualtrics, Provo, UT), a web-based survey creation, distribution, and analysis software approved by the University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board. The TRTS was distributed nationally via teacher education programs at member institutions of the Association of American Universities (AAU), the Literacy Research Association (LRA) listserv, and locally through a local network of universities with teacher education programs in the Pittsburgh area. Access to the survey was emailed to deans and program coordinators at target institutions with an embedded link to the online survey. Institutions were asked to share the email invitation and link with their networks of teacher education students and alumni. TRTS responses were collected from pre-service and in-service teachers ( $n = 422$ ) presumably affiliated with these institutions<sup>6</sup>. Respondent demographics are included in Table 3 below. We did not offer incentives to either institutions or respondents for completing the survey.

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<sup>6</sup> Because we could not control to whom survey links were forwarded, it is impossible to know if all respondents were formally or previously affiliated with participating institutions.

Rather, we relied on the strength of relationships between institutions and members of their professional network in garnering responses to the survey. Thus, respondents self-selected, which makes this survey exploratory in nature and may have influenced the results and, consequently, the generalizability of the findings.

The TRTS consisted of eight demographic questions, as well as 12 open-ended and 12 closed-ended questions (see chapter three appendix Table A 3.1). Demographic questions gathered a limited set of respondents' background characteristics. These background variables included one continuous variable – number of years teaching – and eight categorical variables, including teachers' racial identification, current teaching status (in-service or pre-service), grade level, subject area, reported school racial composition, geographic location, and type of teacher education program attended. Closed-ended items presented statements regarding teachers' beliefs about the importance of race in their students' lives and in their teaching practices as well their willingness and feelings of preparedness to engage in classroom-based race talk and student sociopolitical development. Respondents were given "yes", "no", and "not sure" response options for each item. Response options of this type essentially tasked respondents with rating "the distance between their own views or preferences and the idea expressed in the question" (Fowler, 1995, p. 62). In other words, the response options asked respondents to perform at least three cognitive tasks: 1) reflect upon their own views regarding the statement posed; 2) compare those ideas with the statement; and 3) decide whether the distance between the statement and their own views was close enough for respondents to agree or disagree, with an option for the expression of uncertainty (Fowler, 1995; Groves et al., 2009). A single open-ended question followed each close-ended question, allowing respondents to explain their "yes", "no", or "not sure" response.

Analytically, this response structure allowed me to ascertain factors that characterized agreement, disagreement, and uncertainty in response to survey items.

As Illustrated in Table 3, survey respondents were almost evenly divided between pre-service and in-service teachers (51% and 49 %, respectively). Among in-service teachers, respondents were experienced educators, with a mean of nine years teaching. Educators at the high school level represented the highest proportion of respondents (45%). When combined with elementary school teachers, who represented 32% of respondents, the teachers at these two levels represented over three-quarters of respondents. Nearly as high a proportion of respondents reported teaching in either primarily White or racially mixed schools (37% and 35%, respectively). The racial composition<sup>7</sup> of the sample closely mirrored the racial composition of the overall P12 teaching workforce. Approximately 83% of respondents were White and about 7% were Black. Respondents who self-identified as Asian (4%), Hispanic/Latinx (3%), or multi-racial (2%) comprised nearly all of the remaining 10% of respondents. Respondents who self-identified as either American Indian/Alaskan natives and Hawaiian/Pacific islanders both comprised less than 1% of the total respondents. The survey did, however, oversample from the Northeast region, with 60% of all respondents reporting living in the Northeast. According to the U.S. Department of Education<sup>8</sup>, teachers in the Northeast comprise only about 22% of the almost 3.2 million teachers in the U.S. This oversampling also resulted in the underrepresentation of teachers from each of the three other geographic regions captured in the survey, most severely the South which accounts for 35% of the total teacher workforce but only 14% of the TRTS sample. This oversampling

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<sup>7</sup> TRTS respondents were asked to self-report their racial identification(s). The survey used racial categories listed and defined by the U.S. Census Bureau.

<sup>8</sup> U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS), "Public School Teacher Data File," 2011–12. Retrieved from [https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass112\\_2013314\\_t1s\\_001.asp](https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/sass/tables/sass112_2013314_t1s_001.asp).

could be due, in part, to the overrepresentation of the Northeast among institutions. For instance, Northeastern states account for 18% of all states, but 30% of all AAU institutions in the U.S. This oversampling of the Northeast could also be due, in part, to the University of Pittsburgh's geographic location and use of local and regional networks in the survey distribution.

**Table 3.** TRTS respondent demographics (n = 422)

VARIABLE	MEAN (SD)	RANGE	FREQUENCY	PERCENTAGE
Years Teaching	5.36 (7.32)	0,40		
*In-service teachers only	9.08 (7.62)	1,40		
Grade Level				
Pre-k		18	4	
Elementary		135	32	
Middle		81	19	
High		188	45	
Current role				
In-service		208	49	
Pre-service		214	51	
Race				
Black/African American		29	7	
Amer. Indian/Alaskan		1	< 1	
Asian		18	4	
Hispanic/Latinx		12	3	
Multi-racial		10	2	
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander		1	< 1	
White		351	83	
Teacher education program				
Non-traditional (e.g. Teach for America)		23 397	5 95	
Traditional (i.e. university-based)				
Region				
Northeast		229	60	
South		55	14	
Midwest		53	14	
West		46	12	
Student racial demographics				
Primarily White		157	37	
Primarily Black/African American		63	15	
Primarily Hispanic/Latinx		46	11	
Primarily Asian		8	2	
Racially mixed		146	35	

To be clear, I do not assume that the sample, although similar to the racial composition of the public K-12 teacher workforce, is representative of the public K-12 teacher workforce writ large.

The TRTS is an exploratory survey designed to gain insight into what teachers say about their beliefs regarding race and their teaching practice. We (the research team) were less interested in making generalizable statements about teachers' self-reported beliefs. Rather, we were more interested in understanding what teachers might believe about race and their own preparedness and support to engage in race conversations with students and how those beliefs influence whether or not they believe teachers should engage racial violence as a curriculum site in their classrooms. Thus, the research team did not randomly sample the teaching population as a whole – only those teachers affiliated with AAU member institutions, regional teacher education programs, and educators subscribed to the LRA listserv.

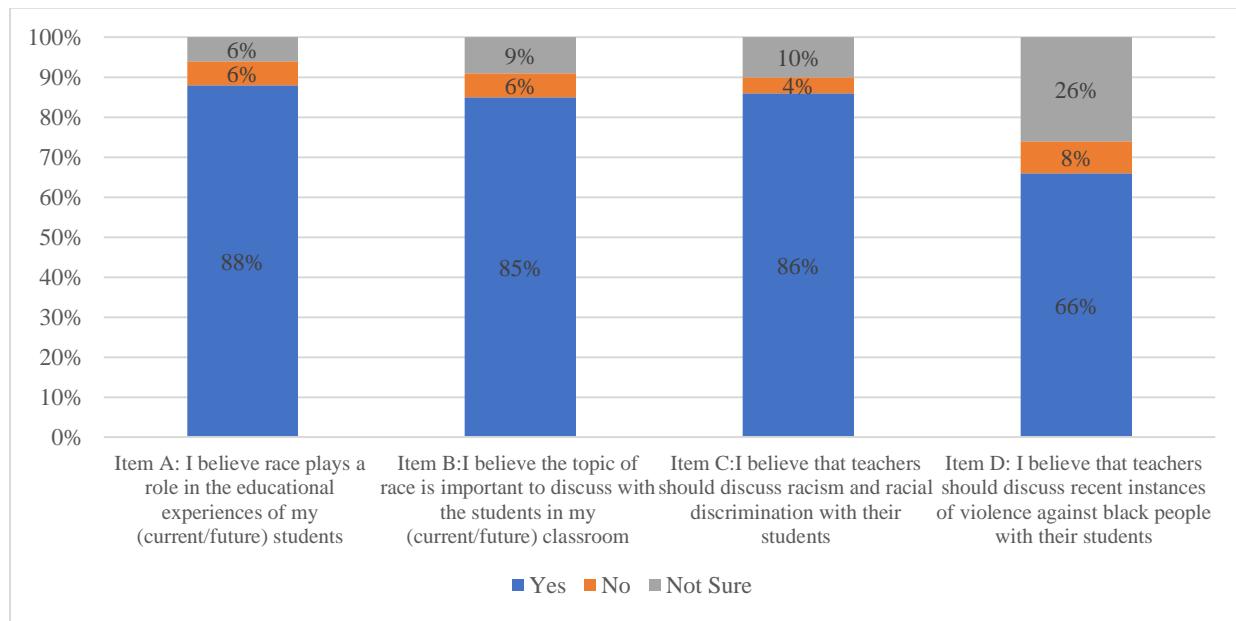
### **3.3.2 Sample**

For this analysis, I focused on a sub-sample of TRTS respondents who, by their responses, seemed to have at minimum an awareness of race as an important societal issue to discuss. Thus, I focused on four survey items, items A – D, that required respondents to respond to statements about the belief that race is important and should be discussed with students, and whether teachers should discuss racial violence with students. Responses to items A – D are included in Table 4 and Figure 4 below. From these respondents, I sub-sampled respondents who met the following criteria:

- A. Respondents who selected “yes” for Item A: *I believe race plays a role in the educational experiences of my (current/future) students; AND*
- B. Respondents who selected “yes” for Item B: *I believe the topic of race is important to discuss with the students in my (current/future) classroom; AND*
- C. Respondents who selected “yes” for the Item C: *I believe that teachers should discuss racism and racial discrimination with their students.*

**Table 4.** Summary of responses to items A – D (n = 422).

ITEM	YES (%)	NO (%)	NOT SURE (%)
A. I believe race plays a role in the educational experiences of my (current/future) students (Q11).	368 (88)	25 (6)	27 (6)
B. I believe the topic of race is important to discuss with the students in my (current/future) classroom (Q13).	358 (85)	24 (6)	38 (9)
C. I believe that teachers should discuss racism and racial discrimination with their students (Q15).	363 (86)	17 (4)	40 (10)
D. I believe that teachers should discuss recent instances of violence against black people with their students (e.g. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Philando Castile) (Q17).	274 (66)	35 (8)	109 (26)



**Figure 4.** Response percentages to survey items A-D.

A total of 308 respondents met these criteria. These respondents represented about 73% of all TRTS respondents. Because I was interested in understanding what similarities and differences might exist in how educators might avoid engaging in racial violence conversations even though they might believe that race is important versus those educators who seemed more willing to

engage in racial violence conversations, I then separated respondents who selected “yes” from those respondents who selected “no” or “not sure” for Item D: *I believe that teachers should discuss recent instances of violence against black people with their students (e.g. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Philando Castile)*. This sampling criterion yielded 239 “yes” respondents and 69 “no” or “not sure” (“non-yes”) respondents. It is important to note that the qualitative analysis does not include all 308 respondents in the sub-sample. Not all respondents to the closed-ended items responded to the consequent open-ended item. Thus, data analysis only includes those respondents who shared reasons why they chose a particular response option to the closed-ended items. Additional data, therefore, was not available from several respondents to confirm, disconfirm, or add to the findings.

### **3.3.3 Quantitative Data Analysis**

In this study, I applied logistic regression analysis to determine what background and/or contextual characteristics might begin to explain the likelihood that respondents would agree or not agree with item D. I employed this statistical method because I wanted to understand potential relationships between characteristics and responses based on the odds of a particular response occurring (Agresti, 2002). In this case, I was interested in determining the odds that respondents would choose the “yes” option for item D (dependent variable).

I began this analysis by importing TRTS data from Qualtrics into a spreadsheet using Microsoft Excel. This provided me with an efficient way of sorting survey respondents based on the established sample selection criteria described above. Once imported, I reduced the data by sorting for “yes” responses to items A, B, C, and D. Once I reduced the data, I then transformed all non-numerical background data (e.g. race, grade level, and region) into categorical variables

numbering each response consecutively beginning with the number one. I then converted closed-ended survey item responses to binary variables, where 0 represented a “no” or “not Sure” response and 1 represented a “yes” response. I categorized responses into binary variables because respondents were not asked to rate or rank their responses on a Likert or similar type scale. Thus, numbering these responses one through three would have held no statistical meaning. However, by creating binary variables in this way, I could employ logistic regression to interpret differences in probabilities of answering “yes” or “non-yes” to item D – the outcome variable of interest.

After creating categorical and binary variables, I imported the data set into the statistical software Stata 14 (StataCorp, College Station, TX). I was then able to create additional binary variables from categorical variables such as race, region, student racial demographics, and grade level. This allowed me to compare a specific designation to all other designations for a single variable. For instance, I created a new variable for race that allowed me to compare respondents who identified as White to all other racial categories. This allowed me to run several regression models controlling for specific characteristics of interest and identify statistically significant differences based upon these characteristics. I then ran numerous logistic regression models, using various background characteristics as independent variables and one variable – responding “yes” to item D – as a binary dependent variable. Thus, all odds ratios produced from this statistical technique reflected the odds that a respondent, controlling for various background characteristics, would respond “yes” to item D.

### **3.3.4 Qualitative Data Analysis**

I used inductive thematic analysis (Anselm L Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to uncover themes and make sense of open-ended responses to item D in the survey. Thematic analysis is a form of qualitative

data analysis that extends beyond the simple counting of words and phrases, focusing rather on “describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes” (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2011, p. 10). Thematic analysis shares methodological similarities with grounded theory, namely that both centralize describing, examining, and interpreting qualitative data across one or more data sets, and both require intimate involvement and interpretation from the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998; Guest et al., 2011). However, thematic analysis differs from grounded theory in that the former’s primary purpose is not theory generation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thus, in many instances, researchers do not consider thematic analysis to be a stand-alone methodological approach. Rather, some researchers view thematic analysis as part of qualitative research approaches, such as grounded theory, phenomenology, and hermeneutics (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun & Clarke, 2006). This study lends itself to thematic analysis because the goal of this inquiry was to uncover patterns in the data and begin building theory about why race-aware educators might not engage in conversations about sensitive, pervasive topics such as racial violence against Black people.

I used NVivo 11 for Mac, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) for this analysis. The use of CAQDAS in qualitative research, particularly iterative research such as thematic analysis, has fueled debate about how the use of software might impact method. Some have argued that using CAQDAS could potentially influence researchers, particularly novices, to treat the research process in rigid and pseudo-automated ways (Hutchison, Johnston, & Breckon, 2010). A reliance on pseudo-automation, some have posited, could lead researchers to become detached from their data by not forcing researchers to immerse themselves in their data unlike more traditional manual methods of data analysis (Bazeley, 2007; St. John & Johnson, 2000). However, as the use of CAQDAS has grown over the past two decades,

researchers have increasingly documented the utility of various software in a variety of research approaches. CAQDAS like NVivo have shown the ability to assist in exploring, organizing, interpreting, and integrating qualitative data (Evers, 2011; Morison & Moir, 1998; Zamawe, 2015) from multiple collection methods simultaneously (Hoover & Koerber, 2011) as well as potentially enhance validity (Siccama & Penna, 2008) and transparency (Bringer et al., 2004). Thus, as St. John and Johnson (2000) noted, CAQDAS can help researchers handle larger amounts of data, increase efficiency and flexibility, provide more rigorous analysis, and provide a more visible audit trail.

Using the same reduced data set from Microsoft Excel referenced in the section above, I imported TRTS data into NVivo as two separate internal documents. These documents were separated by item D response (i.e. “yes” or “non-yes”). This allowed me to later separate and compare coding my document. Thus, I was more efficiently able to discern similarities and differences in the way “yes” and “non-yes” responses were coded. I then organized data analysis into two primary cycles, Cycle I and Cycle II (Miles et al., 2014). I chose to code responses by question rather than by case (i.e. respondent), allowing for more interactive coding and efficiency (Bazeley, 2013). Cycle I involved open coding of responses to item D. I used descriptive coding (Miles et al., 2014), labeling each response with a single term or short phrase to capture the topic of each open-ended response. I created open or “free” nodes (codes) in NVivo during an initial round of open coding (see Figure A.1.1.). I used simultaneous coding, applying two or more codes to the same datum as necessary. After open coding the entire data set, I then returned to the initial open codes and re-coded responses as needed to include initial codes created after a particular response was coded. In this way, I was able to ensure that each response had the same opportunity to be coded using emergent nodes. I also created case nodes across the data set that identified

respondents by background characteristics. This allowed me to separate and observe coding by background characteristic. Using this technique enabled me to uncover any subtle differences in the ways teachers responded to item D based upon certain background characteristics.

In Cycle II, I sought to uncover patterns in Cycle I in order to begin developing themes across the data. I grouped nodes into categories by identifying similarities between nodes. For example, I grouped all data coded with a signifier of student's age or developmental stage (i.e. responses that included terms like "young", "younger", "older", elementary, middle school, or high school) as "age" to signal references to students's age as a factor for not engaging in racial violence conversations. I utilized this process for all nodes with at least three data points. This process allowed me to not only analyze possible existing relationships within the data, but also observe what was not said or demonstrated in the data (Glesne, 2011).

NVivo aided in creating a more efficient analytical process by allowing me to quickly identify the number and location of each node in both cycles of coding. By simply clicking on each node, I was able to immediately observe the ways in which passages in the data were coded in a list format. Moreover, I could click on a list and be taken directly back to the data set with each passage in the coded list highlighted. Moreover, by using the "coding stripes" function, I was able to quickly observe all nodes and cases for each item D response. This allowed me to more easily observe the context for each coded passage, including respondents' background characteristics and any text that may have been in the response item but not coded with the same node.

I used several analytic tools available in NVivo to assist in making sense of how I coded the data. For instance, Figure A.1.2 depicts a hierarchy chart in tree map form that I generated in NVivo to help me gain a sense of the prevalence of different nodes in relation to other nodes. The

nodes are color-coded and the size of each box represents the prevalence of that particular node compared to others. Node boxes within larger boxes indicate parent-child node relationships. Thus, larger boxes containing smaller node boxes indicate broader themes that emerged. I also used coding matrices to observe coding patterns by background characteristics (e.g. by respondents' racial identification). Within the matrices, the number in each box represents the number of coded responses that meet the intersecting criteria. By clicking on each box, I could immediately see all coded responses at each intersection.

### **3.4 FINDINGS**

Below, I present findings from this study in three parts. First, I contextualize study findings by offering descriptive statistics regarding the sub-sample and responses to item D in the survey. Next, I present a statistical analysis using logistic regression modeling to answer the first research question: *What is the relationship between race and teacher beliefs about engaging students in racial violence conversations?* Lastly, I describe findings in response to the question: *What do educators say about why they believe or do not believe that teachers should discuss racial violence with students in their classrooms?* I begin this subsection by delineating findings pertaining to explanations some educators shared about their beliefs that teachers should engage in racial violence conversations with students. Subsequently, I then exhibit findings regarding how other educators explained their uncertainty that teachers should or in some cases their beliefs that teachers should not, engage in racial violence conversations with students.

### **3.4.1 Descriptive Statistics**

I present a demographic summary of these respondents in Table 5 below and in figures 8-12 located in Appendix B<sup>9</sup>. First, it is important to note that not all respondents for the close-ended item D completed the subsequent open-ended item allowing them to expound upon their response. For instance, “yes” respondents had an open-ended item response rate of .74 (177/239); “non-yes” respondents had an open-ended response rate of .72 (50/69). Interesting descriptive statistics emerged among the “non-yes” respondents. In-service teachers, for example, were more highly represented in the “non-yes” group than in the “yes” group (56% to 50%). Moreover, while elementary school teachers comprised 27% of the “yes” group, those in the “non-yes” group comprised 48% of the sub-sample. Conversely, a much lower rate of high school teachers (26%) were “non-yes” respondents than responded “yes” (50%). Also, educators who reported being in schools that were racially mixed or predominantly Black had lower rates of “non-yes” responses than “yes” responses, while educators in predominantly White schools had higher rates of “non-yes” responses than “yes” responses. Regional differences also emerged in the item D sample. Specifically, the Northeast region underperformed in the “yes” sub-sample (47%) compared to the region’s share of TRTS respondents (60%).

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<sup>9</sup> Because the TRTS did not ask respondents to share their gender identifications, throughout this analysis I will use the gender-neutral pronouns “they” and “their” to refer to individual respondents.

**Table 5.** Summary of respondents' background characteristics by response type (n = 308).

VARIABLE	Yes N	Non-yes N
Response Choice		
Yes	239	
No		8
Not Sure		61
Grade Level		
Pre-k	6	4
Elementary	64	34
Middle	49	13
High	120	18
Current role		
In-service	118	39
Pre-service	117	30
Respondent's race		
Black/African American	19	4
Amer. Indian/Alaskan	1	0
Asian	5	7
Hispanic/Latinx	10	1
Multi-racial	3	3
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0	1
White	201	53
Region		
Northeast	113	42
South	37	10
Midwest	43	5
West	30	7
Student racial demographics		
Primarily White	70	33
Primarily Black/African American	44	8
Primarily Hispanic/Latinx	31	3
Primarily Asian	3	2
Racially mixed	89	23

### 3.4.2 Quantitative Analysis

To assess the empirical relevance of observed response differences based on grade level, region, and reported student racial demographics, I present results from a logistic regression analysis. This

analysis measured the likelihood of respondents selecting “yes” for item D (RACVIO), which represents the dependent variable. I introduced controls for several reported background characteristics. These controls include binary indicators for teaching PreK or elementary school students (YOUNG), living in the Northeast region (NE), teaching in a predominantly White school (STUWHITE) or predominantly Black school (STUBLACK), and whether a respondent identified racially as White (WHITE). I also included additional controls for whether or not respondents were in-service teachers, as well as a dummy variable for years teaching (i.e. 1-5 years, 5-10 years, >10 years).

Table 6 presents key results from logistic regression models based on the study’s sample of survey respondents and the binary outcome variable. Since this estimation strategy does not generate actual estimates of independent variable effects, I cannot directly evaluate the partial effects of teachers’ contextual and background characteristics on response probabilities. However, the magnitude of the estimated coefficients can be interpreted by converting them to odds ratios: the estimated factor by which an independent variable influences the odds of a particular outcome. For example, results in Model 1 indicate that respondents who reported working in schools consisting of primarily White students were only 38% as likely to agree that teachers should discuss incidents of racial violence with their students. This (and the other) odds ratio are quite consistent with the marginal effects implied by similarly specified linear probability models.<sup>10</sup>

**Table 6.** Odds ratios and t-statistics from logistic regression models (n = 308)

	Independent Variables			
	STUWHITE	WHITE	NE	YOUNG
<b>Model 1</b>				
RACVIO	0.38** (3.12)	2.07~ (1.90)	0.59~ (1.76)	0.31*** (3.97)
<b>Model 2</b>	STUBLACK	WHITE	NE	YOUNG

<sup>10</sup> Additional OLS models are available upon request.

RACVIO	2.24~ (1.79)	1.80 (1.57)	0.49* (2.41)	0.34*** (3.74)
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~ p<0.10, \*p<0.05, \*\* p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001

*Notes:* Cells contain odds ratios describing the effect of independent variables on the likelihood of respondents selecting yes for TRTS item D. The absolute values of t-statistics associated with a null hypothesis of no effect are reported in parentheses. Both models contain additional controls for the effects of years teaching and whether respondents were in-service or pre-service teachers.

Other results in Table 6 indicate that the racial composition of the student body at the school in which a respondent teaches had the largest effect on the odds that a teacher would affirm a belief in discussing racial violence with students. In schools where students are primarily Black, teachers were more than twice as likely to answer “yes” to item D. Racially identifying as White appears to have only a marginal effect on believing in talking about racial violence with students, and a positive effect was only statistically significant at the 90% Confidence Interval (p<0.10) when teachers reported working in predominantly White schools. At smaller Confidence Intervals, there were no statistically significant differences in the odds that White teachers responded “yes” to item D compared to teachers of color.

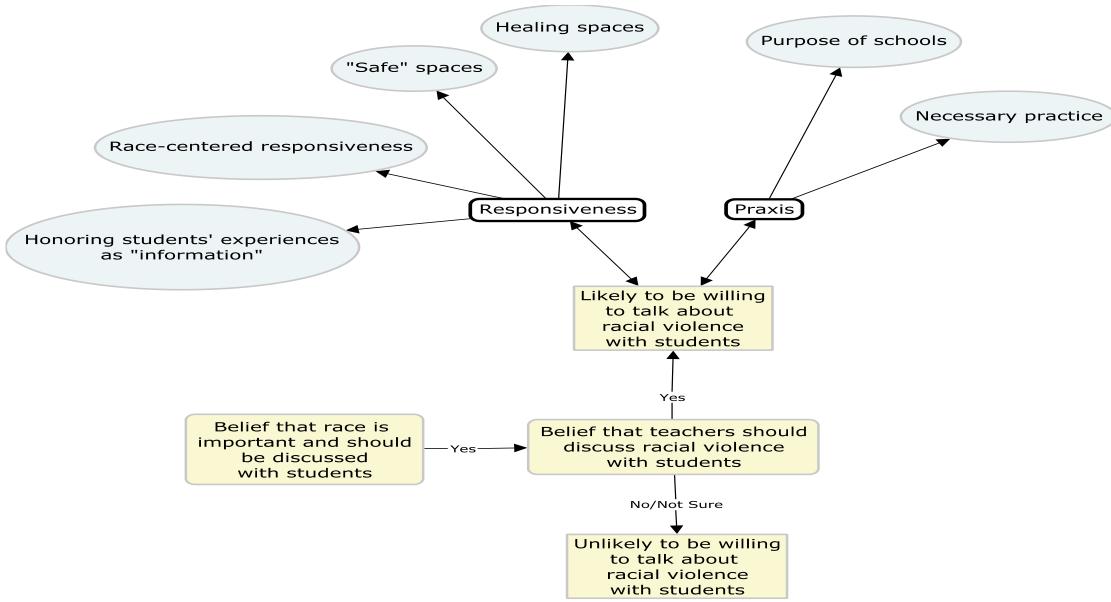
Research suggests that teachers of younger students often struggle to or altogether avoid engaging their students in conversations about critical social issues (Picower, 2012). Thus, not surprisingly, teachers of younger students were very unlikely to say they believe in talking about racial violence with students. Teachers of PreK or elementary school students in White schools were only 31% as likely to respond “yes” to item D, while teachers in predominantly Black schools were only 34% as likely. Both effects are statistically significant at the 99% Confidence Interval (p<0.001) and similarly sized.

Interestingly, geographic region appears to have an effect on teacher responses to item D. Teachers in the Northeast were only about half as likely to say they believe in having racial violence conversations with students. While findings across both predominantly White and

predominantly Black student populations were statistically significant ( $p<0.10$ ), the effect size for teachers in Black schools was larger and the likelihood of responding “yes” to item D was 10 points lower. Thus, it appears that while teaching in schools with primarily Black students was associated with being more likely to state a belief in talking about racial violence, this positive association is mediated by teaching in the Northeast region.

### **3.4.3 Qualitative Analysis: “Yes” Responses**

Statistically, TRTS data revealed that nearly two thirds of all respondents agreed that teachers should engage students in conversations about recent incidents of racial violence directed toward Black men and boys. An analysis of a subset of respondents particular to this study revealed that 78% of respondents who affirmed beliefs that race is important in students’ lives and is important and necessary for teachers to discuss with students also affirmed beliefs in having racial violence conversations with students. Across these respondents, three interrelated themes emerged, including: (a) Responsiveness to perceived student needs or interests; (b) Discussions as an aspect of good teaching practice; and (c) Differing outcome goals (see Figure 5). I discuss each of these findings in more detail below.



**Figure 5.** Logic model of teacher engagement in racial violence talk

### 3.4.3.1 Teacher responsiveness

Across the data, many teachers who believed that educators should engage in racial violence conversations with students shared that their impetus for holding these beliefs was at least in part grounded in a responsibility to be responsive to students' perceived interests or emotional needs. For instance, 35 respondents wrote that they believed they should discuss racial violence at least in part because their students cared about the issue. The grade level distribution of those respondents who shared this sentiment approximated the grade level distribution in the sample. Thus, it appears that the age of their students was not a significant factor in whether or not respondents shared this belief. However, the racial composition of the school did appear to shape respondents' perceptions about whether or not students cared about the issue. Of the 35 respondents who wrote that students care about racial violence, 28 (80%) reported teaching in a

school that was not primarily White despite predominantly White schools accounting for almost 30% of the sub-sample.

Among these respondents, it appears that some believed that discussing racial violence with students served as a way of honoring students' concerns about issues of race and racism in their lived and vicarious experiences. Several respondents shared that it would be "disrespectful", "harmful", or even "racist" towards their students if they did not discuss incidents of racial violence with them. One White science teacher in a predominantly Black middle school, for instance, wrote, "To ignore the instances of violence again black people would be completely disrespectful of me. My students are greatly affected by these incidences as am I." Another respondent shared that they believed it would be "unfair" to "pretend" that such instances of racial violence do not occur, have a potential negative effect on students, and that students do not "want to or need to talk about them." Many respondents shared that their own students often approach them with questions about racial violence incidents, and these questions prompted respondents to want to engage students around the issue. To underscore this point, one teacher wrote, "There are so many questions and fears around these events. If teachers choose not to talk or teach about it, they are saying that these events don't matter and I believe that is completely false." As responsive educators, these teachers seemed to believe that they held some responsibility to act in response to students' concerns.

Some respondents who shared consideration for students' concerns about racial violence explicitly linked discussing racial violence with students as part of a responsive, race-centered teaching praxis. One White middle school pre-service teacher in a predominantly Hispanic/Latinx school, for instance, noted, "Kids ask me. I would rather provide them comfort and a safe place to talk about what is really going on than pretend it isn't. In fact I think it is more racist to pretend that it isn't [sic] happening at all." This respondent seems to equate silence pertaining to racial

violence experienced by people of color as a form of racism. By seemingly acknowledging that White educators evading potentially difficult or challenging conversations about race as a form of racism itself, it appears this educator may, at least minimally, have been aware of the power that they wield as White educators in diverse classrooms and how that power could perpetuate racism by signaling to students of color that their thoughts about race and racism in society are not important.

Closely related to educator's responsiveness to students' perceived interests and needs was an expressed desire of educators to create classroom environments that could allow students to engage in these conversations freely and safely. 36 respondents noted that they believed these types of classrooms environments were necessary for engaging in racial violence conversations. This number represents 15% of all "yes" respondents. Among these respondents, 83% worked in schools that were either racially mixed or predominantly attended by students of color. Only four respondents worked in predominantly White schools. The distribution of these respondents across grade level was closely proportional to the overall distribution in the sub-sample of "yes" respondents.

In writing about creating engaging classroom environments, half (18) of the 36 respondents explicitly used a derivative of the word "safe" in describing the type of classroom environment they envisioned for engaging in racial violence conversations. The term "safe" was seemingly operationalized in various ways. For some respondents, "safe" seemed to be used to describe the classroom as a protected "space" for engaging in racial violence conversations. For example, one respondent wrote, "They [students] see it [racial violence] on the news, they read about it online, they hear about it at home. Children aren't stupid. They know what's going on in the world. It's the job of educators to provide a safe environment for them to learn about and come to understand

social realities and form educated opinions.” Another respondent shared that “students should have a safe space where they can learn” about racial violence incidents. Yet another respondent noted, “Students should know that school is a safe place to talk about current events especially those that are targeted people that look just like them.” For these and other teachers who responded similarly, it appears that they viewed the classroom as a protective physical place that is, to some extent, separate from places that may be less conducive to students engaging in racial violence conversations.

In another way, some respondents wrote about classrooms and schools as emotionally safe, and in some cases healing, spaces. In this sense, classrooms and schools were described as spaces where students could “feel” free and comfortable to engage in racial violence conversations in ways that acknowledged the possible pain and suffering students might be experiencing. Mindful that these sentiments were shared overwhelmingly by teachers in schools that were reportedly not predominantly White, it seems that the presence of students of color may have influenced teachers’ perceptions about which students have emotional connectedness to racial violence. Or, perhaps, educators who held these views may have been more attracted to working in racially diverse schools. In either case, it appears that teachers of predominantly White students did not necessarily see their students as suffering or emotionally injured by racial violence perpetrated against non-White bodies. For teachers in these classrooms, attentiveness to the creation of “safe” spaces appears to be a means toward education and awareness more so than healing. These educators wrote about safe spaces as means for helping students develop “awareness” and “a better understanding” of racial violence incidents by providing students “with some direction on how to form and opinion and reaction to them.”

For teachers of students of color, however, the creation of safe spaces seemed to come from a more emotive standpoint. One respondent noted that students “need safe ways to work through trauma.” Another shared that racial violence incidents “shape our students lives, to ignore them is false and ignores the struggles our students experience daily.” Here, these educators share their perception that students – presumably students of color given their reported educational contexts – might experience continuous and on-going emotional difficulties as a result of racial violence. Given that these respondents did not mention that their students were themselves victims of racial violence, one could surmise that these teachers implicitly recognized that some students of color may experience racial violence vicariously and might suffer from emotional harm as a result.

Some respondents drew a connection between creating emotionally safe spaces for students and positioning themselves as caring adults within those spaces. For some respondents, it seemed that part of creating emotionally safe classrooms was showing students that they also cared about racial violence as an issue and/or their students as emotional, possibly traumatized, beings. By situating themselves within the emotional contours of racial violence conversations, teachers could implicitly signal to students that their classroom is an emotionally safe space for such discourse.

To illustrate, one White high school math teacher wrote

Even though my students might be in class and especially in a subject that does not leave room for real life issues (math), I want them to be comfortable taking the time to address their thoughts and concerns around these issues...it sends a message to students if the teacher even thinks to say "let's [sic] take some time away from our lesson today because there are bigger things going on that we should all be aware of and I want you all to feel safe in this class and outside."

This educator and other similar respondents appear to conceptualize an active role that teachers might play in encouraging racial violence conversations in the classroom through tacit or explicit acknowledgement of students' interests and possible desires to talk about these incidents. Such an approach could be seen as part of a racially responsive praxis that could help students feel safe to discuss racial violence in the classroom. In a similar vein, another responded noted that students "should feel that their teachers are equally upset about these events and are working towards empowering their generation to make systemic changes." Thus, this teacher appears to have defined students feeling that their teacher cares about racial violence as an integral aspect of students feeling that the classroom is emotionally safe enough to engage in conversations about the issue.

I note here one very important distinction. For those respondents who wrote about their perceptions about racial violence as important in students' lives and something students cared about, only nine of the 53 responses coded in this way were from teachers in predominantly White schools. These nine responses represented less than 4% of respondents in the sample and only 13% of educators in predominantly White schools. On the other hand, the 44 responses by teachers in schools that were either racially mixed or predominantly students of color represented 18% of respondents in the sample and over one quarter (26%) of teachers in schools that were racially mixed or predominantly students of color. Thus, educators in predominantly White schools were far less likely to note that students either cared about racial violence or that the issue was important in students' lives. Across the 239 respondents who replied "yes" to item D, 75 (31%) respondents mentioned being responsive to their students' perceived needs or interests. Of these 75 responses, however, teachers in predominantly White schools were underrepresented compared to their proportion of "yes" respondents (19% compared to 29% of the sub-sample).

### **3.4.3.2 Good teaching practice**

Another prominent theme emerging from the sub-sample of “yes” respondents was that many respondents seemed to ground their endorsement of discussing racial violence with students in their own conceptualizations of what constituted good teaching practice. By good teaching practice, several respondents identified engaging students in racial violence conversations as part of their responsibilities as a teacher, particularly teachers of students of color. To be clear, of the 50 teachers whose responses were coded as aspects of good teaching practice, about two-thirds (33 total) were teachers who identified as teaching in schools that were either racially mixed or predominantly students of color. Moreover, grade level seemed to shape whether respondents viewed racial violence conversations as part of good teaching practice. Only 14% (7) of the 50 respondents taught at the elementary level and none taught at the PreK level. Two-thirds of respondents taught at the high school level. These statistics could indicate that teachers of older students are more likely to view having racial violence conversations as part of their teaching practice than teachers of younger students. This theoretical finding would align with the quantitative analysis, which found that teachers of younger students were only about one third as likely to respond “yes” to item D as teachers of older students.

Many respondents seemingly perceived discussing racial violence not merely as part of, but as a necessity of their teaching practice. Terms such as “must”, “need”, “our (or my) job”, “responsibility”, “essential” and “necessary” emerged in many responses. Many respondents wrote that they had an obligation to their students to engage this topic. One White teacher in a primarily mixed race high school, for instance, wrote, “These events are all around us and pretending that they do not exist is erasure. If students are interested in discussing and dealing with these events I think it is our responsibility as educators to hear their voices and open up that

discussion.” This teacher appears to have perceived their teaching practice as intricately linked to not only the interests of their students, but also the humanization of their students. Use of the term “erasure” seems to indicate that this teacher recognized incidents of racial violence as apposite to the experiences of their students and to not acknowledge these pertinent events could diminish the lived or vicarious experiences of their students. Likewise, another respondent – a White teacher in a predominantly Hispanic/Latinx elementary school– remarked, “It is impossible to humanize my students and not discuss current events. In order to ethically participate in my students [sic] education I must humanize them. Therefore we must discuss these events.” This respondents’ use of the term “humanize” in relation to discussing incidents of racial violence with students (presumably students of color given the reported school demographics) could denote a recognition of the potential impact incidents of racial violence might have on how students of color come to view themselves (or how society might view them) as fully-endowed human beings.

Some teachers wrote that they believed they had a responsibility as educators to allow space and opportunities for students to talk about how they have experienced racial violence personally or vicariously. For several respondents, discussing critical social factors outside of school appeared to be central to their teaching practice. To illustrate, one respondent posited, “School is about widening students' understandings of the world. High profile instances of violence against Black people are already out in the world and can't be avoided. Many of the kids WANT [respondent's emphasis] to talk about. To not talk about it is either to deny the world or to deny students.” By positioning not talking about racial violence incidents with students as “deny[ing]” students who “want” to talk about the issue, this teacher ostensibly identified granting students opportunities to engage this critical social issue inside of school as part of their responsibility to students. Moreover, this respondent noted that the issue of racial violence “can't be avoided” and,

thus, seemingly acknowledged that part of their teaching necessitated engaging the issue with students. This sentiment permeated throughout many responses. One White teacher in a diverse high school characterized ignoring the topic of racial violence in classroom conversations as “foolish” because racial violence could adversely influence “students’ vision of society and themselves.” Another educator questioned, “What are we doing in schools if we are not talking about what is going on outside of the four walls of our schools?” Several respondents characterized not talking about racial violence events occurring “outside the four walls of our schools” as “objectionable and pedagogically unsound”, “harmful”, and a “disservice” to students, connoting that evading these conversations could be deleterious to both teaching practice and students’ educational experiences. As educators, it seems that several respondents not only perceived engaging students in racial violence conversations as good teaching, but not engaging students in these discussions constituted bad teaching practice. This juxtaposition underscores that for many teachers, racial violence conversations may not simply serve as a productive addition to their practice – to not do so could be considered a form of educational malpractice.

#### **3.4.3.3 Differing approaches and goals**

A third theme that characterized “yes” respondents was the diversity of approaches and goals respondents conveyed for discussing racial violence with students. Respondents shared varying perspectives on what should be the focus of racial violence conversations, particularly regarding the critical nature that these conversations might have. For instance, one-quarter of respondents (58) wrote about their beliefs in ways that seemed to treat racial violence as a “current event” rather than a critical issue of race and racism. About 13% (31) of respondents wrote about wanting to “educate” students about the issue of racial violence. Only 10% of respondents mentioned wanting to encourage students to think critically about racial violence. Lastly, less than 6% (14)

of respondents expressed a desire to work towards some sort of social change as a result of these conversations. I explicate each of these categories below.

Of the 58 “current event” respondents, half taught at the high school level, over two-thirds (33) were in the Northeast region, and almost three-quarters (42) taught in racially diverse schools. Of the 42 respondents who taught in racially-diverse schools, 32 identified racially as White. Overall, “current event” respondents conveyed the least critical responses. These respondents appeared to focus primarily on raising awareness of racial violence incidents among students. For example, one responded wrote, “The point is not to point fingers or victimize anyone, but to show students that these things can, and do happen...” Some respondents appeared to suggest taking a more hands off, facilitative approach to engaging students. In these responses, teachers posited that students should hear and consider varying perspectives about racial violence incidents, without characterizing which types of perspectives could be harmful or beneficial. Consider, for instance, a White teacher in a racially mixed high school who commented, “We need to make students aware of current events and help them look at situations from a variety of perspectives.” In this comment, the teacher appears to take a neutral, non-critical stance on the issue of racial violence, favoring exposure to several different perspectives without specifying what perspectives might not be acceptable (e.g. White supremacist or oppressive viewpoints). Still, some educators seemingly abjured including any “opinions” or perspectives whatsoever, preferring instead to focus on “factual” information. Common across most of these responses was a recognition that students were interested in and already talking amongst each other about these incidents. However, these respondents made no mention of engaging critically with students around racial violence incidents. Responses focused, rather, on what appeared to be stances disconnected from epistemologically-based interpretations or emotions.

Similar to the “current event” respondents, “educate” respondents often alluded to racial violence being a notable topic of conversation for students outside of the classroom as an impetus for wanting to engage students about it inside the classroom. These respondents differed from “current event” respondents, however, in that they wrote about going beyond merely talking about racial violence to wanting to make sure students were informed about the issue. The “educate” respondents focused on their desires to inculcate students about the issue of racial violence, but in what still appeared to be non-critical ways. Of these respondents, about half reported teaching in high schools and three-fifths reported teaching at a primarily White school. Given that only 29% of “yes” respondents reported teaching at primarily White schools, this overrepresentation of White high school teachers could indicate that even willing teachers in these settings might struggle to engage White students in critical ways about racial violence. For many teachers in primarily White schools, responses often centered on ensuring students had “correct information” about racial violence incidents. As articulated by one teacher in a primarily White high school, respondents shared that teachers should help students “[look] at the cases, look at the evidence and make decisions.” Another respondent in a predominantly White elementary school noted that teachers need “training and guidance to be impartial, objective, and critical, [and] slow to draw conclusions.” Some respondents wrote specifically about wanting students to be better informed because of what they seemingly perceived as an abundance of incorrect messages about racial violence incidents, what one respondent characterized as the “Misinformation Age.” Part of the desire to educate students in primarily White schools may have stemmed from teachers’ concerns that White students, in particular, may have difficulty reconciling idyllic views of society with the gruesome realities of racial violence. One teacher in a primarily White middle school shared, for instance, that their “mostly white student population has no idea how to deal with this information.

Their view is that their suburban middle class community is isolated from this kind of violence...”

Another respondent appeared concerned that, as they wrote, “students [in predominantly White schools] will blame the victims because they don’t see it in their communities and rationalize that minorities are out of line and deserve that kind of treatment.”

About 10% of all “yes” respondents did write about wanting to encourage their students to think critically about racial violence as a desired outcome of engaging with students. About two-thirds of these respondents reported teaching at schools that were either racially mixed or were majority students of color. Juxtaposed against “educate” respondents, it appears that teachers of students of color may be more concerned with helping students critically analyze racial violence incidents than their peers who teach at predominantly White schools. For these educators, topics such as “institutional policies”, “privilege” and “power” were mentioned across responses. Some respondents wrote specifically about connections between racial violence and White supremacy, with one respondent writing, “America’s culture has perpetuated a white supremacy ideal, and that must be attacked if we are to call ourselves the ‘land of the free.’” For these respondents, it appeared that informational conversations may not be sufficient for the kinds of conversations in which they believed teachers should engage students around racial violence incidents. Rather, they seemed to believe that these conversations should connect students with larger institutional, systemic, and/or ideological factors, both historically and contemporarily, that reinforce and perpetuate racial oppression of people of color, particularly Black people. For some of these educators, a focus on some sort of social action or change also characterized their responses. These responses focused on teachers wanting to help equip their students with not only knowledge, but orientations toward social actions that could “address” racial violence and/or “end” racism more broadly. Some respondents also identified the possibility that students, themselves, may hold

racist beliefs and that changing those beliefs was an important outcome of these conversations as well.

### **3.4.4 Qualitative Analysis: Non-yes**

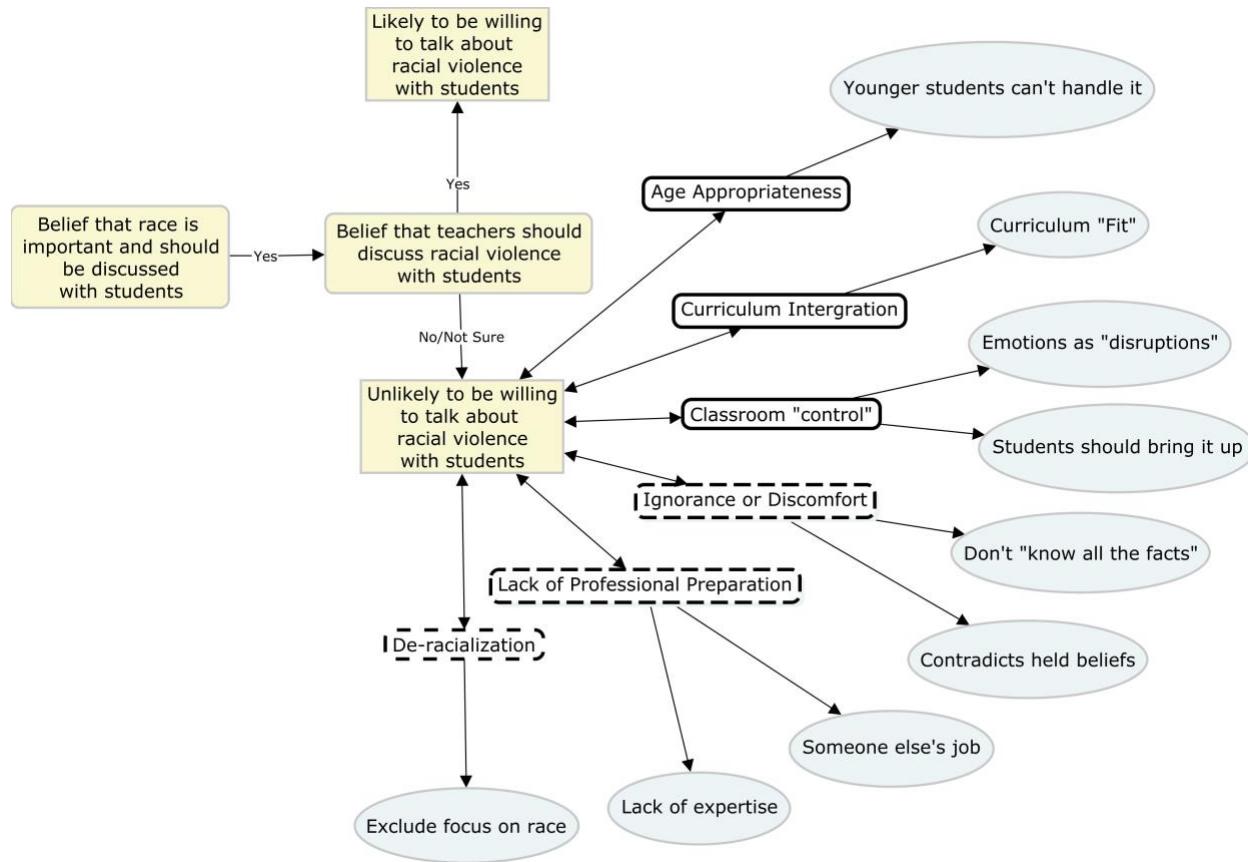
While over 70% of the sample agreed that teachers should discuss racial violence with their students, still almost one quarter of the sample either did not agree or were unsure if they agreed with this belief. Across these “non-yes” respondents, findings emerged that shed light upon why even racially aware educators might be uncomfortable having racial violence conversations with students. Figure 6 depicts a logic model based on these findings. The model illustrates how teachers might go from stating beliefs that race is important and should be discussed in the classroom to not agreeing that teachers should discuss racial violence with students. The model demonstrates that teachers’ uncertainty about or unwillingness to engage racial violence as a curriculum site can both influence and be influenced by at least three primary and three secondary factors<sup>11</sup>, including:

1. Age Appropriateness
2. Curriculum Integration;
3. Classroom “Control”;
4. Ignorance or Discomfort;
5. Professional Preparation; and
6. De-racialization.

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<sup>11</sup> Primary themes denoted by a solid border; secondary themes denoted by a dashed border. A brief summary of secondary findings is available in the chapter three appendix.

Given spatial constraints, this paper will focus on the three primary findings (Age Appropriateness, Curriculum Integration, and Classroom “Control”), which were the most prominent themes that emerged.



**Figure 6.** Logic model of teachers’ racial violence talk evasion

### 3.4.4.1 Age appropriateness

About one third (19) of “non yes” respondents in this analysis noted concerns about the developmental or age appropriateness of talking about racial violence with students. Not surprisingly, three quarters (14) of these respondents reported teaching younger students (PreK or elementary). However, teachers who reported teaching in racially diverse schools constituted two thirds of “non yes” respondents who expressed age as a concern compared to only constituting half

of the sub-sample. Within these responses, educators appeared to be willing to discuss racial violence under the caveat that they taught older students (all of these respondents were preschool or elementary school teachers). For instance, eight of the respondents who cited age as a concern used some derivative of the word “depends” in their response in conjunction with concerns about conversing with young children. Furthermore, respondents juxtaposed talking about racial violence with younger students and older students. For instance, a White teacher in a racially mixed elementary school wrote, “I believe that topic is not necessarily age-appropriate for my young students (first grade), but older students may want to discuss these incidents in the safe space of the classroom.” In this response, which was archetypal of many other responses, this teacher explicitly wrote that the age or grade level of their students could influence whether they would be willing to talk about racial violence. This teacher shared that they did not believe that the topic of racial violence was “age-appropriate” for younger children. There appeared to be some uncertainty in this response, however, as evidenced by the teacher’s use of the phrase “not necessarily”. It was also interesting that this teacher cited the classroom as a “safe space” for older students to engage the issue of racial violence, but (implicitly) not ineludibly for younger students.

Part of some respondents’ hesitation to discuss racial violence with younger students, from a teaching perspective, appears to be educators’ not knowing how to approach this sensitive subject with young children. Four respondents who cited students’ young age as a teaching obstacle also posited that racial violence conversations would/could be “too graphic” or “scary” for young children. One White pre-service teacher in a racially mixed school, for instance, wrote, “I think that this really depends on the age of the students in your classroom and whether or not this is a topic that they could emotionally handle.” A Black teacher in a racially mixed school responded, “Honestly, it depends on the age. Some of it may be too much and too graphic. Think about the

kid's emotions." In pointing to young students' "emotions" these respondent could be positing that young children might not be able to engage in racial violence talk in non-emotional ways or in ways that might not bring to the surface emotions that the teachers' may view as undesirable in the classroom. In couching their uncertainty about engaging in racial violence talk with young students in their concerns about their students' emotional well-being, it appears that these teachers may not know how to teach young children about potentially emotionally-charged topics like racial violence in ways that limit emotional distress that students might experience. Thus, these teachers may be inclined to avoid such topics altogether. For instance, by stating that "some of it may be...too graphic" as a reason not to engage, this respondent may also be stating that they lack awareness about how to make the issue less "graphic" in a way that would allow them to engage the topic with younger students. Another respondent echoed this sentiment by writing simply, "It's too scary for elementary school kids...Why bring this to the school?" By posing this question, this respondent appears to question the appropriateness of potentially sensitive conversations about racial violence in elementary schools, echoing the belief mentioned above that schools should be "safe spaces". However, in this sense, it seems that this respondent might be characterizing the school as a place to avoid these types of conversations, rather than conduct them in ways that are emotionally or psychologically safe for students.

Teachers also responded that they might be willing to discuss racial violence with younger students, but seemed to have some uncertainty about *how* they could do so. For example, one respondent wrote, "I'd have to think about the age of my students (twelve) and hear ideas about exactly HOW [respondent's emphasis] to do this before I can really answer." By coupling concerns about students' age with pedagogical considerations, this respondent seems to be uncertain about how their teaching practices could align with racial violence talk. That is, this

respondent appears to say that they may be *willing* to engage the topic with younger students, but might not believe they are *able* to employ effective teaching practices. Another respondent shared that they were unsure if their younger students could comprehend the issue. A White elementary school teacher in a primarily White school wrote, “I have young kids and I’m not sure if these topics would be too hard for them to understand.” This response could point to this teacher’s uncertainty about how to teach or engage students around the racial violence in a way that will enable students to gain a better understanding of the issue.

Respondents shared that racial violence talk with younger students should/could be different in nature than the types of conversations teachers might have with older students. In some instances, respondents directly juxtaposed their decisions or beliefs about not engaging younger students with the possibility that they might be willing to engage older students. For example, a White, preservice elementary school teacher in a racially mixed school wrote,

My answer would be yes if I taught older kids. I think we can certainly talk about these instances with K-2 students, but just on a different type of level, if that makes sense. Not in the same way I’d talk about it with a junior in high school, for example.

In this quote, the respondent shared a belief that teachers “can” discuss racial violence with younger students, but that these conversations would have to be “on a different...level” than what would occur with older students. By “level” it appears that the respondent suggested that teachers employ different teaching techniques for lower elementary students that would be developmentally appropriate for their age. Another respondent echoed this response, noting that a conversation about racial violence “is one that must be addressed at a level appropriate to the students’ developmental stage. I would think carefully before [bringing] up the topic among younger students.” While it is not clear what such a “level” might entail, it does appear that these teachers

differentiated racial violence talk by students' age range. This idea was reinforced by another respondent, who wrote, "I think that this really depends on the age of the students in your classroom and whether or not this is a topic that they could emotionally handle." In this response, it seems that this teacher focused on teachers' considerations of the emotional maturity of younger children when deciding whether or how to engage in racial violence talk.

#### **3.4.4.2 Curriculum integration**

About 13% ( $n = 9$ ) of "non yes" respondents pointed to concerns about how racial violence conversations could be integrated into their classroom curricula. Each of these respondents racially identified as White and all but two of them reported teaching in predominantly White schools. These responses primarily centralized teachers' subject matter curricula and included teachers questioning how applicable racial violence conversations are to the classroom environment. Several respondents reported a belief that there is a time and place for racial violence conversations, but not in *their* classroom during instructional periods. Some teachers described perceived limitations of what information they could cover in their subject areas as reasons for not engaging in these conversations. For instance, consider the following responses of teachers in primarily White schools:

You have to know your audience and parents as I'm a science teacher. Maybe in history class.

If the conversation comes up or issues surrounding it, discussion is important. If it doesn't come up in conversation, then it should during the reading of literature (MLK) etc. (civil war) (slavery) Understanding, tolerance, should be taught.

I am unsure only because I have yet define [sic] the context in which I would approach the topic of police brutality into an effective lesson.

Taken together, these and similar responses point to some respondents' unwillingness to engage in race talk in primarily White schools based upon an ownership of their curricula that restricted classroom discussions to the academic subject area at hand. These teachers seem to relegate racial violence talk to "appropriate" subjects, thereby defining it as practice that is only suitable in spaces determined acceptable within White racial contexts. By stating that racial violence could be discussed "maybe in history class" or incorporated into units on Martin Luther King, Jr. ("MLK"), the Civil War, or slavery, these respondents seem to suggest that racial violence is a subject relevant only when discussing issues historically relevant and explicitly related to the experiences of Black people.

Interestingly, over half of the respondents explicitly delineated specific courses that might be "appropriate" for having discussions about racial violence. Respondents often pointed to history, social studies, and English language arts courses as possible venues for racial violence conversations. A White high school math teacher in a racially mixed school commented, "There is a time and a place for this to happen. I'm not sure the math classroom is that place. English, social studies, yes." This respondent seemed to steadfastly believe in consigning racial violence talk to only these subject areas, as they went on to write, "I don't think it's the place for a math teacher with a 42 minute [sic] class period to choose to devote class time to ANY [respondent's emphasis] non-math topic." Other respondents shared similar views, with one teacher noting that they believed engaging in racial violence talk might be "easier to do in a history or an English class." A middle school science teacher responded that "social studies would probably have more opportunity to meaningfully tie [racial violence] in." Summarily, these responses seem to illustrate

that teachers may not have realized or been open to learning how they could integrate racial violence conversations into their subject area curricula, despite the myriad implications that racial violence could have across subject areas. Moreover, these responses indicate that some teachers may hold narrower views of curriculum that limit curricula to what is explicitly included in course texts (Eisner, 1994).

Some teachers expressed that they “might” be willing to engage in racial violence talk, but only if they could fit these conversations within their curricula. One respondent seemed to recognize the possibility of integrating racial violence into a non-social science course curriculum. This respondent, a White middle school math teacher in a predominantly White school, posited that they could “work in racism discussion by using data that illustrates racial disparity (like wages, or college education, etc.).” However, this respondent also shared an uncertainty about how to integrate “more recent events” into their curriculum. A White ELA teacher in a racially mixed school shared that integrating racial violence talk could “depend on how well it would work with the content you teach,” noting that it could be “hard” to engage in racial violence talk in “math or science class” but perhaps “easier to do in a history or English class.” By juxtaposing “hard” and “easier” it appears that this respondent did not rule out engaging in racial violence talk, particularly given that this respondent teaches ELA, but did observe that teachers in some courses may perceive challenges to this practice that teachers in other courses may not.

#### **3.4.4.3 Classroom “control”**

Almost one third (22) of “non yes” respondents expressed concern about how the emotional nature of racial violence conversations could potential cause “disruptions” in the classroom. Almost all of these respondents racially identified as White and about two thirds reported teaching at racially diverse schools. Moreover, 16 of these respondents (73%) were located in the Northeast region

and respondents were evenly divided between teaching younger and older students. Respondents noted that racial violence conversations could be controversial and/or too sensitive for some students, particularly those students who may have personal experiences with a loved one or community member being killed. Furthermore, a few respondents shared views that students, themselves, should bring up the topic of racial violence rather than the educator.

Several respondents expressed concern about the potentially emotional nature of racial violence conversations. For these respondents, any emergence of students' emotions in the context of these conversations seemed to be something they wanted to avoid. This was a particularly poignant sentiment among teachers in racially diverse schools. Among teachers in racially diverse schools, responses focused on how these conversations could, as one respondent wrote, "hit too close to home." A White teacher in a racially diverse middle school in the Northeast shared their view that "the graphic nature of some of it, and potential to get pulled into some very powerful, polarizing views and groups concerns me slightly." For this educator – whose comment encapsulated a common thread amongst many respondents – the impediment to engaging in racial violence discussions with students seems twofold: the horrific nature of these incidents as well as the possibility of having a conversation where students might become emotionally entrenched in opposing viewpoints. As noted by Sue (2013), Tatum (1992) and others, teachers in racially diverse classrooms often struggle with having conversations about race, many times resulting in evading these conversations altogether. These respondents seem to illustrate this difficulty, specifically by pointing to students' "emotions" and conversations potentially being "too graphic" for students to "handle". Moreover, multiple respondents pointed to the "politics" of racial violence would not be suitable for school contexts.

Some respondents shared that they might be willing to engage students in racial violence conversations, but noted that they would take their cues from students regarding whether or not to bring the topic up. Within this sub-sample, this sentiment was most salient among teachers of elementary school students. An underlying theme across these respondents seemed to be a recognition that young students are interested in talking and learning about racial violence, but some educators may be uncomfortable with the idea of bringing it up with them. One respondent plainly wrote, “I think at my students [sic] age if someone brings it up, it should be addressed, but I dont [sic] want to bring up murders to 8 year olds.” For this elementary school teacher, there seemed to be a willingness to discuss racial violence if students expressed a desire to, however the educator’s own desire to evade the conversation seemed apparent. By juxtaposing students’ possible desires to engage the topic with their own desire to not engage, this educator points to a quandary to which several respondents alluded: a desire to be responsive to students in the context of an issue some educators would seemingly rather avoid. One respondent described this conundrum as “rather tricky” by noting that students are exposed to these events and might naturally find the classroom to be a natural environment to discuss and learn more about them. It seems, though, that educators’ concerns point more to their desire to be sure that classroom management – or more accurately control – might suffer if they raise a topic for discussion that they are not sure students are ready or willing to engage. By waiting for cues from students, educators ostensibly believe that these conversations could be “safe” for the classroom given that students would presumably not be forced to engage a topic unwillingly.

### **3.5 DISCUSSION**

Sue theorized that race talk in the classroom often conflicts with Western notions of academic settings for several reasons. One reason, Sue conjectured, was that race talk may often evoke intense emotional responses from participants, hence violating an “implicit assumption that expressing and discussing emotions are not in the realm of legitimate academic inquiry and advancement” (Sue, 2013, p. 666) in the Western academic tradition. Moreover, as hooks (1994), Sleeter and McLaren (1995), Freire (1970) and others have noted, the Western academic tradition emphasizes docility in students, allowing for a hierarchical power relationship in classrooms wherein adult teachers value the maintenance of control over students. In this study, differences between “yes” and “non-yes” respondents appeared to, in part, depend upon teachers’ sense of their responsibility to be responsive to students’ perceived emotional needs. That is, many teachers who affirmed beliefs in having racial violence “talk” with students shared perceptions that many students may need emotional support to process a host of emotions they may feel from personal or vicarious experiences with racial violence. These educators expressed an apparent willingness to invite emotional conversations into their classrooms as part of the educational experience. That these educators were overrepresented in racially diverse schools illustrated a particularly acute awareness that many students of color, particularly Black students, may have visceral and emotional reactions to incidents of racial violence and helping students make sense of and, in some cases heal from, those reactions are legitimate aspects of academic engagement. Conversely, many “non-yes” respondents explicitly cited the possibility of having to embrace and respond to students’ emotions in the classroom as barriers to engaging in racial violence conversations. These respondents appeared to be uneasy about or altogether evade having racial violence conversations with students – particularly students who respondents perceived as possibly having experiences

with racial violence – by citing concerns about how students’ emotions could induce “chaos” in the classroom. In this way, it appeared that these respondents were concerned not just with the appropriateness of students exhibiting emotion in the classroom, but also with how these emotions might make controlling the classroom more difficult for teachers. Moreover, teachers wrote about evading racial violence talk because of concerns that younger students might not be emotionally mature enough to meaningfully engage in these conversations. The shortcomings of this view are twofold: (a) it assumes what students are emotionally capable or incapable of handling and (b) it provides no room for developing developmentally appropriate ways to engage students around the topic.

Sue also posited that the academic protocol is antithetical to using students’ lived experiences as sources of legitimate “data” in the classroom due to a perceived subjective nature of students’ accounts. In essence, Sue argued that the Western academic focus on observable and measurable data excludes “anecdotal” accounts. In this study, I found that many “non-yes” respondents wrote about adhering to “factual” information or “not having all of the information” as reasons for evading racial violence conversations with students. Also, for many “non-yes” respondents, a reliance on remaining strictly adherent to academic subject matter in the classroom presented opportunities to evade racial violence talk. These educators seemingly held narrower views of what types of interactions were appropriate for certain courses. Subjects such as English language arts, math, and science, for example, appeared to not be “appropriate” courses in which racial violence could be engaged as part of the curriculum because, to these respondents, there may have been no clear connections. On the other hand, “yes” respondents appeared to view engaging racial violence as a curriculum site to be part of good teaching practice. Particularly, these respondents often wrote about the “necessity” of allowing students to bring their lived experiences

with racial violence into the classroom and engaging students around those experiences. For these educators, who primarily identified as White and primarily taught in racially diverse schools, they seemed to believe that part of the academic experience was having space to make sense of their experiences – a kind of “lived curriculum” – in addition to the “formal” curriculum of the subject area. Yet, teachers of younger children were underrepresented among this group of respondents, signaling that many PreK through elementary school teachers are still less likely to identify the value of talking with students about racial violence at early ages. Do these educators think that younger students do not think about or have emotional responses to these incidents? Perhaps, as illustrated in the findings above, educators of young children may struggle to find developmentally appropriate ways to engage students around these incidents. More problematic, though, is the possibility that many educators may not think that younger students’ experiences and insights about racial violence are suitable sources of “factual” information for academic discussions. Whatever the case, it appears that younger students may not have opportunities to discuss their experiences, thoughts, and feelings about racial violence in ways that are responsive to their need to make sense of these incidents and, possibly, engage in processes of healing from trauma induced by racial violence.

### **3.6 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

In this study, I investigated teacher beliefs about discussing racial violence with students in the classroom. I was specifically interested in understanding how teacher background and contextual characteristics effect what teachers said they believed about racial violence talk with students, and what underlying differences existed among teachers who said they believed in racial

violence talk with students and those that did not. The findings suggest that the presence of White students and/or younger students had the strongest effects on the likelihood that teachers agreed that they should talk about racial violence with students. Differences between those who said they believed in having these conversations and those who did not appeared to center on differing concepts of what types of information and interactions were appropriate for classroom contexts. Teachers who said they believed in having racial violence conversations with students were likely to view this as central to good teaching practice, were responsive to perceived emotional needs and desires of students to talk about the issue, and valued students bringing their lived experiences and perspectives into the academic environment. Conversely, teachers who did not believe in or were unsure about having racial violence conversations with students, seemed to be uneasy about or evade these conversations by pointing to not knowing how to engage younger students, not observing any way to “fit” these conversations into their curriculum, or were concerned about students bringing their perspectives and emotions into the classroom as inappropriate or disruptive to the academic environment.

Given these findings, it seems apparent that believing in having racial violence conversations with students could be shaped by several factors, including: (a) Teaching White students versus teaching students of color; (b) teaching younger students versus teaching middle or high school students; (c) teachers’ valuing of students’ experiences as “information” in academic settings; (d) teachers’ desires to maintain control of their classrooms by limiting conversations to topics unlikely to elicit emotional responses; and (e) teachers’ responsiveness to the interests and emotional needs of students. These findings have numerous implications for theory, research, and practice in education. First, this study points to the need for the generation of additional theoretical frameworks that might help explain how teachers conceptualize the

classroom environment through an intersectional lens inclusive of, but not limited to, race, gender identity, age. Second, this study illustrates the need for additional research on how teachers' beliefs about racial violence emerge (or do not emerge) in and shape their interactions with students of different races, inclusive of the intersection of race, gender identification, and age. Lastly, for teacher educators and educational leaders, this study illustrates that many teachers may need additional support to develop ways of integrating discussions of sensitive racial issues, including racial violence, into their curricula. Moreover, teachers may need support to learn anti-oppressive ways that they can better support students who may be dealing with emotional distress from incidents of racial violence, including how to create space in their classrooms for students to express their perspectives and emotions in ways that add to the learning experience while honoring the experiential knowledge that students of color bring with them into the classroom.

### **3.7 LIMITATIONS**

This study, as almost all studies, was not without certain limitations that exist explicitly or furtively in the findings and analysis. Quantitatively, the TRTS was not designed to measure respondents' beliefs. Rather, the survey captured what respondents "said" they believed. Moreover, the TRTS did not capture several background and contextual characteristics that could have been included in statistical models to shed further light on the likelihood of respondents selecting "yes" for the outcome variable item D (e.g. respondents' gender identification, classroom level racial composition, city, state, or school). By designing the survey in this way, statistical analysis methods and controls were limited. I was not, for instance, able to measure variance in teachers' beliefs across and within subsamples. Most notably, we did not ask respondents if they

actually engaged students in racial violence conversations. While some respondents wrote in ways that alluded to discussing racial violence as part of their existing teaching practice, it was at times difficult to ascertain existing versus hypothetical responses. Thus, I do not know the extent to which racial violence conversations might actually be occurring in classrooms. Qualitatively, missing open-ended responses to item D more than likely affected the analysis and findings. The extent of this effect is obviously unknown. However, in the case of the much smaller “non yes” sub-sample, the presence of missing responses could have materially shaped coding results.

While Sue’s race talk framework focused on interracial dialogues about race, it is important to note that this study found that the predominant presence of White students in a school had a similarly predictive effect to teaching younger students on the likelihood that teachers agreed that they should have racial violence conversations with students. This presented an important theoretical limitation to this analysis. Given that only 7% of teachers at White schools were teachers of color, it appears that Sue’s framework could benefit from a theoretical extension of race talk in predominantly, if not completely, White settings. Are White students not part of a racial group? Do White students not think or have emotions about the killing of Black people? Is it not expected that White students want or need to have conversations about racial violence in their classrooms? These are important theoretical considerations not addressed in Sue’s framework, but appear to be pertinent to the findings of this study.

## **4.0 CHAPTER FOUR: SUPPORTING STUDENT ACTIVISM AND SOCIOPOLITICAL DEVELOPMENT**

This chapter focuses on the perspectives of students who are building sociopolitical consciousness and engaging in social action around education issues in an urban city. The key questions guiding this research are: *What are youth's perspectives on what educators can do to support youth activism and sociopolitical development?* This research builds on the scholarship focused on youth sociopolitical development, primarily on program practices that appear to cultivate critical consciousness in youth (Murray & Milner, 2015). I study youth's perspectives on what adult allies (e.g. teachers and afterschool program educators) can do to help support youth sociopolitical development. Specifically, what ecological and relational factors are important for adults to consider when engaging young people in sociopolitical consciousness building and social action? Given the previous chapter's findings – that many educators avoid engaging their students in critical conversations about race and racism – it is imperative to understand from students' perspectives what types of teacher-student interactions and environments might youth find to be supportive of their sociopolitical consciousness development. This inquiry is essential for educators, particularly because – as the previous chapter illustrated – many educators say they believe critical social issues like race/racism to be important in their students' lives but hesitate to engage students in critical conversations about issues like race. Thus, the goal of this chapter is to better understand students' perspectives of various ways that educators can engage students around and support students in developing a critical understanding of social issues and moving toward acting to address inequities and injustices.

In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I explicate what I mean by youth sociopolitical development. Inherent in the discussion on youth sociopolitical development is a focus on outcomes and central tenets of youth organizing and sociopolitical development programs as well as central tenets of sociopolitical development, both as a broader conceptual framework and specifically as it pertains to youth. I then explain the methods employed in the study. The subsequent section outlines the findings of the study, and in the final section, I provide implications and conclusions.

#### **4.1 LITERATURE REVIEW**

This study draws from the literature on youth organizing and youth sociopolitical development. Youth organizing can be thought of as a grassroots approach to youth development that employs social justice strategies to help youth develop and deploy skills in attempts to create meaningful interpersonal and institutional change in their communities in the promotion of societal improvement (Akiva et al., 2017; Christens & Kirshner, 2011). Youth sociopolitical development (YSD) is characterized by social, emotional, and psychological processes and activities that lead adolescent young people to better understand institutional and systemic aspects of unjust social conditions, develop efficacy around addressing these issues, and engage in social action directed toward transformative social change (Murray, 2017a; Murray & Milner, 2015). Taken together, this collective body of literature illustrates processes youth undergo to develop as social change agents in their communities (in both a geographic and in a psychosocial sense) as well as the skills youth develop to maximize their engagement and impact.

Checkoway and Aldana (2013) noted that grassroots youth organizing and sociopolitical development are each distinct forms of youth civic engagement. In examining four popular forms of youth civic engagement (i.e. citizen participation, grassroots organizing, intergroup dialogue, and sociopolitical development), the authors delineated each form of engagement by several aspects, including basic strategies, conceptions of youth roles, engagement activities, conceptions of power, and conceptions of youth development. Checkoway and Aldana observed that grassroots organizing and sociopolitical development were discrete from the other forms of engagement in that they both emphasized collective organizing and action around challenging the social status quo. Moreover, both forms of engagement centralize youth as socially active and agential members of communities, strategic and critically informed social actors, and empowered human beings who can create social change outside of traditional civic institutions.

In their examination of youth organizing programs, Christens and Kirshner (2011) identified four common elements including relationship development, popular education, social action, and participatory research/evaluation. In youth organizing contexts, the authors observed that young people develop relationships differentially from adults; youth tended to emphasize a more communally interpersonal aspect of trust-building using games, ice-breakers, group check-ins and unstructured social time over one-to-one relationship building that often characterizes adults actions in similar contexts. Christens and Kirshner (2011) referred to popular education as education that built upon Freirean and other emancipatory education techniques to help build critical perspectives on social systems that perpetuate inequalities. Youth organizing programs typically result in a social action phase, wherein youth, through critical analysis and relationship-building, engage with their peers to address salient social issues. Lastly, the authors observed that many models of youth organizing are “bracketed by research and evaluation” (p. 33) through

partnerships with institutions such as local universities. Research activities are often characterized by adults inculcating youth with research skills utilized in empirical social science research, including research design, data collection and analysis, policy research, and public presentation of research findings.

Youth organizing and sociopolitical development programs are multifaceted both structurally and pedagogically. These programs often have an intentional and explicit focus on helping youth engage in transforming oppressive conditions in their communities through critical social action (S. Ginwright & James, 2002), thereby helping youth figure out how to address systemic issues in ways that improve social conditions for themselves and others as well as disrupt views of themselves as subjugated, politically ineffectual beings. Broadly, approaches to this work center on any or a combination of the following areas:

- a) Youth-centered spaces: Youth develop positive racial and cultural identities and the ability to critically analyze social conditions and heal from social and psychological trauma in spaces centered around youth culture (Akom et al., 2008; Jennings et al., 2006);
- b) Anti-oppression: Activities are designed to promote collective social action with the goal of disrupting and dismantling oppressive policies and practices (Watts & Hipolito-Delgado, 2015);
- c) Empowering: Youth become empowered as efficacious, agential beings within their sociopolitical contexts (Jennings et al., 2006);
- d) Social justice-focused: Youth development and activities are focused upon broader systemic changes to bring justice to marginalized communities (S. Ginwright, Cammarota, & Noguera, 2005); and
- e) Emancipatory: Programs promote youth self-determination (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Youth organizing and sociopolitical development programs also employ numerous pedagogical practices specifically aimed at supporting critical consciousness development and social action.

Murray and Milner (2015) identified four pedagogical aims prevalent across the YSD literature, including:

- a) Educators engaging youth in deepening their historical and current knowledge about their own identities and their communities;
- b) Educators helping youth develop cultural, community and social context awareness through projects, readings, and experiences;
- c) Educators helping youth develop critical self-reflection skills to analyze and examine their developing knowledge and awareness; and
- d) Educators inculcating youth with research skills to study their communities in order to act on addressing injustices.

Popular practices aimed toward achieving these goals include having young people read historical and contemporary texts featuring one or more of their identities (Bethea, 2012; Jackson & Boutte, 2009), facilitating youth in critiquing popular culture, including movies, songs, and news media (Morrell, 2002), helping youth situate their own insights and experiences within inequitable social systems through legal (Stovall & Delgado, 2009) and social (Stovall et al., 2009) studies, and having youth lead research projects and produce visual or performance art that critically analyzes and presents their findings (Fine, 2009; Irizarry, 2009; Kirshner et al., 2011; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

While it may seem that youth are particularly motivated to participate in grassroots organizing and sociopolitical development programs in order to make a difference in society and their communities, many youth hold diverse motivations for engaging in these types of programs.

Akiva et al.’s (2017) study, for instance, found that youth not only attend grassroots organizing programs to participate in social justice efforts, but also for the sanctuary that these programs provide. The researchers noted that youth conceptualized these spaces as affirming of their ways of identifying, ideas, and voices as well as spaces shielded them from possible social ills. This finding was consistent with Murray’s (2017) study in which youth activist mentors stressed the importance of creating protected spaces for their programs’ participants as well as several conceptual models of youth sociopolitical development programs (e.g. Akom et al., 2008; Ginwright & James, 2002; Jennings et al., 2006). Additionally, youth might also become motivated to engage in social change by observing adults who model transformative or social justice behaviors and efforts (Seider et al., 2017) or in order to become more personally connected with peers (Forenza et al., 2017).

#### **4.1.1 Factors that Can Influence YSD**

Multiple studies have revealed the importance that peer and family support can have in YSD. For instance, Diemer and Li (2011), in their investigation of potential factors that could influence future political participation of youth in low-socioeconomic status (SES) and working class families, found that “parental and peer sociopolitical support facilitates marginalized youth’s perceived capacity to effect sociopolitical change, sociopolitical control, and self-reported social action participation” (p. 1828). These findings were important, the authors noted, because sociopolitical control and social action orientation were both found to be predictive of voting behavior. In other words, the more sociopolitically efficacious and activist-oriented youth felt they were, the more likely they were to vote, a finding that was contrary to earlier research which posited that the more critically conscious youth became, the less likely they were to participate in

traditional forms of civic participation (M. A. Diemer & Li, 2011). Additionally, Diemer, Hsieh, and Pan (2009) found that youth race relations and parental support could lead to healthy self-definition and subsequently motivation to help transform sociopolitical inequities amongst minority youth. Christens and Peterson (2012) found that increased sociopolitical control was positively correlated with important individual, family, and community outcomes including family cohesion, social support, and self-esteem, thereby establishing a responsive relationship between sociopolitical development and peer and family support.

Christens and Dolan (2011) observed that the most salient outcome of their investigation of a youth organizing initiative was sociopolitical development. The authors noted that youth organizing participants developed “the kind of sophisticated understanding of power that grows most readily from direct personal experience” (p. 539). These findings have important implications particularly for Black (and Brown) youth in outside of school time contexts because community cultural support and participation are critical and especially salient to the development of many racial minority youth (Banks et al., 2007). The importance of OST contexts was illustrated in Godfrey and Grayman’s (2014) study of open classroom climate and its relationship to youth critical consciousness development. Using quantitative survey data from over 2700 US ninth graders, the researchers found that open classroom climate positively predicted youth’s sociopolitical efficacy both inside and outside of school, as well as critical action outside of school. While these results differed from Diemer and Li’s (2007) study, which found no such relationship between teacher support and YSD, Godfrey and Grayman (2014) posited that the differences in results could be due to sample characteristics and youth’s developmental stages. Nevertheless, both studies provide evidence that both inside of school and outside of school supports can positively influence YSD, particularly for African American and other racial minority youth.

Popular culture has also been identified in the literature as a significant influence, positively and negatively, on YSD. Cultural media, such as television, film, and the Internet, can be very influential in the lives of youth (Morrell, 2002; Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). YSD researchers have used these influential avenues as opportunities for critical consciousness training. Watts et al. (2002), for example, examined the practices of their own youth development program for African American males, age 11-21, which centered around hip hop culture and used films and videos as sources for critical reflection and analysis of sociopolitical issues. This particular pedagogy was critical because, as the authors noted, “A critical consciousness of mass media can help young men deconstruct experiences that are related to race, culture, and gender and that are part of their daily experiences” (p. 44). Likewise, Morrell (2002) explored how critiquing popular culture, which he described as “a terrain of ideological struggle expressed through music, film, mass media artifacts, language, customs, and values” (p. 73), could enhance YSD. Reflecting on and analyzing his own teaching experiences with urban youth, the author found that youth were able to improve their critical analytical skills by combining contemporary popular culture with historical and literary contexts, which allowed for reflection, analysis and the production of their own texts and media through a more critical lens.

#### **4.1.2 Outcomes of YSD**

As a result of involvement in grassroots organizing or sociopolitical development programs, youth may experience a plethora of positive outcomes. As noted in chapter two, for many youth, the development of critical consciousness of unjust social issues represents the most studied outcome of program participation. However, evidence suggests that some students may experience academic gains as well (Cammarota, 2011). Youth may also experience a stronger sense of

personal empowerment and agency through increasing their capacities to engage, socio-politically, in their communities (Iwasaki, 2016). Increased capacities might include, for example, young people learning how to utilize modern technological tools (Fullam, 2017; Vakil, 2014), documentary filming (Stovall et al., 2009), or various modes of creative expression (Clay, 2006; Cruz, 2013; Hanley, 2011; Turner, Hayes, & Way, 2013) as tools in their organizing and activism. Moreover, research suggests several developmental outcomes for youth as well as, including psychological and sociopolitical empowerment, leadership development, civic development, psychosocial wellness, and academic engagement and SPD (Christens & Dolan, 2011; Christens & Peterson, 2012; Kirshner & Ginwright, 2012).

#### **4.1.3 Adults' Roles in YSD**

Young people may not develop a deep sense of sociopolitical consciousness on their own. Rather, relationships and relationship building between youth and adults can be essential components of YSD. While the expertise adults bring to YSD contexts is critical, so, too, are the nature of interactions between adults and youth. Shiller (2013), for instance, found that building strong interpersonal relationships with youth, in addition to encouraging critical analysis and fostering political efficacy development, was an important aspect of adults' YSD work. A key aspect of youth-adult relationships in YSD work includes adults' ability to "authentically engage young people in discussions about real problems in their communities to provide them a set of skills for addressing those problems" (Shiller, 2013, p. 88). Youth often want and need adults to help guide, supervise, and support (Wong, Zimmerman, & Parker, 2010) them through cognitive, experiential, and spiritual demands (Watts et al., 1999, 2003) inherent in moving toward a holistic sociopolitical development. Therefore, the nature and quality of interpersonal relationships between adults and

youth in YSD activities are critical, as these relationships can often shape young people's overall experiences, behaviors, and outcomes (Zeldin, Christens, & Powers, 2013). The broader youth development literature has stressed the importance of youth-adult relationships in shaping the quality of youth programs (C. Smith, Akiva, Arrieux, & Jones, 2006) and youth engagement (Greene, Lee, Constance, & Hynes, 2013; Serido, Borden, & Perkins, 2011), but has inadequately addressed how adults shape their interactions with youth with regards to sociopolitical development and youth participation in social action (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

A review of youth organizing and YSD literature reveals various roles that adult partners play in supporting youth organizing and activism. Adults' roles in YSD work include tutors (M. R. Warren et al., 2008), teachers (Dover, 2013; Jeffrey M R Duncan-Andrade, 2005; Stovall & Delgado, 2009), and mentors (Morrell, 2002; Shiller, 2013). Moreover, can be key links to creative or professional development, including adults who are teaching artists (Dover, 2013; Duncum, 2011; Foster, 2012; Hanley, 2011; Stovall, 2006a) or technology experts Stovall et al., 2009; Vakil, 2014). The nature of youth-adult relationships in programs varies greatly, from relationships in which adults and young people work together but do not equitably share power, to egalitarian partnerships where power is equally distributed, and laissez faire engagement in which adults "take a back seat" to youth. In discussing potential roles of adults in YSD programs, Wong et al. (2010) noted that "adults can serve as resources and collaborators – versus being the experts – by facilitating critical dialogue, awareness, and building skills towards critical consciousness in partnership with young people" (p. 105). By observing that adults can be "resources and collaborators" as opposed to "experts" the authors observed a fundamental difference in approach between instructors and facilitators: Instructors may often see themselves, epistemologically, as gatekeepers of knowledge, whereas facilitators may work from more of a constructivist paradigm

where knowledge is co-constructed (Creswell, 2014) by both youth and adults in collaborative modus. A facilitative approach to YSD work can also entail a higher degree of power sharing by adults. These varying educational and advisory roles indicate that adults who work in YSD contexts bring a variety of experiences and expertise to their work and are able to guide youth sociopolitical development in a broad spectrum of ways.

Given the diversity of motivations, activities, and outcomes youth bring to and get out of their experiences in grassroots organizing and sociopolitical development, it is apparent that these programs can fill voids that many youth encounter in their educational experiences. It is still unclear, however, how youth perceive the support they receive, do not receive, or would like to receive from adults in order to support their organizing and activism efforts. For instance, what types of support do students describe wanting from their teachers as they build their sociopolitical consciousness and engage in social action toward transformational change? By exploring students' perspectives of the types of support they would like from educators, this adds to the literature and advances researchers' and practitioners' understandings regarding how adults might support youth in consciousness building and activism.

## **4.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMING**

This study utilizes two intersecting conceptual frameworks as analytic tools to examine youth perspectives on environmental and relational aspects conducive to their critical consciousness development and engagement in social action. The first conceptual framework I discuss is Watts's and colleagues' *sociopolitical development* theory, focusing particularly on eco-transactional aspects of sociopolitical development. I then turn to the *social justice youth*

*development* model conceptualized in a series of papers by Ginwright and colleagues to contextualize sociopolitical development within a discussion of youth development. In this study, I use the *analyzing power in social relationships, making identity central* and *encouraging collective action* tenets of SJYD as analytic tools to understand how youth make sense of the role of educators as well as the personal developmental aspects that are central in their sociopolitical development. I use Watts et al.’s eco-transactional tenet of their sociopolitical development theory to frame power analysis and identity within a context of social transactions and experiences embedded within a youth organizing program.

#### **4.2.1 Sociopolitical Development**

Watts, Griffith, and Abdul-Adil (1999) conceptualized sociopolitical development as “the psychological process that leads to and supports social and political action” (p. 256). The authors juxtaposed sociopolitical development from critical consciousness by describing the latter as the “cognitive cornerstone” (p. 257) of the former. Watts et al. originally conceived sociopolitical development using a stage model. This model included: 1) an *Acritical stage*, in which one believes society to be organized according to real differences in group competencies; 2) an *Adaptive stage*, in which one acknowledges social inequities, yet takes no action to provide for the common good of marginalized groups; 3) a *Precritical stage*, in which adaptive behaviors are questioned and replaced by concerns for marginalized communities; 4) a *Critical stage*, in which one challenges the inequitable organization of society and recognizes the need to engage in social change efforts, and; 5) a *Liberation stage*, in which social action replaces adaptive behavior in order to disrupt oppression and marginalization.

In later work, Watts, Williams, and Jagers (2003) advanced an eco-transactional approach to examining sociopolitical development, wherein transactional and ecological experiences provide important contexts for analyses. This eco-transactional approach complicated and ultimately advanced the earlier stage theory model. Based on interviews with 24 social activists in the U.S., Watts et al. (2003) posited that sociopolitical development transcends traditional notions of cognitive development, which tend to reward knowledge “banking” (Freire, 1970; 2003) wherein pupils simply retain and reiterate information. Noting that sociopolitical development is a relative notion subject to one’s unique circumstances and context, they found that researchers must also consider the potential influences of both transactional and ecological factors on sociopolitical development. Transactional factors, according to Watts and colleagues, consist of the cumulative effects of life experiences. They stated, “The circumstances of one transaction (e.g., events, insights, actions, influences, and attitudes) shape subsequent thinking and behavior and thereby decrease or increase the likelihood of experiencing or creating certain future transactions” (p. 191). Therefore, transactional factors represent a compound interest accrued to life experiences and relationships that contribute, epistemologically, to the formulation of one’s sociopolitical viewpoints. Ecological factors include social and environmental influences. These factors, according to the researchers, “stress the role of settings and their social dynamics” (p. 192).

Altogether, the authors re-conceptualized sociopolitical development as a cumulative and recursive process where future transactions are guided and given meaning by previous ones, and future ones can alter the interpretation of past ones. Moreover, each transaction is a unique situation; it is a combination of an experience venue, aspects of the self, social influences, significant events, and functioning in an organizational role. (p. 192)

These findings complicated Watts and colleagues' initial stage theory, particularly pointing out that stage theory "did little to capture the role that settings, roles, and specific experiences played" (Watts et al., 2003, p. 190) in sociopolitical development. Indeed, these findings suggest that SPD is a dynamic process that can be influenced, both positively and negatively, by various individual experiences and environmental influences.

#### **4.2.2 Social Justice Youth Development**

Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) conceptualized a theory of social justice youth development (SJYD) that built, in part, upon Watts et al.'s (2003)<sup>12</sup> theorization eco-transactional aspects of sociopolitical development. The authors premised their concept of SJYD upon addressing the authors' perception of popular youth development models' (e.g. positive youth development) "inability to examine the complex social, economic, and political forces that bear on the lives of urban youth" (p. 82). The intentional creation of ecological contexts conducive to youth sociopolitical development and social action engagement is a central focus of SJYD. Akom, Cammarota, and Ginwright (2008) posited that purposefully creating spaces that centralized youth culture was essential in helping youth develop critical consciousness and engage in social action. The authors termed these spaces "Youthtopias," and described them as spaces that are "created, constructed, and designed by young people themselves," providing "opportunities for young people to connect with peers, adults, ideas, experiences, and activities that address pressing social and community problems" (p. 114). Recent studies by Cammarota have illustrated that the types

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<sup>12</sup> Ginwright and Cammarota cited Watts et al.'s work prior to Watts et al.'s article being published. Therefore, although the Ginwright and Cammarota article appeared in print prior to Watts et al.'s work, the former were able to pull from the ideas expressed by the latter.

of spaces delineated above can be created not only in outside of school contexts, but inside of school as well. Cammarota's participatory action research in the context of a SJYD program inside of a Tuscan, Arizona high school, for example, illuminated not only positive outcomes that youth may experience from such engagement, but also an ecological context that could facilitate youth sociopolitical development (Cammarota, 2011, 2016; Cammarota & Romero, 2011).

To differentiate their model from other youth development models, Ginwright and James (2002) noted several competencies particular to SJYD, including sociopolitical development and analysis, social and community problem solving, decision-making, healing and spiritual development, and community well-being and just institutional practices. They also noted that outcomes associated with SJYD differ from outcomes associated with other popular models of youth development. Ginwright and James stressed that SJYD is more explicit about addressing serious social issues that youth in marginalized or exploited communities face, helps youth develop as agents of transformative social change rather than people who are merely resilient to social inequities, and fosters critical consciousness development and engagement in critical social action.

In outlining SJYD, Ginwright and James delineated five core tenets of SJYD:

- a) Analyzing power within social relationships (understanding how institutional misuse of power can create inequitable sociopolitical systems);
- b) Making identity central (understanding how youth see themselves, how they are viewed by society, and the effects identity can have on power and privilege);
- c) Promoting systemic change (capacity of youth to transform oppressive institutional practices and counter narratives that suggest individual culpability for structural inequities);
- d) Encouraging collective action; and

- e) Embracing youth culture (set of ideas and a common worldview shared by youth). (pp. 35-37)

The tenets *analyzing power in social relationships*, *making identity central*, and *encouraging collective action* shape the focus of this chapter. For Ginwright and James, analyzing power in social relationships is critical because inequities in the exercise of power in individual and group relationships are at the root of social problems. They posited that youth must “understand how the misuse of power in institutions creates systems that reproduce multiple forms of inequality” (p. 36) as a foundation of their sociopolitical development. This analysis of power, Ginwright and James explained, involves youth becoming educated about the political and organizational structures of social systems and beginning to formulate and propose policy solutions. Strategizing about potential policy solutions necessitates youth developing the capacity to not only identify power holders who are sometimes opaque and not easily discernible, but also engage in a critical self-reflective practice (Milner, 2003) where youth can identify and analyze the role of power in their personal lives. For Ginwright and James, one outcome associated with this tenet is that youth enhance and deepen their sense of purpose in life. That is, youth are able to situate their social justice work within broader personal, professional, and social goals, thereby grounding their social justice work within a self-defined ethos of life.

Ginwright and James (2002) stressed the importance of centralizing young people’s identities as essential to their development as critical social actors. A focus on identity is important because forming a strong self-concept during the adolescent period is particularly acute during this phase of development (Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Ginwright and James stressed that inequality is often linked to identity. The authors noted that identity consists not just of how one sees herself, but also how society sees her. Thus, people’s experiences with

inequitable social systems are often influenced by how they identify and how society sees them. Identity, however, can also serve as a source of solidarity. That is, young people often develop a sense of solidarity and camaraderie with others based upon their shared identities or their positions as allies to people with different identities but to whom they empathize. Outcomes associated with positive identity development include instilling a sense of pride regarding one's identity and understanding of how social forces can influence one's perception of their identity.

Ginwright and James (2002) described collective action as “the process of engagement that seeks to alter existing social conditions through noninstitutional means” (p. 36). The premise underlining “noninstitutional means” as an avenue for youth collective actions is an inherent critique of the incrementalism and reliance upon existing social institutions consistent with classic liberalism – a critique notably advanced by critical race theorists among others (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Thus, for Ginwright and James, extra-institutional means of disruption and advocacy, such as sit-ins, rallies, and other forms of collective social actions are essential in helping youth develop as social justice advocates presumably because these venues present greater opportunities to create social change more hastily than institutions that might function to slow down social change. Moreover, the premise underlying the emphasis that Ginwright and James place on collective rather than individual action is that social change occurs through the efforts of groups of people as opposed to individual actors. Thus, SJYD can function as a counter-narrative (Milner & Howard, 2013; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) to a master narrative that social change is the product of a single (often male) charismatic leader, such as Martin Luther King, Jr., Nelson Mandela, or Mahatma Gandhi. Instead, a supposition of SJYD is that the capacity for long term, sustainable social change is built upon collective organizing, advocacy, and activism

that can sustain losses or changes in leadership because everyone feels empowered to continue change efforts.

#### **4.3**

#### **METHODOLOGY: CASE STUDY**

This study utilized case study methodology (Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994) to investigate young people’s motivations for attending a youth organizing program, their desires for their experiences in the program, and what they take from their experiences. The case study method is a qualitative research method investigators employ to study phenomena within their natural contexts (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Denzin and Lincoln (2013) described qualitative research, fundamentally, as “a situated activity that locates the observer in the world” (p. 6), noting that qualitative research elucidates the world through a series of depictions, illustrations, and exemplifications interpreted by researchers, but informed by participants. Qualitative researchers “focus on observing, describing, interpreting, and analyzing” (Bazeley, 2013, p. 4) people’s experiences, actions, and perceptions about themselves and their world. Thus, qualitative research is a way of sense making that privileges experiential knowledge and cultural ways of knowing over often hegemonic notions of objectivity and detachment. What primarily distinguishes qualitative research from philosophical prognostications about social phenomena is the systematic ways in which qualitative researchers conduct their investigations, analyses, and interpretations. Indeed, qualitative research comprises a coagulation of interpretive suppositions, methodological foundations, and research methods (Creswell, 2013; Ellis et al., 2008). The primary purpose of a case study in qualitative research is to examine some aspect of a phenomenon that is unique (Guest et al., 2013; Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994), often with the goal of advancing or refining theory about the

phenomenon of interest that can be applied to a larger population (Stake, 1994; Yin, 1994). Case studies are bounded by time and activity, and researchers often employ a variety of data collection procedures to collect detailed information (Creswell, 2014).

### **4.3.1 Situating Myself within the Study**

As I noted in chapter one, understanding one's relationship to and with their research context is an essential reflective practice for qualitative researchers. Understanding one's own positionality is critical for researchers because having an in-depth understanding of how one's own beliefs, assumptions, and biases can emerge in their research can help a researcher guard against potential "dangers" (Milner, 2007) that could emerge while conducting research with historically-marginalized communities. Milner's (2007) framework (which I described in chapter one) was useful in helping me to reflect upon the role that my own experiences and perceptions played in this study. As a Black male whose parents and community instilled a strong sense of racial and cultural pride and deep knowledge of the history and experiences of Black people in the U.S., in many ways I saw a younger version of myself reflected in the young people I observed and interviewed. The struggles, successes, hopes, and ambitions youth described echoed sentiments expressed in conversations I had with family members, mentors, and friends at about the same age. As a nonprofit professional in Mississippi who worked with afterschool programs and school districts to help improve students' academic outcomes for over nine years, I was struck by what I perceived as a lack of attention paid to helping students develop a critical consciousness about the issues and systems surrounding them that were negatively impacting their life chances. I often wondered how we as adults could expect young people to grow and prosper if they did not develop an understanding of the obstacles they face? As a researcher with this background, I wanted to

understand not just how youth build their sociopolitical consciousness, but what aspects of their consciousness-building experiences were most beneficial and could be transferable to schools and other programs that may not be focused specifically on organizing and activism.

Although the youth and adult allies I observed were by and large of the same racial background as I, I made no assumptions that we shared all of the same perspectives and opinions about the nature of social issues or how to develop sociopolitically. I am 20 to 25 years older than all of the youth I observed, meaning my lived experiences were qualitatively different in some very important ways. For instance, social media in its present form (e.g. Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat) did not exist when I was their age. Moreover, the internet was in its infancy and smartphones were a decade away from their introduction to the consumer market. As I was attempting to understand young people's experiences in this study, I attempted to understand my own experiences in similar contexts as well. Thus, as I engaged this research, I posed several reflective questions to myself, such as what type of support did I want from teachers and adults in helping me form my critical consciousness? What experiences were pertinent for me? To be certain, I stayed true to the data and evidence in the study. However, I am explicit that my desire to help educators better understand how to support YSD informed this study; yet I also understand that as an external insider – one who is not native to the particular community in which this research was conducted but nevertheless shares similar cultural traits and has been embraced by this community (Banks, 1998) – my own similar experiences have informed the questions I posed and observations I noted during this study.

#### **4.3.2 Context of the Study**

The context of this case study is the Youth United (YU) program, an outside of school time youth program focused on cultivating and nurturing youth advocacy and organizing in schools and communities. YU included approximately 18 middle and high school students attending school in and around Kingsland (pseudonym), an urban emergent (Milner, 2012) city in the northeast United States. The aim of the program is to cultivate students as leaders in their schools and communities. I chose this particular program for two reasons: (a) the program's parent organization is a prominent nonprofit in the community that focuses specifically on improving schooling environments and educational outcomes for students in the city; and (b) the program operates outside of school and utilizes principles of youth organizing to engage students around improving their inside of school educational experiences.

In August 2017, YU organized a week-long convening of youth in the Pittsburgh area around school and community-based advocacy. Anchoring their discussion in the Student Bill of Rights developed by YU participants in 2013, students came together around the issue of classroom “pushout” – a phenomenon where students’ right to equitable education is harmed through exclusionary disciplinary and educational practices that result in some students becoming disengaged from school (Morris, 2016). Based on this convening, students decided to focus on two particular issues articulated in the Student Bill of Rights – the right to effective teachers and the right to inclusive learning environments.

### **4.3.3 Research Design**

Data for this study were collected between the fall of 2017 and spring of 2018. Data collection consisted of focus groups, field observations, and content analysis of program artifacts. Below, I describe each of these data collection techniques in further detail.

Typical of almost all case studies, this study utilized a variety of data collection techniques – namely in the form of focus group interviews, field observations, and collection of program documents and artifacts. The collection of various forms of data within the context of this case study was important chiefly because of concerns with trustworthiness in qualitative research. To be clear, the term *trustworthiness* as employed by qualitative researchers is similar to considerations of reliability and validity notably present in quantitative research. In quantitative research, reliability refers to the consistency of results over time, including the ability of results or observations to be replicated. Validity is chiefly concerned with the means of measurement and whether or not the research measures what it is intended to measure (Golafshani, 2003). Conversely, validity in qualitative research focuses on the accurate representation of data. That is, validity concerns the extent to which accounts accurately represent the aspects of the phenomena under inquiry (Altheide & Johnson, 1994). Reliability, some qualitative research methodologists argue, is directly related to validity in that one cannot have reliability, or trust in the way in which interpretations were derived, in without said research first achieving validity (Golafshani, 2003). Some qualitative researchers argue that reliability and validity are important considerations for all researchers and should be reconceptualized for the specific aims of qualitative research (Golafshani, 2003). However, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) noted that, because of their grounding in positivist methodologies, many qualitative researchers consider these terms to be obsolete in

qualitative research, replaced by terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability which describe the trustworthiness of qualitative interpretations (Denzin, 1994).

In assessing the trustworthiness of qualitative research, various data collected from multiple sources can allow the researcher to engage in a more thorough, contextualized examination. The coagulated analysis of multiple sources of evidence, which allows the researcher to learn by observing multiple perspectives, is referred to as triangulation (Janesick, 1994; Neuman, 2011; Yin, 1994). Data triangulation provides multiple points of view that support analysis of the same phenomenon. This strategy reduces the risk that conclusions will reflect only the biases of a specific method and allows the researcher to gain a more secure understanding of the issues under investigation (Maxwell, 2013). When data is truly triangulated, “the events or facts of the case study have been supported by more than a single source of evidence” (Yin, 1994, p. 99). Furthermore, triangulated data may also expose differences or contradictions occurring within a phenomenon that can lead to the researcher asking additional questions (Neuman, 2011). Thus, in this study, it was important to collect multiple forms of data that could reveal illogicalities or substantiations of evidence uncovered by other data collection methods.

#### **4.3.3.1 Focus Groups**

This study utilized focus groups with members of the program. The focus group method was chosen because of the expectation that the interaction of participants would generate knowledge that may not occur in individual settings (Kitzinger, 1995; Morgan, 1996). Kitzinger (1995) described focus groups as group interviews that capitalize on communication between participants in order to generate data. Focus groups use the interactions of group members with one another as part of the method. As Kitzinger noted, “The method is particularly useful for exploring people’s knowledge and experiences and can be used to examine not only what people think but

how they think and why they think” (p. 299). Focus groups are particularly beneficial as they may help create environments where participants may be able to speak more freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings (Frey & Fontana, 1991). Because sociopolitical development is often a collective process (as illustrated in chapter two), the collective brainstorming between group members (Berg, 2009) that is characteristic of focus groups makes this approach appropriate for this type of inquiry.

Over 10 program participants participated in at least one of three focus groups, which were between 31 and 40 minutes in length. Focus groups were held during citywide membership meetings, typically at the meetings’ end. Citywide meetings were located in a large, loft-like room adjacent to the administrative office of YU’s parent organizations. In each focus group, I presented youth with an assent form containing a description of the research project and its dual purpose as an evaluation for the program. At the end of each form, youth were given the opportunity to assent to participating in the focus group as well as any future focus groups. Participants were only required to assent once. Thus, youth who participated in more than one focus group had to complete only one assent form. Youth who elected not to complete an assent form did not participate in any focus groups.

Focus group questions (see Chapter Four Appendix) primarily focused on three areas: (a) participants’ insights and perspectives on their social and educational contexts (focus group 1); (b) participants’ thoughts about how race shows up in their social and educational experiences (focus group 2); and (c) participants’ thoughts on how their experiences during the course of an almost yearlong grassroots organizing program may have shaped them moving forward, including aspects of the program that they felt were most beneficial to their development as engaged members of their communities (focus group 3).

#### **4.3.3.2 Field observations**

I performed in-person observations of, and at times video recorded, both public and private YU events and activities, including meetings, trainings, presentations, and the program’s signature event – a youth-centered conference held on the Martin Luther King, Jr. holiday of January 15, 2018 (heretofore referred to as the “MLK Day conference”) attended by over 30 middle and high school students. Specifically, I observed monthly citywide meetings ( $N = 4$ ), “teach-ins” – training sessions for preservice teachers from a local university ( $N = 2$ ), and the MLK Day conference. These specific observation points allowed me to observe youth participants engage in a variety of dialogic interactions and engagements that illuminated their perceptions of what support for youth sociopolitical development could or should entail.

Citywide meetings were held once per month and lasted approximately two hours each. Attendance at these meetings consisted of typically five to ten teens and, during my observations (I was not able to attend every citywide meeting), seven youth attended regularly. At these meetings, youth discussed various topics of interest including discussions of current events and professional development (e.g. resume writing), engaging with young professional Black leaders in local communities, and planning community engagement events (i.e. podcasts, teach-ins, MLK Day conference). Most meetings were facilitated by an adult program coordinator. However, some meetings were designed and facilitated by one or more youth participants.

YU participants also created, developed, and delivered two “teach-ins” which were designed to train pre-service teachers around how to identify and engage their future students around issues negatively impacting their lives and that their students find important to share with a teacher. Eleven pre-service teachers from a teacher education program at a local university attended at least one of the two teach-ins, which lasted approximately 1.5 hours per session.

Teach-ins were student-led and facilitated. In the first teach-in session, all participants (teens and pre-service teachers) began by engaging in an activity wherein everyone used markers and construction paper in an assortment of colors to, on one side of the paper, draw a depiction of what their “ideal” classroom would look like and, on the other side of the paper, write specific characteristics of their “ideal” classroom. Then, teens and pre-service teachers formed small groups to compare and discuss their depictions and descriptions with one another. All participants then engaged in reflecting about the activity as a large group so that different perspectives could be shared, and pre-service teachers could understand how these students perceived desired classrooms to be. Participants then engaged in a second activity in which teachers either volunteered or were randomly selected to participate in a short role-playing activity with students. In this activity, students would approach their “teacher” with an issue they are facing and pre-service teachers, acting as the students’ teachers, would act out how they would support the students. The purpose of this activity was to challenge pre-service teachers to think about the different personal and social challenges students in urban schools might face and how they might be supportive allies for their students in ways that are inclusive, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed. After each role-playing skit, participants as well as the larger group reflected on the experience collectively. The second teach-in was led by an adult facilitator and centered on participants thinking about ways in which binaries along racial, gender, and socioeconomic lines might emerge in educational environments and how teachers might be mindful of and navigate around existing binaries. In this session, participants were presented with vignettes around certain issues and were forced to select from a menu of three responses which response they most identified with. Signs with the letter A, B, or C were posted in three separate areas of the loft-like meeting room and corresponded with each response option. Participants stood in the vicinity of

the letter corresponding with the response most closely resembling their preference. With each scenario, participants roamed to a different letter, some seemingly decidedly and some seemingly unsure of where they might stand. After participants positioned themselves accordingly, the facilitator led a reflection which prompted participants to discern why they chose a particular response option. In some instances, participants recounted their own experiences with different scenarios, not just what they would do hypothetically. Afterwards, three student leaders engaged in a panel discussion and question-and-answer session with pre-service teachers, where pre-service teachers could ask the teens anything they wanted to know about how to effectively engage and teach students.

The MLK Day conference was an afternoon and evening proceeding centered on social networking, brainstorming, and helping teens develop tools and plans of action to address important social issues they hope to change. The event was held at eh YU program location. Despite sub-25° temperatures and light snowfall, 31 students in grades 6-12 invested the afternoon and early evening of their day off from attending school to attend the conference. The stated purpose of the conference was to (a) help students recognize their individual and shared power; (b) help students build their personal and professional networks; and (c) help students recognize their social responsibility to act upon social inequities and injustices. The conference consisted of two major components. First, youth organizers engaged adult content experts around facilitating small group workshops around topics that youth found to be important in their lives. These topics included positive racial identity development through engagement with hip-hop art, conflict resolution, historical contributions of people of color in the city, resiliency, being culturally responsive to immigrants (particularly English language learners), and book-making activity that engaged students around their hopes and dreams for the future. The event concluded with a

viewing of the documentary movie *Teach Us All*, which explored historical and contemporary racial inequities in U.S. public education centered around the experiences of the nine Black teens who integrated Little Rock Central High School in 1957 (Little Rock Nine).

I observed for visual interactions and verbal exchanges between and among the participants. Field notes were taken, chronicling physical environments, oral discourses, and human behavior and interactions (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 2011). These field notes were both descriptive and reflective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) and were created during and after each observation. Over time, the accumulation of field notes allowed for analysis and exploration of themes (Berg, 2009) across sessions. In addition to field notes, I also digitally photographed, and video recorded portions of meetings and events during my field observations. I specifically vide recorded pedagogical techniques that youth participants employed in engaging their peers or adults in meetings, trainings, or the MLK Day conference.

#### **4.3.3.3 Program artifacts**

I gathered program artifacts that added analytical and contextual depth to data analysis and theory generation. I specifically accumulated organizational literature in the form of program reports and grant applications as well as program artifacts in the form of feedback forms completed by youth participants in the MLK Day conference. I chose these documents because I wanted to understand how the organization conceptualized and wrote about YU as well as how young people who engaged with YU in a youth-designed assignment made sense of their experience, including what aspects they found most beneficial, and what they took away from the event.

I also used, as artifacts, two podcast recordings created by members of YU. These podcasts were professionally produced in a local recording studio, curated by the teens themselves,

and shared through a bustling online audio file sharing service notably used by many popular musicians to share new music free of charge. The teens chose this platform, specifically, because of its popularity and widespread use among their peers, thus allowing them to share their message to as many listeners as possible. I chose these podcasts as data because youth addressed, in their own words and volition, areas of interest to this study. These areas included how they perceived the YU program, their views on the role of teachers as allies in student activism, and what they gained from their participation in YU. Podcasts lasted between 16 and 25 mins.

#### **4.3.4 Data Analysis**

Qualitative studies frequently acquire a vast amount of data, and meticulous deliberation upon which data to use is an important aspect of the analytical process (Patricia Bazeley, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). After collection, the qualitative researcher must analyze and make sense of myriad types and pieces of data. Qualitative data analysis can be understood as “the process of separating aggregated texts...into smaller segments of meaning for close consideration, reflection, and interpretation” (Ellingson, 2013, p. 414). Researchers are charged with piecing together a patchwork of often multi-modal data into a coherent set of meanings derived from their own and, oftentimes, their participants’ interpretations. Huberman and Miles (1994) noted that data analysis involves three interconnected sub-processes, including:

- Data reduction, wherein the researcher reduces the under consideration based upon choice of conceptual framework, research questions, cases, and instruments;
- Data display, wherein the researcher presents data in an organized, condensed compilation of information that enables conclusion drawing and/or action taking; and

- Conclusion drawing and verification, wherein the researcher draws meaning from displayed data. (p. 429)

In analyzing this study, I used inductive thematic analysis (Anselm L Strauss, 1987; Anselm L Strauss & Corbin, 1994) to make sense of and uncover themes across the various forms of data collected. As Guest, MacQueen, and Namey (2011) imparted, thematic analysis goes beyond a mere counting of words and towards a description of implicit and explicit ideas within the data. I began data analysis by importing all data into NVivo. This way, I was able to keep all data in one location and efficiently code across different forms and pieces of data. During and after data collection, I listened to all audio files and watched all videos. Audio files reviewed included 139 minutes across three focus group interviews and 41 minutes across two podcasts. I also reviewed over 40 minutes of video from the MLK Day conference focused on how youth engaged their peers pedagogically and one hour of video from the two teach-ins. Furthermore, I read and re-read through focus group transcripts, observational notes, and data retrieved from organizational documents.

Central to my analysis was an ongoing coding process throughout the study. First, I applied a descriptive coding schema, in which I summarized attributes of a particular datum with an easily identifiable label (Miles et al., 2014; Richards, 2014). Secondly, I used “topic coding” to label text as categories, followed by an analytical coding process in which I created new categories based on the concepts and ideas that emerged as I reflected on the data collected (Richards, 2014). Coding and analysis was inductive in nature, meaning I did not approach this process with a priori themes in mind (Guest et al., 2011). Rather, I allowed the codes to lead me to themes that emerged from the data and then used the two conceptual frameworks to make sense of the findings.

#### **4.4 EMERGENT THEMES**

In this section, I discuss emergent themes regarding what types of support youth desire for their social organizing and action. I attempt to exhibit characteristics of sociopolitically-supportive educational/developmental environments that youth shared that they believe help support their sociopolitical development. By no means do I claim that the characteristics I identified are exhaustive of features that help youth develop as sociopolitical agents. Rather, these themes emerged from information derived from focus group interviews, podcasts, and my observations of youth in the YU program, including core participants and attendees at the MLK Day conference. I attempt to capture these perspectives in light of Watts et al.'s (2003) supposition that sociopolitical development is not merely a psychological process, but also a social process informed and influenced by relationships and environmental interactions. Moreover, I attempt to capture these perspectives building upon Ginwright's ecological understanding of youth development within a social justice context that centralizes power analysis in social relationships and collective social action (S. Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; S. Ginwright & James, 2002). I focus on three recurrent themes that seemed to capture young people's perceptions and desires related to building sociopolitically supportive environments:

- Mutual support between educators and students/youth
- Opportunities for young people's voices to be amplified
- Youth self-fulfillment

Considered together, the above themes seemed to capture opportunities within educational contexts that youth desire in environments that are supportive of their sociopolitical development.

#### **4.4.1 Mutual Support**

Youth identified that mutual support amongst youth and between youth and educators was, perhaps, the most important eco-transactional aspect of their sociopolitical development. Mutual support, in this study, seemed to center on youth's recognition of how power emerged in their relationships with teachers and the various ways in which youth wanted to experience teachers' encouragement of and support for their organizing and activism. In many ways, the building of a mutually supportive environment served as a precursor to youth engaging with their peers and educators around social issues. In educational settings, it seemed that young people were acutely aware of how they would like teachers to support their development. YU youth shared perceptions that teachers had an active role to play in youth activism. For instance, in describing a scenario in which she and a classmate were preparing to participate in a school walkout to protest gun violence in the wake of the shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, one YU participant shared the following experience:

I remember I was sitting in class, sitting there making posters. And my teacher came up to me and she was supporting me. And she was helping me, like, even sitting there helping me design the posters and saying, "Oh, you should say this saying. It would sound good." And, this would go good with this. And even when me and my friend got up to leave...she was sitting there like, "I'm so proud of y'all. I support y'all. And if there's anything I can do to help, just tell me." And...I feel like she's one of the teachers where even if she feels like it's not the best idea, but it's for a good cause, she'll not drop everything, but she'll do her best to support you in any way she can.

This participant described a scenario that illustrated how a teacher might encourage and be supportive of student activism, both in a specific instance and more generally. In this scenario,

the teacher provided a supportive environment for this student's activism in at least three ways. First, the teacher allowed the student to use the classroom as a safe space for planning a social action. By first allowing the student to create posters in the classroom, this teacher is presumably sending a message that social activism is a permissible type of engagement in this particular classroom. Moreover, by engaging students in preparing protest posters, the teacher may also have signaled an agreement with these particular political positions, even going as far as to suggest language that might be included on the posters. This signaling was evident in this participant's perception of her teacher's acknowledgement of pride and support of her actions. The supportive relationship this participant seemed to perceive, however, seemed not to be dependent upon the participant and her teacher holding symmetrical political perspectives. Rather, by stating that "even if she feels like it's not the best idea, but if it's for a good cause...she'll do her best to support you..." this participant appears to have some degree of appreciation for a teacher who may not hold the same beliefs, but honors the beliefs and corresponding actions of her students if they are for the benefit of others. Thus, for this student, feeling supported by educators may not be contingent simply upon congruent beliefs, but, rather, helpful actions and reassuring sentiments.

That shared beliefs may not be a prerequisite to students' feeling supported by teachers to engage in sociopolitical action is acutely pertinent to discussions of race and racial violence in the classroom. In the focus group interviews, it became apparent that students did not expect, nor in many cases desire, their teachers to engage them in critical conversations about race or racial violence. Participants shared that they believed that, although race and racial violence are important in their lives and are important to discuss, their teachers may not be adequately prepared or informed about the topics enough to engage them in meaningful dialogue that would, at a minimum, do no harm to students of color in the classroom. Students were generally more

receptive to Black teachers engaging these topics than White teachers. For instance, one participant stated:

I just feel more comfortable if an African-American or another minority talks about racism.

I feel like if you can't relate to it, then it's going to be hard to talk about it and really get the message across. If I see someone I can relate to then I would be able to listen more and really try to understand them better.

It appears for this participant and others who shared similar sentiments, racism could be considered a more difficult topic to discuss for many teachers. Considering that over 80 percent of U.S. public school teachers are White and fewer than 10 percent are Black (U. S. Department of Education, 2016), many students may not believe that the majority of their teachers are capable of engaging them in critical conversations about race in the classroom. However, juxtaposed against the aforementioned finding that teachers may not need to share identical beliefs with students in order for students to feel supported sociopolitically, it appears that teachers' abilities to discuss race may be less important than the support they show for students who do want to engage in critical consciousness development and social action addressing issues of race and racism.

The reluctance of some students to engage in race talk (Sue, 2015) with White teachers was apparently informed by students' racialized experiences in schools. That is, some students appeared to believe that they had better educational experiences with Black teachers and other teachers of color than with White teachers. Furthermore, some students appeared to believe that many White teachers did not have cultural competence (Ladson-Billings, 1995, 2014) to engage them in sociopolitical activities centered on race. To illustrate, one focus group participant shared: If I see a teacher that looks like you, you tend to learn more. There was also an argument at my school because we have a Black student union that's ran by a White teacher and she allows White

students in it. That's kind of off. It was a whole debate about it at school. When we talk about race, it gets out of hand.

Black student unions (BSUs) are school-sanctioned clubs of primarily Black students (although several have Latinx and other students of color as well) who organize within their respective schools around issues of racism, inequities, and inequalities that students experience. Several local high schools have BSUs. Each BSU has at least one faculty member of the school that serves as an adviser to the group. This participants' experiences in a BSU with a White faculty adviser seems to have negatively informed the students' perceptions of the abilities of White teachers to effectively engage student organizers around race. That the faculty adviser "allows White students in" to the apparent objection of at least some Black students appears, to this particular student, to have created an adversarial environment within their particular school. And, within this context, it seems that conversations about race may get "out of hand", possibly meaning that this particular White teacher may struggle to create environments for students to talk about racial issues in ways that students of color feel supported.

Underscoring the salience of many White teachers' inability to create supportive environments for critical conversations about race, another focus group participant spoke about engaging with teachers and peers about the topic of racial violence in the classroom. This student shared:

Last year I had a Black teacher and she would share stories of what she has been through. We would have deep heart to heart discussions where half of the class would be crying. It was really emotional and eye opening. This year we have a White teacher and a White student teacher. Both of them will tell us the news by discussing the facts but they don't really engage us in the conversation. We'll discuss it and talk about what happened and

how we can solve it. But we don't get into the deeper meaning of it. The discussions are a lot shorter because not everyone participates. This year there seems to be a disconnect between the students and the teacher. This year and last year the class is mostly African American. This year I feel we don't really talk about stuff like we should.

For this participant, it appears that the presence of a Black teacher in class with whom this participant and their peers could identify was an important factor in creating an emotionally engaging and responsive environment in which to interrogate the issue of racial violence. This teacher's willingness to share her own personal experiences with students in the class seemed to be a critical factor in this engagement. This participant seemed to embrace participating in highly emotional, "deep" conversations about a potentially sensitive issue like racial violence by noting that "half of the class would be crying." As noted in the previous chapter, many teachers – particularly White teachers – who avoid engaging in race talk with students cited wanting to avoid students' bringing strong emotional reactions to the issue of racial violence to bear in the classroom. Conversely, this participant and, by their account, their peers are seemingly willing to embrace highly emotional, critical conversations in the classroom. Thus, it seems that welcoming students' emotions and providing space for students to process and make sense of their feelings about critical sociopolitical issues like racial violence could be a key aspect of students believing that their classroom is a supportive environment for these types of conversations. Furthermore, by juxtaposing their experiences with a Black teacher against their experiences with a White teacher and White student teacher, this participant recognized that the race of the teacher shaped the type of experience they had in the classroom and whether or not they felt supported to engage in deep sociopolitical conversations. The participant noted that the White educators preferred "discussing the facts" but not engaging in conversations about the deeper sociopolitical implications of racial

violence. This observation underscores another finding in the previous chapter, which found that many teachers say they are comfortable discussing “facts” of racial violence incidents, but often fall short of engaging students in deeper meaning-making conversations. Therefore, it is evident that educators’ willingness to engage sociopolitical issues more deeply and critically – not just superficially – could also signal to students that the classroom is a sociopolitically supportive environment.

Despite being skeptical of White teachers’ abilities to support students in examining issues of race and racism, some students appeared to support White teachers who were willing to attempt to better understand students’ racialized experiences. Several youth, for instance, shared that they would be open to teachers who are not informed about such issues sharing their views, even if those views did not align with students’ own perspectives. Also, several youth shared that they would feel supported to engage in critical conversations if teachers presented critical issues, said to students that they needed to have discussions in class about them, and allowed students to lead the discussions. This sentiment suggests that it may be less important that teachers, themselves, are informed about sociopolitical issues than teachers creating a supportive space for students to lead and engage in critical conversations. It is important that Ginwright and James (2002) stressed encouraging rather than participating in collective action as an essential aspect of supporting youth organizing and activism. The findings above are illustrative of that emphasis on encouragement. Students seemed to perceive support for engaging in race talk to be more important than teachers engaging in race dialogue themselves. It did not seem lost on these students that teachers may have limitations pertaining to their feelings of efficacy or interest in discussing racial topics in the classroom. However, students did not appear to believe those issues to be important. Rather, students seemed to place more emphasis on feeling encouraged to engage race conversations.

Ginwright and James (2002) stressed that youth must have opportunities and build their capacities to critically analyze the role of power within social relationships. For some YU participants, an analysis of relational power centered on their understandings of their interactions and relationships with their teachers. For these youth, feeling supported by a teacher included engaging teachers in ways that disrupted hierarchical power structures that often characterize relationships between teachers and students in schooling environments (Sleeter & McLaren, 1995). One participant shared in a focus group interview that, during the teach-ins, she “liked the idea of having teachers...on the same level” as she was, meaning that the power relationship between teachers and students was eliminated in place of a more egalitarian experience. This participant went on to state that she “always felt like teachers felt like they were higher or have authority over me, but I kind of felt like they almost bragged about it in a way. But with the teach-ins, we were on the same level. It was a [sic] open space. I was comfortable with my opinions and what I felt.” For this student, the experience of the teach-ins, where youth were the content experts and pre-service teachers were the learners, seemed to elicit a feeling of equality in the context of this experience. That apparent feeling of equality seemed to help this participant feel more comfortable not only with the teachers, but with herself as well. By stating that she was more “comfortable” with her feelings and opinions, one might surmise that educational contexts characterized by egalitarian relationships between teachers and students could result in some students feeling that their emotions and perspectives on social issues are more supported. Indeed, another participant augmented this view in sharing that the teach-ins helped her change from her view of teachers as professionals in schools to simply perform job functions to recognizing that teachers “are actual people with actual experiences and advice that can help us.” For this participant, being able to engage with educators in a supportive environment wherein power differentials were eliminated

may have, in a way, humanized educators and allowed the participant to be more open to learning about educators lived experiences and listen to educators' advice that may be beneficial to her own social action priorities.

It is important to note that there appears to be, for many students, a bi-directionality in the power relationship between teachers and students. Several students, for example, expressed a need and desire to support teachers who they perceive as attempting to support students as sociopolitical agents. Students recognized that many teachers may face professional barriers hindering their ability to support students, and that students may play a role in helping teachers feel supported to engage students around sociopolitical issues. In one podcast, for example, a YU participant observed:

We need teachers to support us. We need them to help us get our point across. But, I feel sometimes teachers can be afraid of what's going to happen to them. I had a teacher, she went to the women's rights march here. And, she said something on a poster and we saw it and all the students were happy about it...this is what we need. But then, we started to think about it like what if she gets in trouble? Like, that's something I started thinking about. So, I hurried up and took it off my social media. I didn't want her to get in trouble. But, I also do want people to see that sometimes we need teachers to be at the marches with us.

In this anecdote, this participant appeared to be cognizant both of the desire for teacher support of youth activism and the need for youth to be responsive to the possible professional consequences some teachers may face for that support. Moreover, this participant seems to recognize that, in that situation, students held the potential to exercise power over a teacher by choosing to post or not post pictures that could potentially be damaging to a teacher's professional career. To this

participant, it appears that they recognized that youth have a responsibility to support teachers who support them. By removing images of a potentially controversial sign from their social media account, this student not only supported their teacher by acting to protect the teacher from professional endangerment the teacher may experience due to their own activism, but also understood and chose not to exercise a form of power over this teacher. This scenario underscores the notion of collectivity inherent in both the SJYD framework (Ginwright & James, 2002) and conceptualizations of critical consciousness (M. A. Diemer et al., 2016). This participant shared what was essentially a sense of solidarity with their teacher, which included a desire to be mutually supportive in their activism. Indeed, another podcast participant echoed the concern for supportive teachers, stating “A lot of the teachers are scared or frightened because of our leadership or they don’t want to lose their job. I definitely understand it.” That students appeared to fathom that supportive teachers could face professionally dire consequences and expressed concern for their teachers was reflective of a deeper understanding of structural barriers that could prohibit some teachers from being otherwise supportive of youth activism as well how educational systems can potentially wield power over teachers. This participant recognized that school leadership could potentially play a broader role in whether or not teachers are supportive of student sociopolitical development and activism. Students were not resigned to merely expressing concern for supportive teachers, however. Youth also expressed that students may have an active role to play in supporting teacher allies, particularly in the face of professional backlash for embracing student activism. As one participant stated, “I will fight for a teacher to get their job back if they did something they believe in and I also believe in.” Thus, by understanding how educational power structures might inhibit or sanction supportive teachers, youth seemed to be able to begin to think

about consequences supportive teachers might face and youth could use their own collective power in support of teacher allies.

#### **4.4.2 Amplifying Youth Voices**

It became clear throughout this study that many youth valued having opportunities to have their voices heard. Youth or student voice can be described as youth having a role in important activities such as agenda-setting and decision-making (Mitra, 2006). Although young people may not always be able to articulate their experiences and insights in ways that are valued by adults in society, it is clear that many youth have thoughts, opinions, and perspectives that they feel have value and would like to share with others. For some youth, participation in YU appeared to be as much about engaging in sociopolitical activity as having the opportunity to be heard and have influence over their educational experiences. As Freire (1970) recognized, words – and by extension voice – can be a form of social action. That is, words have the power to help advance transformative social change. Youth in YU recognized that their ability to bring about social change is suppressed in various ways by society. For instance, voting age restrictions deny youth under the age of 18 (in almost all U.S. jurisdictions) the ability to elect or replace government officials who write and enact laws that impact their lives. However, given advances in digital technologies and platforms, youth today have more opportunities than, perhaps, ever before to share their thoughts, ideas, and perspectives with others across the world in ways that could potentially effect educational change. Youth may view getting their messages out and having their voices heard as forms of collective action given the potential reach presented by new technologies and platforms.

YU participants seemed to perceive the core of the program as creating opportunities to share their voices and messages with the world. In each aspect of the program, youth participants

were able to integrate their voices and perspectives. In designing program activities, youth partnered with adult facilitators to develop experiences that centered around sharing youth's perspectives. For example, youth co-designed three main program activities (i.e. podcasts, teach-ins, and a series of web-based videos) that provided platforms for them to share their thoughts and ideas with a wide audience. The focus on youth voice seemed to be predicated on examinations of how power is exercised in society to restrict young people from sharing their messages and having their voices heard. For instance, a large portion of the first citywide meeting was to examine different ways in which YU participants could share their collective messages to their peers. In this discussion, youth focused on creating downloadable podcasts that they could easily share with peers as well as record videos to post online. The youth chose these two particular modes of youth voice because they recognized difficulties they faced accessing more traditional forms of media like newspapers, local television news, and local radio stations.

On several occasions, YU participants cited the amplification of their voices – individually and collectively – as the most salient aspect of their overall program experience. To be clear, none of the youth said that they felt they had “found” their voice or that adults “gave” them a voice. Rather, several participants noted that they began the program less confident in expressing themselves and advocating for their views publicly. However, after several months participants shared that they felt more efficacious in their advocacy efforts. One participant stated:

My biggest takeaway was that it [YU] helped my confidence a lot because I don't talk a lot and I still don't talk that much but I'm working on it. Maybe that was because I felt like what I had to say didn't really matter and nobody would really agree with it...My biggest thing was confidence and just feeling validated and being open-minded and being reminded

that what I have to say is important. It is important for me to be able to communicate effectively so that I can get what I have to say out.

This quote is representative of a common sentiment among YU participants. For several youth, having multiple platforms upon which they could impart their views essentially allowed them to choose media that best suited their personalities and comfort levels. For teens more comfortable on camera, the web-based videos represented attractive options. For youth who were less comfortable on camera, podcasts presented alternative opportunities. Furthermore, teach-ins provided a chance to have their insights received by people preparing for careers in P-12 education. No matter the medium, youth shared that it was important to be in environments where they felt perspectives and insights derived through their lived experiences were validated. By validated, youth did not mean that everyone agreed with their assertions. Rather, for these participants, validation meant that their insights were respected and their right to have and share these insights was confirmed. Indeed, another youth acknowledged:

Your voice matters and how you feel matters and you shouldn't let anyone change that no matter what. Not everyone is the same, so not everyone is going to think the same. Not everybody is going to be able to see things how you see things.

Having the ability to amplify their voices did not mean that youth internalized feelings of superiority or disrespect for others' perspectives. Indeed, youth seemed to understand that power in social relationships can be wielded through silencing others' voices or attempting to make others' experiences seem invalid or unimportant. It became evident through my observations that forming relationships built upon power sharing and mutual respect for others' insights coincided with increased confidence to speak out. Several participants shared that they would at times refrain from voicing their opinions not because they may have felt uncomfortable doing so, but, rather,

because they did not feel it necessary to voice counter arguments whenever they disagreed with someone else's viewpoint – even viewpoints of educators. Instead, it seems that so long as youth perceived a shared-power relationship with peers and educators, they were willing to balance advocating their own viewpoints with allowing others to advocate theirs. Reflecting upon the forced response exercise in the second teach-in session, for example, one YU participant shared that they did not voice disagreement with some pre-service teachers' choices because their experience in the program helped them to become cognizant that educators' viewpoints often come from their own lived experiences and allowing them to talk through those viewpoints so that students can understand their perspectives is itself a form of power sharing and support. Notably, students appeared to desire to have this type of interaction with teachers reciprocated in the classroom. Namely, students appeared to want teachers to afford students the same opportunities to express views that teachers might not agree with but may come to understand through dialogue.

#### **4.4.3 Self-Fulfillment**

In addition to support for specific activist goals, youth also expressed a desire for support in cultivating their abilities to achieve personal and career goals independent of their activism and organizing activities. Ginwright and James (2002) posited that encouraging youth collective action can result in youth feeling growing their capacities to create social change and feeling empowered in their personal lives. In this study, youth expressed wanting to form relationships with educators that helped youth identify their own personal goals, develop a plan to achieve those goals, and feel supported in working towards the goals they outlined. A significant focus of YU was dedicated to this work. Youth seemed to view this developmental support as supportive of their development as sociopolitical actors, even though these areas of support were not distinctly connected to YSD.

From the outset of the program – at the first citywide meeting – youth completed a “self-contract for self-fulfillment” which required them to reflect a personal goal they wished to accomplish and outline what commitments they were willing to make to achieve their stated goal. Each participant completed a contract. Goals that youth listed ranged from being better students to embarking upon future careers.

To help youth begin to reflect upon positionalities, the program began with a self-reflective activity. Each participant, all Black teenagers, was given a Styrofoam bowl and an assortment of colored writing utensils. Youth were instructed to write how they viewed themselves on the inside of the bowls and how they perceive others, including society, to viewed them on the outside of the bowls. Generally, youth appeared to hold mostly positive perceptions about themselves. Comments scribed inside of the bowls frequently included words positively associated with personalities (e.g. funny, confident, nice, kind, caring), appearance (e.g. pretty, good-looking), and intellect (e.g. smart, thoughtful, good grades). Conversely, on the bowls’ exteriors were etched a broader diversity of views. Many more negative connotations characterized participants’ perceptions of how others viewed them. Although many of the same positive descriptions were present, terms with negative connotations (e.g. rude, mean, disrespectful, weird, obnoxious) were also etched upon the outside of the bowls. As youth reflected upon the terms they wrote on their bowls, it became evident that many participants perceived others to view them more negatively than they viewed themselves. Youth were generally more apt to describe their friends and peer groups as having more positive views of them, but expressed that they saw society as misunderstanding them and viewing them with contempt.

Building upon this initial activity, YU participants then began to engage around focusing on reinforcing positive self-perceptions and building upon those positive self-perceptions to craft

and begin working toward personal goals. Positive identity affirmation and self-fulfillment became a central feature and salient outcome of YU participants' experiences with the program. Throughout the course of the year, participants often returned to the self-contract as an anchor for their work. Most notably, in designing the teach-ins youth centered those workshops around training pre-service teachers to understand how to best support students to achieve their personal or professional goals. Youth participants recognized that they could play an active role in helping to cultivate teachers that could be responsive to the self-fulfillment needs of students. That is, these youth organizers identified that sociopolitically supportive environments should consider not only organizing and activism, but also more holistic support for students, including for helping students achieve their personal goals that may or may not be directly related to activism. During the role-playing portion of the teach-ins, youth presented pre-service teachers with their actual self-contracts for self-fulfillment and elicited support for achieving their goals. Pre-service teachers were tasked with spontaneously responding to their students' inquiries. After each scenario, the participants in the role play as well as the rest of the group engaged in a large group reflection. The youth participants pointed out both positive aspects of the teachers' responses as well as areas they perceived as needing improvement. The idea was that educators would probably begin to see their potential to support students in various ways that on their face may not appear to be relevant to sociopolitical action, but in practice could help students feel more confident about who they are and their abilities to achieve goals more broadly. In this way, teachers would conceivably begin to develop a set of transferable skills applicable to supporting youth activists.

YU participants largely described their experiences with the overall programs as personally transformative. Specifically, youth pointed to feelings of growth in social skills and confidence to achieve their goals. One participant stated:

Something I took away from this is my personality because before high school, I wasn't really a people person. I did not like people at all. I had a lot of opinions and I wanted to speak about them...I've been a changed person and I've gotten to see myself around other people because I thought I would just come in here and not talk to anybody and just be here. But I'm here...and I'm proud of myself for being able to come here and be the person I know I am instead of this little anti-social person.

This participant clearly indicated that a positive and desirable outcome of the relationships and environment cultivated within the program was an increase in confidence and pro-social behaviors. By juxtaposing being a person that feels more authentic against a “little anti-social person”, this participant seemingly benefited from opportunities to engage peers, educators, and others in ways that positioned youth as knowledge bearers. This participant observed a change in their personality that instilled a sense of personal pride. Several program participants shared similar stories of personal growth that they experienced as part of the program. It became clear to me that participants appreciated being in an environment wherein they could not only engage peers and adults around sociopolitical issues, but also develop tools to help them grow in a more holistic sense. These youth seemed to care about their future careers and work they wanted to do as adults, not just their youth organizing work.

#### **4.5 IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS**

While it has been well-established that relationships and environments play an important role in youth development (Akiva et al., 2017; Lerner et al., 2011; Wu, Kornbluh, & Weiss, 2016), the characteristics of relationships and environments that youth find most beneficial to their

sociopolitical development is less clear. Although scholars conceptualize what adults should do to help students develop sociopolitically, this research builds upon the literature by accentuating youth perspectives on supportive environments within a sociopolitical context. Youth United teens described mutually-supportive relationships with teachers, opportunities to get their messages out to wide audiences, and experiences that helped them fulfill their dreams as salient aspects of their experiences building sociopolitical consciousness inside and outside of school. For these youth, feeling supported by teachers to engage social issues, both through classroom discussions and social action, was critical to their organizing work. Youth realized that teachers also might need to feel support from their students as well. In essence, youth shared that they were willing to support teachers that they felt supported them, indicating a sense of solidarity in the work.

In addition to mutually-supportive relationships with teachers, youth also noted that opportunities to develop and disseminate social messages was essential to their development. Youth shared that their confidence increased as they engaged more opportunities to share their points of view through numerous forms of media. Youth, however, also understood that they had a responsibility to not use their voices to silence the voices of others, even those with whom they might disagree. Youth seemed to embrace people sharing diverse views. It seemed that youth were interested in understanding diverse viewpoints rather than simply having their own perspectives reinforced. What seemed most important in this regard was that youth had opportunities to share the perspectives and their right to share and be heard was affirmed.

Youth who attended YU were not only interested in advancing their sociopolitical work, but they were also interested in engaging in developmental activities that helped them grow personally and professionally. As Akiva et al. (2017) noted, youth attend grassroots organizing programs for myriad reasons, not just to become better activists. Consistent with this finding,

many youth shared that their main takeaway from their experience with the program was a growth in confidence and comfortability in planning for their futures in addition to advocating for their interests. The organizing premise of the program was only one aspect of their experience. What several youth appreciated above and beyond the organizing training were the numerous opportunities to explore their dreams, plan for their futures, and develop ways to help teachers learn how to support their students as they transition from adolescence into adulthood.

In summary and conclusion, the ability of educators in both inside and outside of school contexts to build supportive environments that address the whole student seemed to be intimately tied to young people's development generally and as activist in particular. While I appreciate the work that researchers, including Ginwright and colleagues, have endeavored upon to advance our understanding of youth sociopolitical development and social action, I believe that more work is needed to understand what youth organizers and activists need and desire from adult allies beyond programmatic activities. In other words, what type of *relationships* do youth say they *want* and *need* from adults? What else, beyond organizing and activism, do youth want to learn in YSD contexts? As evident in this study, adults in educational contexts can be supportive of youth sociopolitical development when they go beyond activities and are attentive to how they interact and relate to youth and help youth develop holistically.

A key implication of this research is that, for many youth, sociopolitical development is not simply about learning about social injustices and participating in social action activities. Models that exclusively focus on those aspects of development fall short of what many youth want to learn and experience. Rather, youth organizing and sociopolitical development should be viewed as one dimension of a more holistic youth development (Watts et al., 2003). In developing as sociopolitical agents, youth should also be supported in their transition from adolescence into

adulthood through planning for their futures and understanding how the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they develop might be transferable to their future careers and community endeavors. For YU youth, much of the joy derived from the program centered on their personal development, not just their development as social change agents. To be clear, these findings in no way should be interpreted as minimizing the importance or centrality of helping youth develop their sociopolitical lenses. Conversely, these findings support the notion that youth development is a complex web of developmental zones and social influences (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Lerner & Overton, 2008). In the context of youth sociopolitical development and organizing programs, one must be reminded that not all youth show up for the marches. Many youth attend because they desire to be in supportive environments that will help fulfill their broader dreams, goals, and ambitions.

## **5.0 CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY, CONTRIBUTIONS, AND CONCLUSION**

The purpose of this dissertation was to contribute to theory, research, and practice in youth sociopolitical development by examining opportunities youth have to develop their critical consciousness of and actions toward addressing inequities and injustices in their schools and communities. I was impelled to embark upon this dissertation because of the multitude of stories, images and videos of Black women, children, and men being victimized by police and racial violence. Yet, I was simultaneously heartened to see teenagers and young adults of color mobilizing to push politicians and decision makers to eradicate and hold to account those responsible for perpetrating these attacks upon Black people. I knew, through my own experiences as a community development professional in Jackson, MS that contrary to some media discourses, these young people did not just “show up” to demonstrations simply because they had nothing else to do with their time or because they wanted to “cause trouble”. Rather, many youth engage in training and development to become deeply knowledgeable about and actively involved in planning and organizing demonstrations against unjust social policies. The research literature examining how youth arrive at engaging in social action, including the types of supports youth find most beneficial, is still nascent, however. Thus, in this dissertation, I embarked upon extending the literature on youth sociopolitical development by examining the types of supportive environments that we as adult allies could create to aid youth in their sociopolitical development.

## **5.1 SUMMARY OF CHAPTERS**

In chapter one, I introduced the topic of youth sociopolitical development (YSD) nested within a broader context of the intersection of race and adolescent development in U.S. education. I argued that the creation of supportive opportunities for students of color to develop a critical consciousness of and mobilize to act upon social issues was indispensable to their overall development, particularly during the adolescent period. I embedded this conversation within a delineation of ways in which Black children have been denied full access to the educational franchise through myriad social, economic, and educational policies. Through this educational disenfranchisement, Black children have experienced disproportionately negative educational outcomes compounding across multiple generations, leading many educators to pathologize Black children as inherently deficient in their abilities to be successful in educational environments (Milner, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2001; Warren, Douglas, & Howard, 2016). Over time, I have seen many Black children internalize deficit notions of themselves, resulting in some Black children thinking that they are incapable of achieving their dreams because of the damaging messages they receive about themselves in school. I, therefore, I argued that in order for educational practices to be truly effective and empowering for Black children, educators must create environments where Black children can feel supported to gain a critical understanding of how systemic and institutional oppression negatively impact their lives and communities in ways that promote positive identity development and, to paraphrase Baldridge (2014), re-locate the deficit away from themselves and upon inequitable social systems.

In chapter two, I reviewed the extant literature on YSD published between 2000 and 2017 to uncover key aspects of YSD work. Using critical consciousness and sociopolitical development to conceptually frame this review, I uncovered several facets that characterized three domains of

YSD – critical reflection, sociopolitical motivation, and transformative social action. Through this review, it became apparent that to be successful in YSD work, educators must attend to all three aspects of YSD in a way that acknowledges the intersectional nature of all three components. That is, as Watts et al. (2003) noted, a stage theory of sociopolitical development is inherently limiting because sociopolitical development occurs and is refined through social and interpersonal interactions as well as the insights one gains through the accumulation of experiences over the life span.

In chapter three, I explored educators' perspectives on engaging students in conversations about a critical social issue – racial violence – that impacts Black children in communities across the U.S. Using a mixed methods approach incorporating logistic regression and inductive thematic analyses, I examined data from the multimodal, exploratory Teachers and Race Talk Survey (TRTS) that captured beliefs teachers shared about the role of race in their students' educational experiences and whether or not teachers should discuss racial violence in the classroom with students. I entered this study anticipating finding racial differences amongst teachers regarding whether or not teachers indicated that they believed in having racial violence conversations with students. Findings from this analysis, however, indicated no statistically significant differences between White teachers and teachers of color with regards to discussing racial violence with students. However, findings did suggest that teachers in predominantly White schools and teachers of younger children (regardless of race) were less likely to report believing in engaging students in conversations centered on racial violence. Additionally, findings in chapter three indicated that teachers who reported believing in talking about racial violence with students held very different views of the classroom and teaching profession than teachers who reported not believing in having racial violence conversations. Specifically, teachers who held this belief seemed less concerned

about inviting emotional conversations into the classroom than non-believers, were attentive to students' interests in having these conversations, and valued the experiential knowledge students of color possess as legitimate sources of data to be examined.

In chapter four, I explored perceptions of youth regarding how to support YSD. Findings from the previous chapter helped to illuminate educators' perspectives on supporting critical conversations in the classroom. Findings from this chapter helped to illuminate Black students' perspectives on support they desire from adults. Specifically, chapter four findings indicated that students desired mutually supportive environments wherein they felt free to discuss social topics they found important as well as encouragement to engage in social action. Although students expressed appreciation for teachers who engaged in social action with them, neither teacher engagement in social action nor agreement with students' political views was a prerequisite for students feeling supported by teachers. Rather, students desired an environment where they felt emboldened to explore their ideas and plan social action. Furthermore, students shared that support for broader personal goals was also key to feeling supported sociopolitically; and that they wanted support for opportunities to share their messages with broader audiences. The findings in this chapter indicated that although students found sociopolitical development to be important, students may view sociopolitical development within a broader concept of a more holistic development.

## **5.2 CONTRIBUTIONS TO THEORY**

Taken together, the findings from this dissertation suggest that opportunities to support YSD are interwoven throughout the educational and developmental experiences of youth. That is, viewing

YSD as a developmental process separate from other developmental and educational experiences may provide a limited view of how adults can cultivate supportive environments across inside and outside of school contexts that help youth make sense of and act to address social inequities. Conversely, viewing YSD through an intersectional lens that considers how varying components of YSD traverse one another within a broader context of holistic youth development can provide a more expansive analytic space for researchers and practitioners.

### **5.2.1 Theoretical Limitations of Existing Literature**

My review of extant literature in chapter two and empirical studies in chapters three and four revealed several key limitations regarding how the field conceptualizes YSD. First, few studies offered novel theoretical formulations regarding how youth develop their sociopolitical consciousness outside of structured interventions led by adult figures. That is, most studies illustrate how adults might facilitate YSD in a formal developmental environment, but few conceptualize how students develop their consciousness outside of these environments. What motivated youth to attend these YSD programs in the first place? With what levels of sociopolitical consciousness do these young people enter these programs? Where, outside of these programs, are youth also developing their sociopolitical lenses? These types of questions remain largely underexplored and, thus, unanswered in the field. And, therefore, we still know little about the social ecology of sociopolitical development for youth, particularly youth of color.

Second, and closely related to the first limitation, while there is a plethora of studies that take a micro-ecological approach to YSD, few examine broader, macro-ecological factors that influence YSD. As I noted in chapter one, young people during the adolescent development period begin forming stronger self-concepts based largely on their interactions with a broader array of

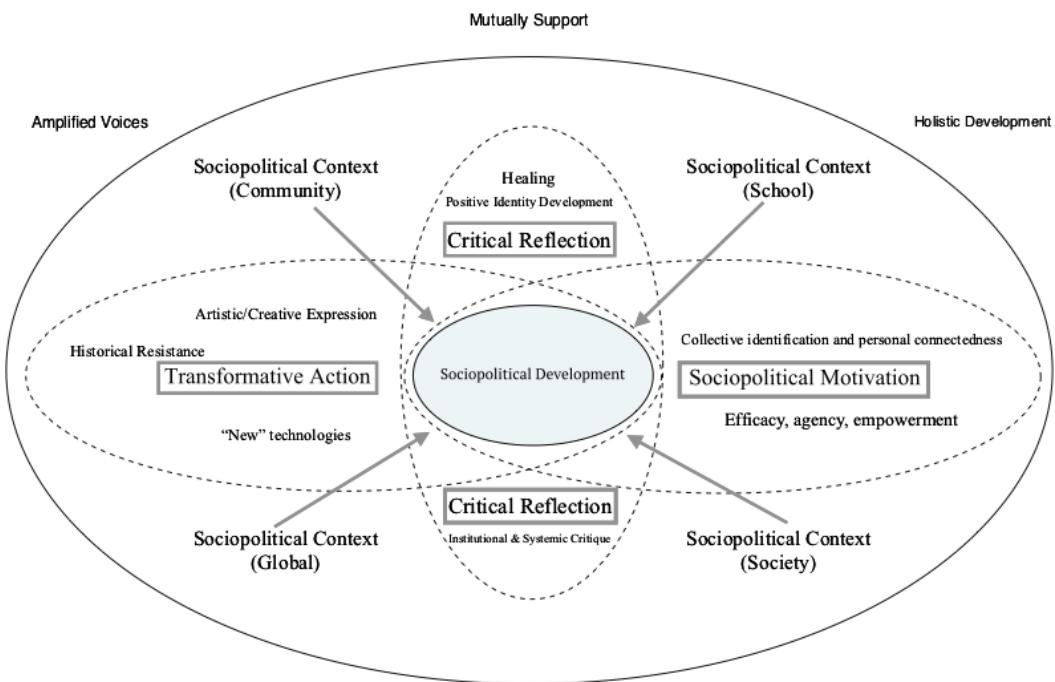
environments. Moreover, youth begin to develop more sophisticated knowledge of the world during this phase. Unfortunately, a preponderance of the research literature fails to examine how youth make sense of the multiple ecological levels with which they interact. Thus, less is known, for instance, how youth make sense of how issues at the society and global levels shape their consciousness development.

Lastly, it remains unclear how adults make sense of and structure their YSD work with youth. This area of inquiry, which I have explored elsewhere (see Murray, 2017), is still nascent and remains underdeveloped. While we have learned much about teacher beliefs about their work, we still know little about YSD workers and their beliefs. This area is important because the beliefs of educators shape how they interact with students (Pajares, 1992) and students in YSD contexts often look for adults as models for their own sociopolitical development (Seider et al., 2017). Chapter three began to explore how the stated beliefs of inside of school educators shape their views on engaging in racial violence talk with students. It became evident in that study that teachers' beliefs about the teaching profession, including its purpose and restrictions, shaped their beliefs about race talk. Yet, very little is known about the implications of beliefs in the work of YSD workers.

Altogether, this critique points to a lack of theoretical understandings of macro-ecological contexts and adult support for YSD. How do macro-level systems, institutions, and events shape YSD? What types of adult support help youth in this process? Under what conditions does sociopolitical development occur? I attempt to fill this conceptual gap in the section below by presenting a conceptual model of YSD that takes these questions into account.

### **5.2.2 Conceptual Model of YSD**

I begin to address these limitations by conceptualizing a newer model of YSD that takes into account the findings in this dissertation. Figure 7 illustrates this conceptual model. In this model, sociopolitical development occurs as critical reflection, sociopolitical motivation, and transformative action converge. That is, the model suggests that an ecological view of sociopolitical development accounts for a convergence of, as opposed to a progression through, these three aspects. This conceptual model acknowledges that youth may begin to develop their sociopolitical consciousness at different points. For instance, a young person might begin their sociopolitical development by attending a demonstration or some other form of transformative action before they begin to critically reflect upon social issues or become motivated to engage in social change efforts. Likewise, one may experience oppression and become intrinsically motivated to create social change but may not have critically reflected upon the underlying causes or systemic roots of oppression.



**Figure 7.** Conceptual model of youth sociopolitical development

This model also takes into account that youth encounter varying sociopolitical contexts that inform how they experience and make sense of the world. Andolina, Jenkins, Zukin, and Keeter (2003) found that young adults' civic engagement is influenced by habits formed at home, lessons learned at school, and opportunities to participate offered by community-based groups. This model builds upon this research as well as the findings in this dissertation to identify sociopolitical contexts that may shape youth's organizing and activism. The model identifies four primary sociopolitical contexts, including:

- Community (e.g. families, peers, friends, mentors, social and community-based organizations, local businesses and religious institutions)
- School (e.g. teachers, administrators, district policies, and school culture)
- Society (e.g. governments, policies, media, culture, systems, and institutions)
- Global (e.g. oppression in foreign countries)

Below, I describe each context in further detail.

### **5.2.2.1 Community Context**

The community context includes interpersonal and community-level institutional relationships in which youth engage. This context represents people and organizations with which youth have their most intimate interactions. The community context includes family members, peer groups, friends, adult mentors, social organizations that support youth development, community-based organizations including afterschool programs, local businesses and religious institutions. These relationships youth have with these people and organizations are often long-lasting and inform their development in critical ways. For example, pre-adolescent identity development is often characterized by strong family ties; however, as children enter adolescence, peers and social institutions become more influential (Lerner & Galambos, 1998; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). Families and peers are instrumental in young people's development of social involvement. For instance, modeling socially active behaviors (either adults, siblings, or peers) can influence young people to become socially active themselves. Andolina et al. (2003) found that youth in homes where family members volunteer, for instance, are more likely to be actively involved in volunteer efforts and continue volunteering as young adults. Furthermore, afterschool youth programs are instrumental in the development of many youth, particularly Black youth who are more than twice as likely as White youth to attend an afterschool program (Hynes & Sanders, 2011). And, the type of outside of school time experience can be key. Conner and Cosner (2016), for instance, found that youth who attended an afterschool program specifically designed to promote organizing and activism developed more consciousness around systemic inequities than youth who attended an afterschool program designed to promote civic participation.

### **5.2.2.2 School Context**

The school context includes the formal education environments that youth must navigate. These formal environments include personnel (i.e. teachers, administrators, support staff, bus drivers, and district leaders), district-specific educational policies, school funding environments, state and federal policies, and the educational culture of schools. Formal education environments can influence youth organizing and activism by either offering or restricting opportunities that are supportive of this work. Support can include opportunities for open discussions of critical social issues or the creation of avenues to engage in organizing and activism. However, when schools, personnel, and policies restrict discussion and opportunities for engagement, they send messages to students about what is or is not important to know. School policies that penalize students who engage in social protest, for example, send messages to students about such actions are not socially acceptable. Conversely, policies or personnel that support social action can help students feel encouraged and empowered to become active citizens involved in advocating policy solutions on their behalf and on behalf of other oppressed groups. Moreover, school policies that encourage high-stakes to the detriment of creative teaching and in favor of teaching to standardized tests (Grodsky, Warren, & Felts, 2008; Houchen, 2013; Thompson & Allen, 2012) robs students of opportunities to develop as social actors while potentially exacerbating social inequities Grodsky et al., 2008).

### **5.2.2.3 Societal Context**

The third sociopolitical context involves the societal context in which youth live, including the social policies, institutions, systems, messages, and cultural norms that impact their lives. In the U.S., the intersection of race, culture, class, gender identity, sexuality, and the myriad other ways in which people identify shapes people's experiences and how they make sense of the world.

Collins (1989) noted that oppressed groups (particularly Black women) possess a standpoint epistemology – or self-defined ways of making sense of the world and their oppression – as a result of their distinctive set of life experiences based upon their intersecting identities. Collins noted that Black women, for example, have a “distinctive Black feminist consciousness” (p. 748) resulting from the oppression Black women endure based upon their race and gender in a society predicated on systems and institutions that uphold and propagate White supremacy and patriarchy. In a similar way, youth in communities marginalized because of race, gender, class, sexuality, etc. form a distinctive way of viewing the world based largely on their identity as youth. Ginwright and James (2002) maintained that youth culture is distinctive in ways similar to ethnic groups and consists of “a set of ideas and common worldview shared by most young people” (p. 37). This is not to say that all young people think alike. It is easy to find young people with as many diverse points of view as adults. Rather, the idea is that young people experience similar institutional constraints and marginalization based on their age, including restrictions on civic participation, workers’ rights, decision-making power, etc. Thus, the ways in which society positions young people are important to understand in order to better support their sociopolitical development.

#### **5.2.2.4 Global Context**

Lastly, the vast social contexts across the world can also have a significant influence on the ways youth develop as sociopolitical agents. People in general and youth in particular are more connected with the rest of the world than ever before. Web-based platforms, including social media, act as conduits for youth in various countries to learn about and connect with one another and form a sense of solidarity with other oppressed groups. The global support from youth around the world for Malala Yousafzai, a teenage girl in Pakistan who was targeted and shot in the head by militants in her home country for being a global advocate for the educational rights of Pakistani

girls, is just one example of how youth form solidarity and unite around issues that impact youth around the world. Trending Twitter hashtags like #bringbackourgirls in support of over 200 girls kidnapped from a school in Nigeria provides another example of youth global engagement.

Altogether, this dissertation indicates that multiple contexts can shape youth's opportunities to engage in sociopolitical development. Youth become critically conscious about issues from local issues in their schools and communities to broader social and global injustices. In some cases, these various contexts seem to coalesce. In none of the literature reviewed in chapter two, for instance, was it evident that youth isolated a single context in their sociopolitical development. Sociopolitical development for young people appeared to involve examinations of how different sociopolitical contexts combined to create inequitable social conditions. Thus, adult allies who engage youth in YSD should recognize how an amalgamation of multiple sociopolitical contexts might shape the experience and emphasize an examination of multiple contexts in their work.

Additionally, this dissertation revealed that the environments in which youth engage in sociopolitical development are critical yet understudied from an eco-transactional standpoint. That is, although Ginwright and James (2002), Akom et al. (2008), and others have developed models that delineate the types of environmental structures that can help youth cultivate their sociopolitical consciousness, it still remains unclear what types of support from and relationships with adults within those environments youth find most beneficial. Thus, this dissertation shows that the YSD field could benefit greatly from a broader conceptualizing of YSD that extends beyond structural components of YSD programs toward social interactions and experiences. Thus, a model that recognizes an intersectional relationship between various factors that influence YSD will be useful for educators to help identify several opportunities to support youth (i.e. one may begin at any of

the entry points and build from there), the multiple contexts that shape youth's sense-making, and various components of YSD work that should be considered when engaging young people.

### **5.3 CONTRIBUTIONS TO PRACTICE**

This dissertation has implications for educators' practices, both inside and outside of school. For inside of school educators – particularly teachers – this dissertation illustrates that having deep knowledge of social issues or views that align with their students' views are not necessarily prerequisites for supporting students in their sociopolitical development. Rather, teachers can help students feel supported in ways that are responsive to other developmental needs students possess that are not sociopolitical in nature but supportive of students' sociopolitical development. In chapter three, for instance, I found that although many teachers say they believe that race is important in their students' lives and should be discussed, teachers' beliefs about their profession, classroom management, and grasp of the issue can inhibit them from engaging students in critical conversations about racial violence. Yet, chapter four showed that students desire support from their teachers to discuss and act upon critical issues, even if they do not believe their teachers are knowledgeable about the issues or share students' beliefs. Students seemed to value support that made them feel that they had spaces and opportunities to engage the issues they cared about, as well as feel supported by their teachers in broader ways. Thus, for teachers who may feel uncomfortable discussing critical social issues (particularly issues pertaining to race and racism) with students in the classroom, helping students feel supported to think critically about these issues or helping students access opportunities to share their views with broader audiences present occasions to still support YSD. Furthermore, helping students develop peripheral skills that may

be transferable to their organizing or activism work may also help students feel that they are being supported.

Based upon the findings from this dissertation, below and in Table 7, I present the following recommendations for educators who want to support youth sociopolitical development but are hesitant for personal or professional reasons:

- a) *Engage in an on-going critical reflective practice:* A key aspect of supporting YSD involves supporting youth as they engage in critical reflection on how they identify and how their ways of identifying shape and are shaped by their life experiences (chapter two). Supporting youth in this way requires educators, themselves, to engage in this same practice on an on-going basis. Howard (2003) described critical reflection in teaching as “reflection within moral, political, and ethical contexts of teaching” (p. 197). Critical reflection thus contributes to educators gaining a better understanding of how issues of race, culture, social class, and identity shape students’ thinking, learning, and myriad ways of understanding the world (Howard, 2003). Specifically, educators should continually reflect upon their life experiences, both retrospectively and contemporaneously, in a critical way that informs and inspires emancipatory practices (Howard, 2003; Milner, 2003). Milner (2003) advanced that such reflective practices can occur through journaling and engaging in critical dialogue with peers couched in educators’ life experiences. Moreover, educators should seek, themselves, to understand the systemic nature of social and educational problems and how they may be participating in oppressive practices or might work against despotic forces.
- b) *Understand your positionality (Milner, 2007), including how your worldview and biases might emerge in your work:* As illustrated in chapter four, students value environments in

which they feel supported to discuss and strategize about addressing critical social issues. Part of that support would seem to entail educators having an understanding of how their own biases and positions regarding certain issues might emerge in how they restrict or support students. Thus, part of a critical reflective practice for educators who support YSD would necessitate grappling with issues of positionality and bias. This includes educators understanding intersectionality and its epistemological and social implications for educators and students (Collins, 1989; Crenshaw, 1991). Key questions educators might pose to themselves include: What are my views on racism, sexism, homophobia, poverty, etc.? How have my life experiences shaped these views? How have the way(s) I identify and the way(s) society identifies me shaped my views? How do the beliefs I have about these issues show up in my work and impact my interactions with students/youth?

- c) *Create opportunities for youth to engage in dialogue around critical social issues youth find important:* Freire (1970) argued that action informed by dialogically-derived critical reflection necessarily predicates the transformation from a state of “[being] under” to “being”; that is, from being ontologically and sociopolitically subverted to fully humanized, self-determining, and empowered. As illustrated in chapter four, many youth are seeking opportunities to engage one another in critical dialogue about social issues that are important to them. Because youth spend a large proportion of the weekdays in schools, it is natural that many youth see the classroom as a natural setting for such engagement. However, as shown in chapter three, many teachers may be hesitant to engage in sensitive critical conversations, particularly pertaining to race. Yet, students offered that their teachers need not be content experts, but rather provide opportunities within classrooms for students to explore social issues. Thus, for educators, it appears that simply providing

spaces for students to engage this work is sensible and, for some students, adequate for them to feel supported. Educators can create these spaces in numerous ways, such as allowing 10 minutes at the end of class sessions for students to talk about pertinent social issues, allowing students to lead discussions centered around social issues, or helping students build the oratorical skills to articulate and advocate for their positions on critical social issues.

- d) *Learn about youth's sociopolitical contexts:* Milner et al. (2015) posited that educators need to develop an understanding of their students' social contexts outside of school in order to best support students in the classroom. They argued that educators should engage young people in critical conversations about the inside and outside of school factors and experiences that shape their lives. Moreover, educators should immerse themselves within their students' communities and cultures in order to better contextualize students' social experiences and behaviors. This immersion can be done in many ways, including attending or participating in cultural events (e.g. religious events, community festivals, etc.), speaking with workers in community-based organizations, and reading locally-owned newspapers. Understanding the sociopolitical contexts in which students live will serve to help educators make sense of how to best support their students' transformative social actions.
- e) *Understand the role of racism and White supremacy in your life, the lives of youth, and society:* Despite the myriad social issues that impact students' experiences based largely on how students identify, race remains a salient feature of students' identities that has implications for their sociopolitical development. Thus, educators should critically reflect upon and develop an understanding of themselves as racial beings (Milner, 2003, 2015) as

well as the social realities and institutional entrenchment and consequences of racism and White supremacy (Bell, 1995; Feagin, 2000). As illustrated in chapter three, many educators still struggle to address critical issues of race with students in part because some educators may not understand how race might restrict how they conceptualize and approach their teaching practice. Although almost nine out of every ten educators in the TRTS agreed that race plays a role in their students' educational experiences, many fewer expressed a belief in discussing one of the most pernicious consequences of White supremacy (i.e. racial violence directed towards Black people) in the classroom. As Sue (2015) and others contended, restricting students from engaging in race talk can itself be an exercise of racism by signaling to students of color in particular that their experiences are not valued in academic discourse. Therefore, educators should critically engage their own relationships with racism and White supremacy in order to better understand how their teaching practice might serve as instruments of oppression or mechanism for liberation.

**Table 7.** Recommendations for supporting youth sociopolitical development

<b>Educators should...</b>	<b>Description</b>
Engage in on-going self-reflection	Educators continually reflect upon their life experiences, both retrospectively and contemporaneously, in a critical way that informs and inspires emancipatory practices (Howard, 2003; Milner, 2003).
Understand their own positionality	Educators gain an understanding of themselves, others and themselves in relation to others (Milner, 2007), including how their worldviews and biases might emerge in their work.
Create opportunities for critical dialogue	Educators engage youth and other adults in dialogical encounters that reflect upon and elucidate how oppressive social structures shape their experiences (Freire, 1970: 2003)
Learn about young people's sociopolitical and educational contexts	Educators engage young people in critical conversations about the inside and outside of school factors and experiences that shape their lives (Milner et al., 2015)
Understand the role of racism and White supremacy in your life, the lives of youth, and society	Educators critically reflect upon and develop an understanding of themselves as racial beings as well as the social realities and institutional entrenchment and consequences of racism and White supremacy (Milner, 2015; Milner, 2013)

These recommendations hopefully provide a foundation for supporting YSD. I do not claim that these recommendations are exhaustive. I expect researchers and practitioners to add to, revise, and critique this list. I do hope that this list becomes a launching point for educators who are tepid about embarking upon the hard work of helping youth cultivate their social activism but are nevertheless interested in this work.

#### **5.4 CONCLUSION**

When I began conceptualizing this dissertation, I was looking for answers to questions about how youth become socially active, where they get their inspiration, and who they draw from for support. I thought I would find a magic potion that I could share with educators to motivate us all to help

youth activists succeed. What I found was that there is not magical elixir, no single answer, no special formula for this work. Rather, I found that youth are not looking for a special type of support. They simply are looking for support – support to help them fulfill their dreams. Support to help them understand the world. Support to help them do something about the social inequities they see all around them. During the course of this research, I found myself asking repeatedly, *why is this so hard for adults to do? Why is it that youth ask for so little, yet we give them even less? Why don't educators know this, it seems so simple?*

Findings from this dissertation suggest that educators do not have to consider sociopolitical development to be a distinctive form of youth development. Instead, students could benefit from educators viewing sociopolitical development as an essential aspect of youth development. When viewed this way, educators can find seamless ways to incorporate new and existing tools into their practice that support youth engagement in addressing social issues that negatively impact their lives. Although it is important that educators develop an understanding of the critical social issues that negatively impact the lives of many of their students, being a content expert on social issues is not a prerequisite. Students are asking for opportunities to engage these issues. They want to know that their teachers care enough about them to allow them to talk about these issues and, in some cases, strategize about how to address them.

In 1935, W.E.B. Du Bois (1935) posed the germinal question regarding the education of Black children in the twentieth century when he asked simply, “Does the negro need separate schools?” The premise of Du Bois’s question was the contemporaneous national discussion about the quality of education Black children were receiving in segregated schools and whether or not Black children would be better off integrating into White schools. After chronicling the state of Black education in the U.S., Du Bois concluded that Black children needed neither separate nor

integrated schools; What Black children really needed was an education consisting of Sympathy, Knowledge, and the Truth, no matter what school they attended. Du Bois's point is as prescient today as it was in 1935. Fortunately, it appears that teacher education programs have done a better job of helping teachers develop sympathy for their students from marginalized communities. Through the advent of technology, students have more access to information to build knowledge than perhaps ever before. However, many students want opportunities to learn the truth about their sociopolitical contexts and develop the capacity and tools to act on addressing social issues. This is the next step we must take as educators – to help students build consciousness around critical social issues and feel empowered to act on them. Only then will we achieve Du Bois's dream of a complete education for Black students (and students from other marginalized communities). And, only then will we create environments where all students can feel that they have the support to transform their communities.

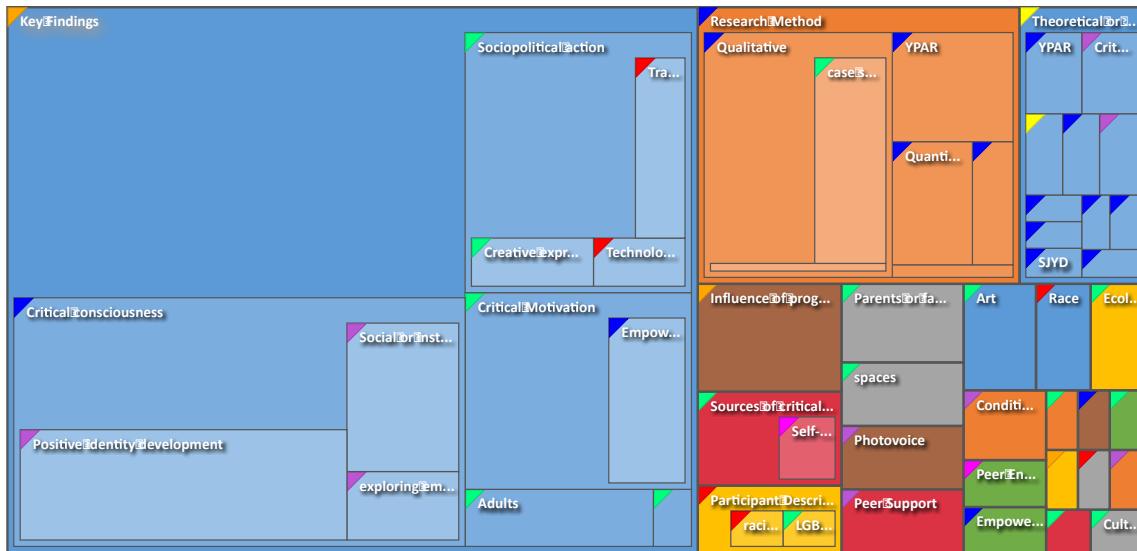
## APPENDIX A. CHAPTER TWO

### A.1 NVIVO SCREENSHOTS

#### A.1.1 NODE TREE

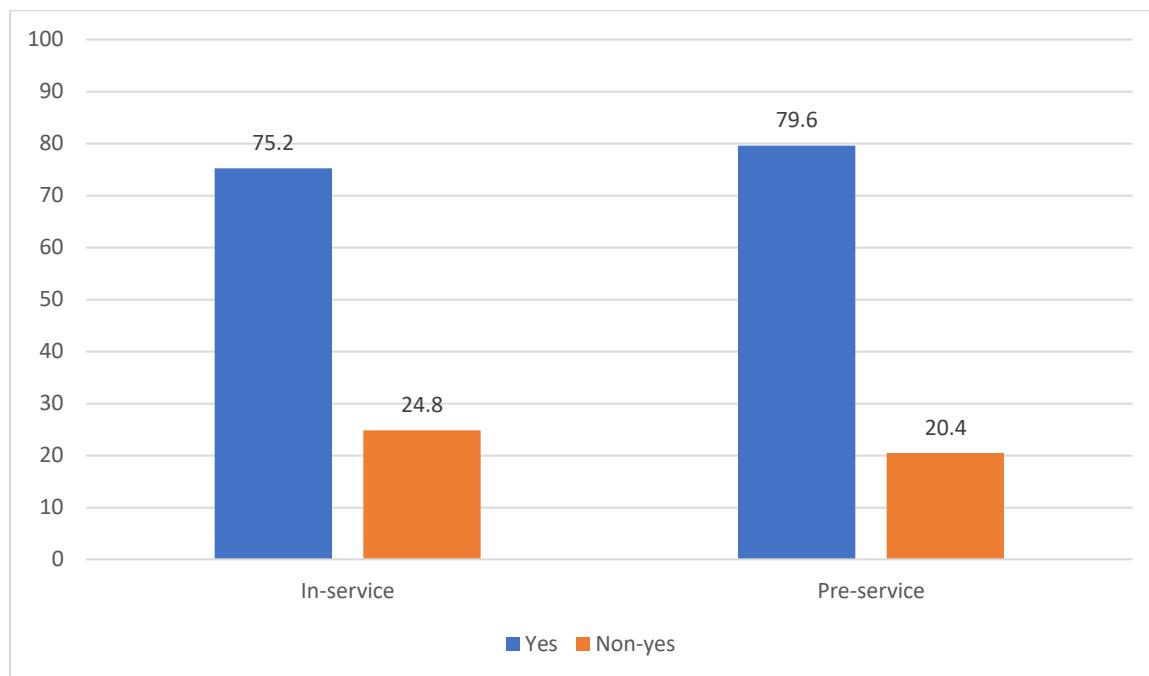
The screenshot displays the NVivo software interface. On the left, the 'NODES' section of the tree view is expanded, showing various nodes under 'Key Findings'. The 'Key Findings' node has 48 sources and 182 references. Other visible nodes include 'Research Method', 'Theoretical or Conceptual...', 'Influence of program(s)', 'Sources of critical conc...', 'Parents or family members', 'Participant Descriptions', 'Art', 'Peer Support', 'Photovoice', 'spaces', 'Conditions for SPYD', 'Ecological Focus', 'Race', 'Empowerment and agency', 'Peer Engagement', 'critical computational lite...', 'Culturally relevant arts ed...', 'Hip Hop', 'Making meaning of contr...', 'Sense of community', 'Skill development', 'Social media', and 'Technology use'. The main workspace shows two detailed views of nodes. The top view is for 'Internal\b\Cammarota, Julio (2011)' with 7 references coded, 1.27% coverage. It contains a text excerpt about social justice perspectives of urban youth. The bottom view is for 'Internal\b\Cammarota, Julio (2016)' with 9 references coded, 2.39% coverage. It contains a text excerpt about two types of transformations leading to awareness of structural conditions influencing students' reality. The right side of the interface shows a vertical bar for 'Coding Density' with three colored segments: blue ('Positive identity development'), orange ('Critical Motivation'), and red ('Research Method'). Below this is a section for 'Critical consciousness' and 'Sociopolitical action'.

### A.1.2 HIERARCHICAL CODING MATRIX

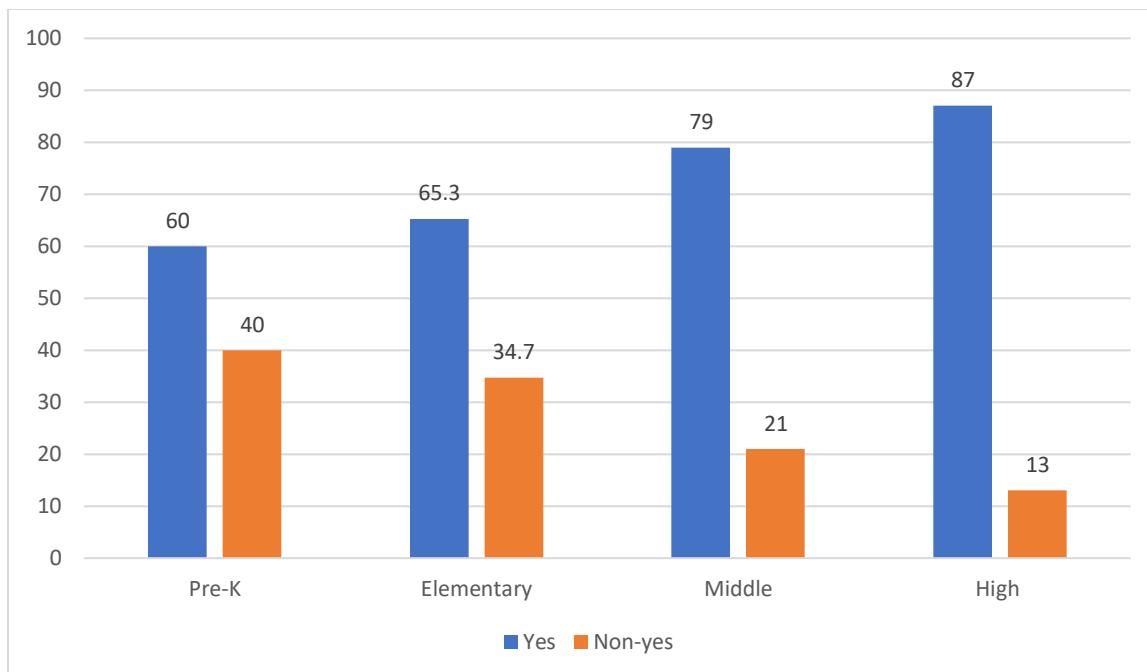


## APPENDIX B. CHAPTER THREE

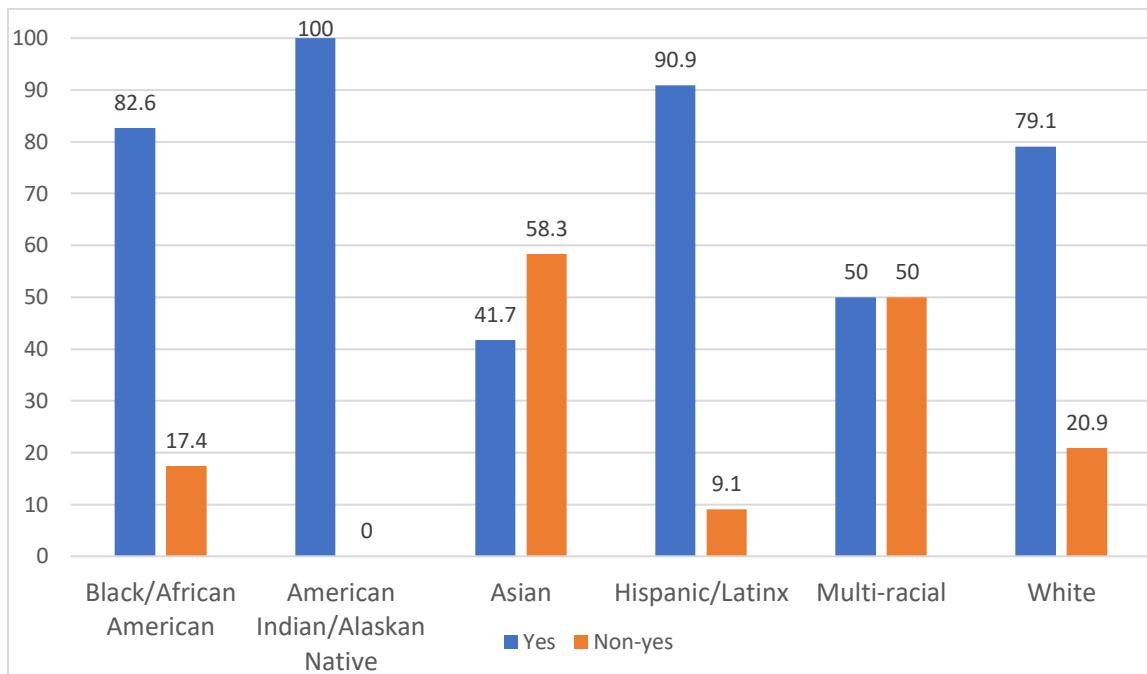
### B.1 TRTS SAMPLE SUMMARY CHARTS



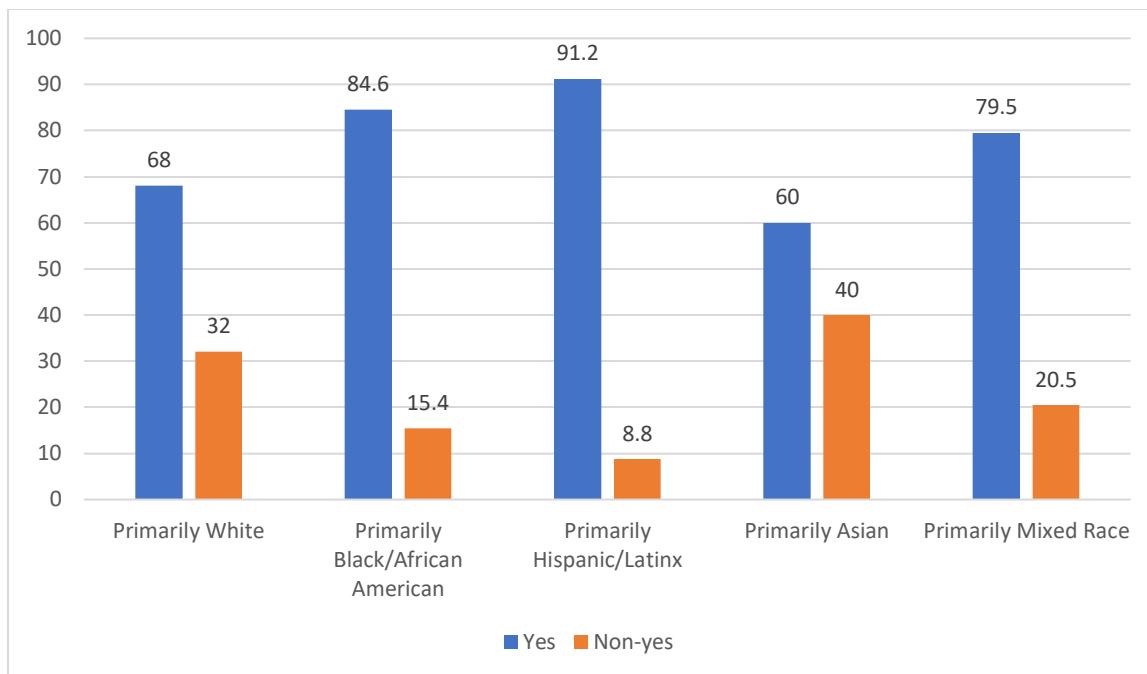
**Figure 8.** Responses by current teaching role



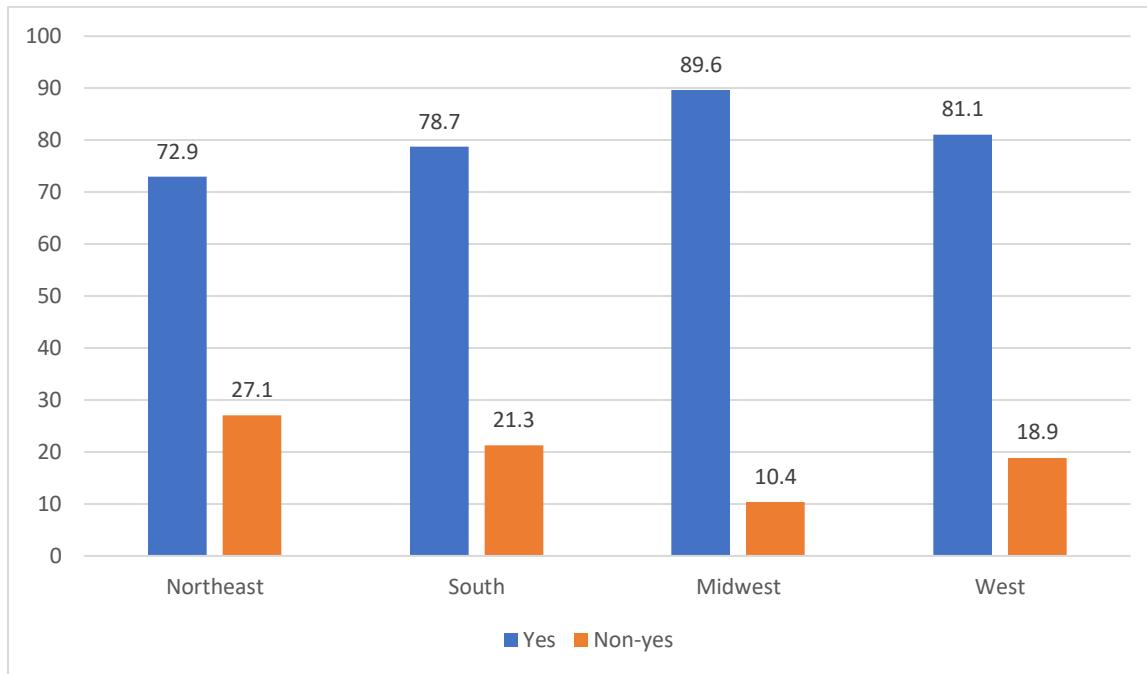
**Figure 9.** Responses by teaching grade level



**Figure 10.** Responses by teachers' racial identification



**Figure 11.** Responses by student racial demographics



**Figure 12.** Responses by region

## B.2 CLOSED-ENDED TRTS ITEMS

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Q11. (Item A). I believe race plays a role in the educational experiences of my (current/future) students.

---

Q13. (Item B). I believe the topic of race is important to discuss with the students in my (current/future) classroom.

---

Q15. (Item C). I believe that teachers should discuss racism and racial discrimination with their students.

---

Q17. (Item D). I believe that teachers should discuss recent instances of violence against black people with their students (e.g. Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Philando)

---

Q19. I believe teachers should discuss recent violence against police officers with their students (e.g. The police shooting in Dallas, TX).

---

Q 21. I feel prepared to have conversations about race in my classroom.

---

Q23. I believe my teacher training program prepared me to discuss race in my classroom.

---

Q25. I believe my students' parents/guardians would support conversations about race in my classroom.

---

Q27. I believe the administration at my school supports conversations about race inside the classroom.

---

Q29. I believe that it is my responsibility to help my students acquire the skills to critically analyze and respond to social injustices.

---

Q31. I feel prepared to help my students acquire the skills to critically analyze and respond to social injustices.

---

Q33. I believe the administration and teachers at my school would be supportive of student organizing and activism.

## **B.3 DESCRIPTIONS OF SECONDARY TRTS FINDINGS**

### **B.3.1 Theme 4. Ignorance of or discomfort discussing the issue**

Several respondents wrote that they either did not “have all the facts” about racial violence incidents or were generally uncomfortable discussing the issue because it conflicts with their beliefs about law enforcement. Respondents noted that their lack of information about racial violence incidents inhibited their willingness to engage students around those issues, with one respondent stating that they did not have “enough information to comment.” Other respondents wrote that they wanted to avoid conversations that challenged assumed roles and values they placed on law enforcement, with one respondent noting that there is “No reason to invite ‘blue lives matter vs. black lives matter’ moral dilemma” into the classroom – a statement that failed to acknowledge that experiences of many students of color, particularly Black youth, with law enforcement and, by extension the criminal justice system, might differ from the experiences of White students.

### **B.3.2 Theme 5. Lack of professional preparation**

Several respondents noted that they felt they lacked the professional preparation to engage in racial violence conversations with students. These respondents shared that they believed these types of conversations should be “handled carefully by professionals” and that it could be a “dangerous practice” for teachers “without proper training” to engage.

### **B.3.3 Theme 6. Colorblind approach to engaging race**

Finally, several respondents also expressed colorblind approaches to engaging issues of race and racial violence. These responses were characterized by respondents de-racializing issues of racial violence, instead choosing to focus their responses on all types of violence (e.g. “There is a lot of violence in the Middle East”) or framing their responses around “current events” in general.

## **APPENDIX C. CHAPTER FOUR**

### **C.1 FOCUS GROUP ONE**

Thank you for talking with us today. The purpose of this focus group is to give you an opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences as youth activists, including how you developed your sense of consciousness regarding social issues.

Before we get started, I want to remind you of a few things:

- There are no right or wrong answers
- Anything you say will not be attributed directly to you—that is, we will not use your name in any reports or presentation that comes from this work.
- The one rule is that everyone is respectful of each other—people may have different views about the school seminars and that is OK. This is an opportunity for you all to get the chance to speak. We won't talk over one another and give everyone, who wants to, a chance to share
- You can ask us questions for clarification at any time

So, before we get started, does anyone have questions [pause]. Ok, let's get started...

First, it would be great if we could all go around the room and introduce ourselves briefly—Just say your first name and grade

**Thank you. I want to talk a little bit about your growth and development as youth activists:**

- What inspired or motivated you to become a part of Youth United?
  - Probes:
    - When did you first start thinking about some of the bigger social issues such as racism, educational inequality, etc?
- Coming into the program, what were you looking most forward to getting out of your experience?
- What have been the most important experiences you have had in your development as someone who is involved in social issues?
  - Probes:
- Who has helped you the most in becoming more conscious about social issues? For example, it could be anyone from family, friends, neighbors, community members, teachers, people on television or social media.
  - What about them, for instance what they do or who they are, has been most important to your growth?
  - What did you learn from these people that stuck with you the most?

- What issues or current events really resonate with you the most and motivate you to be actively engaged in communities? How does it show up in your work?
- What roles, positive or negative, do schools play in you and your peers' social consciousness development?
  - Probes:
    - How does your school help foster or inhibit youth social consciousness development and activism?
    - Do you believe that teachers should discuss issues like racial violence in the classroom? If so, what should those conversations look like? If not, why not?
    - Do you feel supported by your school in your activism efforts? Why or why not?
    - What could your school (teachers, staff, administrators) do better to help students engage more in social action?
- What roles, positive or negative, do your communities play in you and your peers' social consciousness development?
- What role or roles do you think race and racism play in your social consciousness development?
  - Probes:

**Thank you for all of this great feedback. Before we close, is there anything else you'd like to talk about regarding your experiences with the seminars?**

I think that is about it. Thank you for participating in this focus group.

## C.2 FOCUS GROUP TWO

Thank you for talking with me today. The purpose of this focus group is to give you an opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences as youth activists.

Before we get started, I want to remind you of a few things:

- There are no right or wrong answers
- Anything you say will not be attributed directly to you—that is, we will not use your name in any reports or presentation that comes from this work.
- The one rule is that everyone is respectful of each other—people may have different views about the school seminars and that is OK. This is an opportunity for you all to get the chance to speak. We won't talk over one another and give everyone, who wants to, a chance to share
- You can ask us questions for clarification at any time

So, before we get started, does anyone have questions [pause]. Ok, let's get started...

First, it would be great if we could all go around the room and introduce ourselves briefly—Just say your first name and grade

**The last time we met, we talked about how you came to want to be involved in Youth United, what you hoped to get out of this experience, and what you thought about how the people and environment around you have helped or not helped you in becoming more socially conscious. During that conversation, we touched a little bit on what you thought about the role of race in your experiences. For this meeting, I want to dig a little deeper into your perceptions and understandings of race and racism.**

- Do you believe race plays a role in your educational experiences? For example, how you and/or your peers are punished in school, the access you have to quality education, the condition of your school building, etc?
  - Probes:
- Do you think teachers should engage issues of race and racism with students in the classroom?
  - If so, why?
  - If not, why not?
- What have been your experiences with teachers engaging you in conversations about race and racism?
  - Did you have conversations about race in elementary school, middle school, or high school?
  - In what classes did you have these conversations?
  - What was the race of the teacher, to the best of your knowledge?
- \*\*\*\*\*Do you see a difference in the way that teachers talk about issues of race versus other people you talk about these issues with?

- If so, what were those differences?
- We've seen several instances of racial violence, particularly killings at the hands of law enforcement, in recent years. Do you talk about these cases in school? If so, with whom? And, what did you get learn from these conversations?
  - Do you think teachers should talk about cases like Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown and Sandra Bland with their students? Why or why not?
  - Have you had the conversations in the classroom? If so, what was the experience like?
- \*\*\*\*Do you think you have support from adults to talk about race and racism in school as part of your education experience?
  - What adults do you feel supported by?
  - If not, what makes you feel not supported to have these conversations as part of your education experience?

**Thank you for all of this great feedback. Before we close, is there anything else you'd like to talk about regarding your experiences with the seminars?**

### C.3 FOCUS GROUP THREE

Thank you for talking with us today. The purpose of this conversation is to give you an opportunity to reflect on and share your experiences making sense of your training and your experiences trying to implement some of the things you've learned.

Before we get started, I want to remind you of a few things:

- There are no right or wrong answers
- Anything you say will not be attributed directly to you—that is, we will not use your name in any reports or presentation that comes from this work.
- The one rule is that everyone is respectful of each other—people may have different views about the school seminars and that is OK. This is an opportunity for you all to get the chance to speak. We won't talk over one another and give everyone, who wants to, a chance to share
- You can ask us questions for clarification at any time

So, before we get started, does anyone have questions [pause]. Ok, let's get started...

First, it would be great if we could all go around the room and introduce ourselves briefly—Just say your first name and grade

So, in this session I want us to talk about your experiences learning about social issues and moving toward addressing issues in your own ways whether in school or in your communities.

- What are the main things you have learned from your engagement with Youth United this year?
  - What stood out most to you about your Youth United experience?
  - How do you feel you have grown from this experience?
- Specifically, what activities or projects were most beneficial or useful for you?
- What relationships – with adults, peers, teachers or anybody – have helped you in your social action work the most?
- Describe your experiences as youth activists and organizers this year? (center around each of the major projects)
  - What issues did you choose to address and why?
  - What did you do?
  - What worked or went well?
  - What didn't go so well?
- How prepared did you feel to engage these issues? What are the sources of that preparedness
  - Did you feel like you had all of the information you needed?
  - What did you not have that you wished you had?
- What were your sources of support or information for your activism?
  - People?

- Places/institutions?
  - Resources?
- What impediments did you face?
  - People?
  - Places/institutions?
  - Resources?
- How do you define success in your activist or organizing work?
  - What “wins” did you experience?
  - Do you feel that you have been successful in your thus far?
- How do you think race/racism shaped your experiences?
  - Did you learn anything you didn’t already know about race or racism?
  - How did you see race or racism playing out in your work?
  - How do you think your experience would have been different if your race was different?
- What could the program do better to support your preparedness and work as youth activists and organizers?

\*Examples of probing/follow-up questions designed to get more information on a given question:

- "Can you say more about that?"
- "Can you give an example?"
- "Jane says X. How about others of you. What do you think?"
- "How about you, Joe. [Or, "you folks in the corner over there...."] Do you have some thoughts on this?"
- "Does anyone else have some thoughts on that?"
- Repeat for different aspects of the topic, with variations in style. For example, if the main focus group topic was "community policing," some key aspects to cover might be visibility, sensitivity, interaction, respect, etc.
- "Some people have said that one way to improve X is to do Y.
- Do you agree with this? (Or, "How do you feel about that?")

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