

Is Grey the New Black?
A Narrative Inquiry of Growing Up as a Black-White Biracial Child in the South

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JESSICA L. BARFIELD

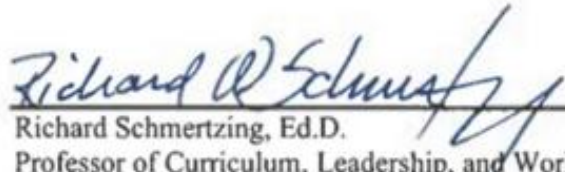
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B.S., University of Georgia, 1997

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This dissertation, "Is Grey the New Black? A Narrative Inquiry of Growing Up as a Black-White Biracial Child in the South," by Jessica L. Barfield, is approved by:

**Dissertation
Committee
Chair**


Richard Schmertzing, Ed.D.
Professor of Curriculum, Leadership, and Workforce
Development

**Dissertation
Research
Member**


Lorraine Schmertzing, Ed.D.
Professor of Curriculum, Leadership, and Workforce
Development

**Committee
Member**

DocuSigned by:

2952FBCBB0A443C
Christine James, Ph.D.
Professor of Philosophy

**Associate Provost
for Graduate
Studies and
Research**


Becky A.K. da Cruz, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice

Defense Date

November 12, 2025

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ABSTRACT

The experiences of Black-White biracial individuals remain understudied in educational research despite their growing presence in U.S. schools, particularly in the southern United States. This qualitative study employed narrative inquiry to examine how Black-White biracial young adults who grew up in the South made meaning of racial identity within predominantly White classrooms, schools, and communities. Guided by Seidman's (2019) three-interview approach and Daiute's (2014) narrative framework, four participants ages 18–22 shared life stories across family, school, and peer contexts. The study was framed by critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model to analyze structural inequities, personal agency, and cultural resources shaping self-perception.

Findings revealed pressures of racial categorization where Black-White biracial identity was often collapsed into Blackness, alongside the significance of hair, appearance, and phenotypical visibility in shaping belonging. Participants described a dual burden of invisibility and hypervisibility that challenged binary racial norms while inviting scrutiny. Family conversations, mentorship, and participation in sports, arts, and peer groups functioned as key sources of affirmation and resilience, whereas classrooms frequently minimized or ignored race altogether.

This study contributes to limited scholarship on Black-White biracial identity in the South by centering participant narratives that disrupt monoracial frameworks. Findings underscore the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, intentional representation, and teacher preparation practices that promote inclusivity.

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To my participants, I am profoundly grateful. Thank you for trusting me with your stories and for sharing your lived experiences with honesty and courage. Your voices are at the heart of this research, and it is my hope that I have represented them with integrity and care.

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Finally, to all who walked alongside me during this journey, whether through a word of encouragement, a shared meal, or a quiet reminder to rest, I am deeply grateful.

DEDICATION

For my children, Sullivan and Quinn. May you grow up knowing that your voices matter, your stories are powerful, and your dreams are worth chasing. This work is as much yours as it is mine.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

Caring for and nurturing children, *all* children, has always been my calling; ever since I was a little girl, I wanted to be a teacher, and I loved seeing children learn and grow in my own classroom when I began teaching in 1997. I started as a paraprofessional in the same school that I attended as an elementary student under the very same principal who was in charge when I was a child. I was extremely eager, and my dedication paid off when I was offered a classroom of my own just 3 months into the school year. Teachers were instructed to give me one student from each of their rosters to create my class list, and I am sure it is no surprise that I got the students with whom others did not really want to work: the extremely poor, the behavior issues, and many, many Black children. Seeing how many Black and Brown children teachers cast off to come to my newly formed classroom was an eye opener, and I was able to see overt racism towards children for the first time in my privileged life.

I made it my mission to speak to and interact with all of my students in ways that I would want to be treated as a child. I was also extremely vocal on the playground and in faculty meetings if issues ever came up that I could see were rooted in racism and differing treatment of students that were not White. Throughout my 10 years in the public schools of my hometown I saw evidence of prejudice, but I also fought it and spoke out against it strongly, bringing many of my fellow teachers along with me. As they were enlightened they shifted their views to ensure that Black and Brown children were seen,

taught, and nurtured with the same care as the White children in their rooms. It was thrilling to see others in my planning group expand their views and better meet the needs of their students. I enjoyed teaching Pre-kindergarten, Kindergarten, and First Grade as I was amazed at how much growth children could achieve so quickly when seen and valued. The years flew by quickly.

After a decade teaching at an elementary school, I felt that I had outgrown my sandbox and longed to make a broader difference in the lives of children by helping to educate future teachers. In 2007, I was contacted and asked to come lead the Elementary Education Department at my local technical college, and it was exactly as I had hoped. Working with pre-service teachers at the technical college allowed me to work with a diverse population of students and to guide them to create lessons and activities that would meet the varying needs of the diverse students that they would soon encounter in their future classrooms. During this time, I also began to teach in several adjunct positions at colleges and universities, eventually moving on to start the Elementary Education Bachelor's Program at a large community college in North Florida. It was fulfilling to work with students as they prepped to move into the world of teaching, guiding them to ensure that they saw each of their students as worthy and deserving of attention, acceptance, and love.

While I had witnessed differing treatment of students during my decade in elementary classrooms as a teacher, as well as my over 20 years working in higher education with preservice teachers, my eyes truly opened to the difference in treatment of children at the age of 35 when I adopted my Black-White biracial daughter in 2010. I personally witnessed everyone gush over my child but overlook or ignore other children

who looked like her in school settings, which upset me immensely.

The disparities between the treatment of my child and other children who looked like her, as well as my experiences as a classroom teacher, directly led to the development of my study topic as I hoped to find answers that addressed what I saw concerning the experiences of Black-White biracial children and individuals growing up in the South. In the next two sections I will discuss why the experiences of Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South were important for me to study, the goals I hoped to achieve by doing so, and the research questions that I developed to guide my study.

Statement of the Problem

Numerous studies to explore and discover how individuals learn and make meaning of their lived experiences have been conducted, too numerous to count in fact; yet the focus consistently remained on monoracial children and individuals (Brown, 2009; Chapman, 2013; Delpit, 2006, 2008, 2021; Gaither, 2015; Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Kozol, 2012). Though the United States Census only recently even offered a “multi-racial” category for respondents in the year 2000, multiracial and biracial births are on the rise, with a projected 20% of the population becoming biracial and/or multiracial by the year 2050 (Howard, 2020; Lee & Bean, 2004). We are halfway to 2050 and 10.2% of the United States population (33.8 million people) identify as biracial and multiracial, which is a 276% increase from the 9 million people (2.9% of the population) who identified as biracial and multiracial in 2010 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021); the largest multiracial groups were White and some other race. The documented increase of biracial and multiracial children entering the education system in the United States dictates that

there is a growing need to explore what it means to experience life as a person who is not monoracial (Gaither, 2015; Howard, 2020). Gaither (2015) declared that by the age of 4 children understand skin color and fear rejecting one of their parents, supporting the need for educators working in learning environments to gain a deeper understanding of how young Black-White biracial children, like my daughter, make meaning of their experiences in the classroom to scaffold students as they develop.

Despite the increase of Black-White biracial students in the school systems in America, research remains limited on just how this group of students identifies race personally and how they fit in with mainly monoracial peers in the classroom. Limited research on Black-White biracial students poses an issue for educators, as the largest segment of the two-race population recorded on the 2010 U.S. Census was Black-White biracial individuals (Humes et al., 2011) and one of the largest multiracial segments on the 2020 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021); this issue was a guiding factor for my study. Because teachers are encountering larger numbers of students who do not fall within a monoracial category (Howard, 2020), especially Black-White biracial students, it is imperative that they be equipped with a greater understanding of how to meet the needs of this burgeoning student population. As the number of Black-White biracial students entering the classrooms in America continues to increase, teachers will need to adjust their skills to meet the needs of non-White students (Delpit, 2006, 2008, 2021; Howard, 2020).

Clarification of Labels

Clarifying labels in my study is essential to ensure consistency, accuracy, and respect when discussing the lived experiences of Black-White biracial young adults

growing up in the South. The terminology used to describe racial identity is not only descriptive but also carries deep historical, cultural, and social meanings that can influence interpretation. Without careful attention to labels, there is a risk of oversimplifying or misrepresenting the complexity of biracial identity. By establishing clear definitions, this study creates a foundation that both honors participants' voices and strengthens the validity of the research. The following labels were used throughout the study:

- *Participants*: Black-White biracial young adults, aged 18 to 22
- *Black-White biracial*: individuals who have one Black birth parent and one White birth parent
- *Biracial*: when speaking of my participants it is used interchangeably with Black-White biracial
- *South*: for the purpose of this study, it is defined as a cultural and geographic region of the United States defined by a history of plantation slavery and a distinct cultural identity, primarily composed of states like South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Louisiana, Florida, Texas, Arkansas, and North Carolina
- *Narrative inquiry*: the study of human experience through the interpretation of stories, involves making sense of accumulated knowledge and gained experience by telling and analyzing stories (Daiute, 2014)
- *Critical race theory (CRT)*: a framework that asserts racism is systemic and embedded in American institutions and laws, rather than being solely individual prejudice (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023)
- *Cultural wealth model (CWM)*: model recognizing and celebrating the inherent

strengths, knowledge, and skills that communities of color possess to navigate and challenge systemic inequities (Yosso, 2005)

- *Biracial identity development model (BIDM)*: biracial individuals go through the following stages while developing identity: personal identity, choice of group categorization; enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration (Poston, 1990)
- *Microaggression*: a comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (Sue et al., 2007)
- *Code-switching*: when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation or situation (Delpit, 2008)

Research Goals

Maxwell (2013) identified three central types of research goals that shape qualitative research: personal, intellectual, and practical. Personal goals influence all aspects of the research process, guiding the selection of the topic, shaping methodological choices, and sustaining the motivation necessary to complete the study. According to Maxwell (2013) because researchers serve as the primary instrument of data collection in qualitative research, it is essential that they acknowledge and disclose their personal goals and potential biases in order to preserve the validity and trustworthiness of the study. Intellectual goals, in contrast, emphasize understanding participants' contexts, experiences, and the ways these shape their decisions and meaning-making (Maxwell, 2013). Practical goals extend the influence of research beyond the study itself, seeking to inform and impact practices and policies in educational and social contexts. Within the

present study, my work was guided by personal, intellectual, and practical goals as I sought to gather and share the narratives of Black-White biracial participants growing up in the South.

Personal Goals

My personal goals for this research grew from both my professional career as an educator and my personal experiences as the White mother of a Black-White biracial daughter and a Black son. For nearly 3 decades, I worked in classrooms and higher education settings where issues of race and equity consistently surfaced, often in subtle yet powerful ways. My commitment to teaching began in 1997 when I entered the classroom and immediately witnessed the disparities in how children were assigned, taught, and treated. Students of color, particularly Black children, were placed in my room not because of their potential but because other teachers deemed them “problems” to be handled. These early experiences made visible the role that race plays in educational contexts and fueled my determination to treat every student with dignity and respect. From that point forward, I became vocal in challenging the inequities I saw in schools, whether on the playground, in faculty meetings, or through mentoring fellow teachers who were beginning to recognize their own biases.

That same determination became deeply personal in 2010 when I adopted my Black-White biracial daughter. Her presence in my life sharpened my awareness of how biracial children are perceived, welcomed, or dismissed in classrooms and communities. I saw firsthand how teachers and other adults often lavished attention and praise on my daughter while ignoring or even reprimanding other biracial children who looked just like her; I felt that she was treated special because people personally knew me and saw her

differently than other Black-White biracial children who were just like her. This troubling inconsistency revealed the ways that whiteness, or proximity to whiteness, and adult perceptions intersect in shaping the treatment of children in schools. As a mother, I could not ignore the inequities directed toward children who shared my daughter's racial identity. As a researcher and educator, I felt compelled to investigate and document these experiences, not only for my personal children, but also for the countless Black-White biracial students who lack advocates in their schools and lives.

One of my foremost personal goals was to add to research that sheds light on how Black-White biracial students experience race and make choices between identifying as biracial, biracial minority (Black), or biracial majority (White). This demographic represents one of the largest segments of two-race individuals recorded in the U.S. Census and is rapidly increasing in number (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021). Yet, as the literature consistently shows, they remain overlooked in educational research (Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Lynn & Dixson, 2022). I am personally motivated to ensure that their stories are recorded and honored. My children and the children of countless families like ours deserve to see their realities reflected in scholarship. Their experiences disrupt monoracial categories, challenge deficit narratives, and broaden what it means to belong in schools in the South.

A second personal goal was to gain insight into how this often overlooked group experiences being biracial in mainly White classrooms within mainly White schools. Having taught in public schools and later trained preservice teachers at colleges and universities, I know how dominant narratives in education often ignore or misinterpret the complexities of biracial identity. Classrooms continue to operate on assumptions

rooted in whiteness, and teachers, the majority of whom have historically been White women (Donnor, 2022; Leonardo & Boas, 2022), are often unprepared to understand or affirm biracial identities. My goal was to illuminate the subtle ways that Black-White biracial students are pressured to choose one side of their identity, silenced in conversations about race, or treated as exceptions rather than whole persons.

Documenting these narratives is both an academic and personal commitment to ensuring these students are no longer invisible.

Third, I aimed to better understand the needs and development of this rapidly increasing segment of American classrooms. As a mother and an educator, I have long wondered how Black-White biracial children navigate their identities in schools where they are both hypervisible and invisible. My daughter's daily experiences, along with those of my son, remind me that children's sense of self is constantly being negotiated in classrooms. I want to understand these processes more deeply, not only to contribute to scholarship but also to influence teacher preparation so future educators will be equipped to create inclusive, affirming spaces.

Finally, I am committed to sharing my findings with local school systems to positively impact the lives of young Black-White students growing up in the South. This goal is perhaps the most personal and urgent. I live in and raise my children in the same communities where my participants grew up, and I am personally invested in ensuring that schools in this region move toward equity and inclusion. By presenting findings to local school boards, administrators, and teachers, I hope to create practical pathways for schools to affirm Black-White biracial identities, disrupt harmful practices, and foster belonging. This goal extends beyond academic contribution; it is a personal mission to

see immediate and tangible change in the classrooms my children and their peers inhabit.

These personal goals sustained me through the demanding process of qualitative research. Maxwell (2013) reminded researchers that personal goals not only influence topic choice but also provide the motivation to persist when the research journey becomes difficult. For me, this research was more than an academic requirement; it was an act of advocacy for my children, my students, and countless others navigating what it means to grow up Black-White biracial in the South. My goals were rooted in love, equity, and justice. They drove my desire to listen carefully, document responsibly, and share courageously so that Black-White biracial students will see themselves represented in the literature and, more importantly, in the practices of their teachers.

Intellectual Goals

The intellectual goals of my study centered on deepening scholarly understanding of how Black-White biracial students make sense of race, identity, and belonging within the unique cultural context of the South. As Maxwell (2013) explained, intellectual goals guide researchers toward expanding knowledge by asking questions that illuminate how people interpret their experiences. For me, these goals were anchored in the conviction that the narratives of Black-White biracial participants provide insights not yet fully represented in the literature and are essential for reshaping how educators and policymakers think about race in schools in the South.

One intellectual goal was to explore how Black-White biracial individuals defined the construct of race and situated themselves within it. Prior research has often collapsed biracial identities into monoracial categories, particularly Blackness, due to the enduring influence of the “one-drop rule” and binary racial systems in the South (Dawkins, 2012;

Delpit, 2008; Gaither & Rozek, 2020). By using narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014) to foreground participants' stories, I sought to uncover the nuances of how Black-White biracial children described and negotiated their racial identity, shedding light on moments when they claimed, resisted, or redefined labels such as biracial, biracial minority (Black), or biracial majority (White).

A second intellectual goal was to examine how home environments and family conversations influenced biracial identity development in the lives of participants in the study. Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model highlights the role of family in shaping identity, and my participants' stories provided real-world examples of how silence, affirmation, or explicit dialogue at home impacted racial self-perception. This exploration built on existing literature while also contributing new insights into how Black-White biracial individuals constructed meaning across multiple contexts.

Another intellectual goal was to investigate something both Donnor (2022) and Leonardo and Boas (2022) discussed: how predominantly White classrooms functioned as racialized spaces for Black-White biracial students. Schools are often assumed to be neutral spaces, yet research rooted in critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) demonstrated that they are instead sites where inequities are reproduced. Through participants' accounts, I captured how classrooms, peer relationships, extracurricular activities, and teacher interactions shaped both opportunities and obstacles for the Black-White biracial young adults in this study. These intellectual insights extend current conversations in the field by explicitly focusing on the experiences of Black-White biracial students in the South, a region with a deeply entrenched racial history that continues to influence daily school life.

Finally, an overarching intellectual goal was to contribute to the growing body of knowledge about multiracial identity as a dynamic and contextual process. Biracial identity development cannot be understood through static models alone; it requires attention to fluidity, context, and shifting social pressures. By analyzing participants' narratives using approaches such as values coding, plot analysis, and character mapping, I was able to highlight the evolving and multilayered nature of identity development.

Through these intellectual goals, my study not only addresses gaps in the literature but also offers new frameworks for understanding how four Black-White biracial students navigated identity in schools shaped by both historic and contemporary racial dynamics in the South. These insights are vital for educators, scholars, and communities committed to fostering equity and inclusion as they can introduce us to areas of concern for which more sensitivity and attention is needed.

Practical Goals

The practical goals of my study are rooted in the desire to create tangible, lasting change in the ways that schools, teachers, and communities respond to the needs of Black-White biracial individuals. While my personal goals sustained my passion and my intellectual goals guided my inquiry, my practical goals focused on how the findings of this research can extend beyond the pages of a dissertation and influence everyday practices in classrooms across the South. As Maxwell (2013) emphasized, practical goals are those that seek to affect real people and real systems, and it was in this spirit that I undertook this work.

One practical goal was to provide teachers with insights that can inform more inclusive instructional practices. By amplifying the voices of Black-White biracial

participants, I hoped to equip teachers with a deeper understanding of how students navigate identity in predominantly White classrooms. Many teachers, especially those who identify as White women, the demographic majority in the teaching profession (Donnor, 2022), have limited exposure to biracial perspectives. The stories and themes I present in this study can be integrated into teacher preparation courses, professional development sessions, and ongoing school-based training to ensure educators are prepared to recognize microaggressions, address racial silences, and create classrooms where Black-White biracial students feel both seen and valued.

Another practical goal was to support schools and districts in crafting culturally responsive policies and curricula. The narratives gathered through this study highlighted the need for policies that do more than espouse diversity in name; they call for policies that actively disrupt deficit narratives and affirm the complex identities of Black-White biracial individuals. Sharing my findings with local school systems in the South was therefore a deliberate aim, as these communities, their students, and teachers stand to benefit most immediately from an increased awareness of how biracial students experience school. Findings from this research can guide administrators in shaping equity initiatives, curriculum committees in diversifying texts and materials, and school counselors in developing supports for identity development.

A third practical goal was to contribute to broader conversations in education about the rapidly increasing population of multiracial students in America's classrooms. With projections indicating that by 2045 the United States is projected to become minority White (Howard, 2020), schools cannot afford to overlook the needs of this demographic. My study provides a model for how narrative inquiry can capture and

center Black-White biracial voices, offering both local and national educators a framework for understanding identity development in racially charged contexts. By disseminating findings at conferences and through workshops, I aim to ensure that this work reaches beyond my immediate community and contributes to systemic change.

In order to meet the previous personal, intellectual, and practical goals explained previously, I used narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014) to explore the experiences of my participants. By exploring and sharing the lived experiences of Black-White biracial children in this dissertation it has positioned me to provide educators with the knowledge and tools they need to affirm biracial identities, disrupt inequities, and foster classrooms where all students can thrive. In this way, the study not only fills a gap in the literature but also carries the potential to positively impact the daily realities of Black-White biracial students who, for too long, have remained on the margins of educational research and practice. To achieve these goals, I was guided by four major research questions.

Research Questions

Maxwell (2013) explained that strong research questions are those that clearly target what the researcher seeks to uncover and that provide direction for gathering the information needed to accomplish the study's purpose. Guided by this perspective, and grounded in the personal, intellectual, and practical goals outlined earlier, I designed research questions that focused on how Black-White biracial individuals made meaning of their identities while growing up in the South. These questions served as the foundation for the inquiry and ensured that the narratives collected illuminated the unique challenges, choices, and perspectives of this often overlooked group. The following research questions guided this study.

Research Question 1: Defining the Construct of Race

Understanding how Black-White biracial individuals define the construct of race is essential because it highlights the unique ways this growing population navigates identity in schools and communities where racial categories are often presented as rigid and binary. Gaither and Rozek (2020) found that Black-White biracial students do not fall neatly into traditional constructs of Black or White but instead develop fluid understandings of race that shift depending on context, peer groups, and family conversations. By centering the voices of four young adults who grew up as biracial in the South, I hoped to gain insight into how as children they made sense of their lived realities, how they positioned themselves within predominantly White classrooms, and how societal and familial influences shaped their self-perception. This knowledge matters for guiding teachers to create culturally responsive learning environments that affirm Black-White biracial students' identities, foster belonging, and counteract the microaggressions and inequities that often undermine their academic and social experiences. Thus, the first research question I sought to answer was: In what ways do Black-White biracial young adults define the construct of race?

Research Question 2: Racial Identity in Schools

I also wanted to explore how Black-White biracial participants situated themselves within their defined construct of race in the school setting. This was crucial because schools are among the first social environments where individuals encounter external expectations, peer pressures, and institutional practices that shape their sense of belonging. For Black-White biracial students in the South, the classroom often becomes a site where they are pressured to align with one racial category, most commonly being

read as Black, regardless of their own self-perceptions. Exploring how these students negotiated identity in such spaces shed light on the ways they responded to microaggressions, stereotypes, and systemic inequities while also identifying strategies they used to claim agency and resilience. Understanding these processes will help me work with educators, as it reveals not only the challenges Black-White biracial students may face in predominantly White schools but also how teachers can better affirm and support their identities through culturally responsive practices and inclusive classroom environments. As a result, research question 2 was: How do Black-White biracial young adults situate themselves within their defined construct of race in the school setting?

Research Question 3: Household Role in Identity

While looking into the social and academic experiences of Black-White biracial participants and how those experiences helped them define themselves within school settings, I knew I also needed to investigate how the racial self-perception of Black-White biracial individuals was affected by the home environment. This was essential because home environments play a critical role in shaping how individuals come to understand and define their racial identity. Puchner and Markowitz (2015) demonstrated that when parents intentionally addressed differences, whether appearance, cultural background, or experiences of bias, biracial children were better prepared to make sense of their identity and navigate societal expectations. In this way, the choices families made about the art on their walls, the cultural objects they displayed, the music they played, and the books they kept in their homes sent steady messages about belonging and cultural identity. Conversely, when race was minimized or left unspoken in the home, along with a lack of culturally affirming art, music, décor, and literature, Williams and Ware (2019)

found children struggled with confusion, denial, or internal conflict when confronted with external categorizations in school and community settings. Posing research question 3: How is the racial self-perception of Black-White biracial young adults affected by the home environment? allowed insight into the protective or challenging roles households played, highlighting whether culturally affirming choices made in how the home was presented fostered confidence and integration of both heritages, or whether lack of culturally affirming choices in how the home was presented exacerbated feelings of marginalization in the participants. Such understanding not only added depth to my study of Black-White biracial identity development but also has the potential to inform educators on how to partner with families to affirm children's self-perception and ensure consistent support across home and school contexts as they grow up. I looked forward to exploring my assumption that by ensuring culturally relevant art, music, and books are available across both home and school contexts, adults can help foster healthy self-perception and support biracial children as they grow into a confident understanding of their racial identity.

Research Question 4: Parent/Guardian Role in Identity

Lastly, exploring how parents and guardians of Black-White biracial children contributed to their child's biracial identity was vital because parental influence often serves as the first and most consistent framework through which individuals understand race. Studies have shown that conversations within the home with parents, whether open and affirming or silent and avoidant, significantly shaped how biracial children perceived themselves and navigated external racial categorizations (Delpit, 2006, 2012; Williams & Ware, 2019). Parents' choices in addressing or neglecting topics of race, culture, and

belonging can either empower their children to embrace both heritages or leave them vulnerable to confusion, guilt, and the pressures of societal labeling. By examining how parents and guardians handled their biracialness, their family stories, and their family members' responses to racialized experiences, my data opened the door for me to see the ways parental interactions either buffered against or reinforced systemic inequities for participants. This exploration not only deepens understanding of Black-White biracial identity development but also provides valuable insight for educators seeking to build bridges with parents to support children's holistic sense of self (Gay, 2023). This led me to ask research question 4: How do parents/guardians of Black-White biracial young adults contribute to their child's biracial identity?

By answering these research questions, I believe I fulfilled my purpose of giving voice to the experiences of this study's Black-White biracial participants, including stories that echo those of my own Black-White biracial daughter. Lifting up their narratives allowed me to better understand how they defined race, how they found belonging in Southern schools, and how their homes and parents/guardians shaped their self-image. This work is deeply personal for me as both a mother and an educator, and I see it as a step toward creating schools where Black-White biracial students are recognized, supported, and celebrated.

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of my study was to address issues that I observed while in the schools for my profession, as well as with my children, surrounding Black-White biracial individuals. The limited body of literature around young Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South bolstered my decision to carry out my study with this

demographic group, but being the parent of two children who are not White also heavily influenced my decision. As the parent of a Black-White biracial daughter and a Black son, I have experienced insensitive questions and garnered inquisitive looks since my children were babies, but what have these intrusions into our lives by others done to shape my children's view of self, I wondered. In our home, we discuss racial issues, varied family structures, and social justice issues openly and earnestly, yet I know that as my children navigate the days at school, they experience other views, constantly constructing their own understandings.

In my study I explored how Black-White biracial students experienced being biracial in the South as they went about their daily routines at school and in life. As I undertook my study, I gained insight into how students who Gaither and Rozek (2020) termed this often overlooked demographic experienced being biracial in mainly White classrooms within mainly White schools, often in mainly White spaces in the South. Information gathered about how Black-White biracial participants experienced being biracial as they grew up can guide teachers to teach in a more multicultural, sensitive manner that will benefit all students, especially those in one of the largest growing two-race demographic group (Humes et al., 2011), Black-White biracial individuals.

More research will help educators of Black-White biracial students for several reasons. According to Brown (2009), Black-White biracial students comprise an increasing portion of students in United States' schools, yet these students remain understudied. With limited research on Black-White biracial students, it is important to explore how they interact with the world around them and make meaning of these interactions. In addition, Black-White biracial children do not fall within traditional racial

constructs, which results in views about race that are fluid and do not fall within the typical constraints of what it means to be only Black or only White (Rockquemore et al., 2009), and therefore they choose from various racial identities, often shifting depending on peer groups. More research will shed light on how Black-White biracial individuals experience race and make choices between identifying as biracial, biracial minority (Black), or biracial majority (White). Chen and Hamilton (2012) interviewed 20 families with biracial children (participants were first year undergraduates) and as a result concluded that a major factor in the development of the participants' understanding of race and racial identity was grounded in the conversations parents had with their children in the home while growing up. Further, when parents directly addressed issues like the difference in their appearance, deep conversations ensued around constructs of race and racial identity, helping their biracial children make meaning of their experiences.

Culture and race are important factors influencing perceptions concerning student learning and abilities in America's classrooms (Delpit, 2021; Howard, 2020). It is imperative for students, teachers, and parents to call for equitable educational experiences by exposing biases and starting race conversations. If we are to extinguish the "savage inequalities", present in America's classrooms as described by Kozol (2012) and educate non-White students with the same vigor that we teach their White peers, then those in education must get real about racism and demand change, which is why I devised research questions to explore how Black-White biracial students navigated these inequalities in classrooms in the South.

The significance of my study lies in its focus on amplifying the voices and lived experiences of Black-White biracial participants who grew up in the South. By centering

these perspectives, my research highlights a population Gaither and Rozek (2020) identified as often overlooked in educational discourse yet increasingly present in today's classrooms. These narratives are not only valuable in understanding how identity develops within a biracial context but also provide critical guidance for teachers in the South who will increasingly encounter biracial students in their classrooms. The stories my participants shared illuminate both the challenges and strengths of being Black-White biracial in largely monoracial spaces, offering teachers the knowledge and empathy needed to respond with greater inclusivity and cultural awareness.

Black-White individuals often navigate complex identities that differ significantly from those of monoracial Black or White peers. Their dual heritage places them in unique positions of negotiating belonging, often within schools where racial dynamics remain deeply entrenched (Gaither & Rozek, 2020). For some, this means facing pressures to align with one racial identity over another, while for others it means developing resilience in response to exclusion or misunderstanding (Poston, 1990). Teachers who engage with these realities gain a deeper appreciation of the layered experiences of Black-White biracial students, allowing them to validate students' identities and affirm their place in the classroom community (Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Gay, 2023). Recognizing these experiences is essential for ensuring that Black-White students do not feel marginalized, invisible, or forced into rigid categories that deny the fullness of their identities.

Cultural competence emerged as another key contribution to the experiences of students in this study. Teachers who are aware of the cultural and historical contexts shaping Black-White students' experiences are more capable of supporting their academic and social-emotional needs. By cultivating this awareness, educators can create

classrooms that are emotionally safe, inclusive, and responsive to diverse perspectives (Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Howard, 2020; Leonardo & Boas, 2022). This includes proactively addressing racial microaggressions, challenging implicit biases, and affirming Black-White students' lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge. Such an approach moves beyond treating students as passive recipients of education and instead acknowledges them as whole individuals whose identities deserve recognition and respect.

The findings of my study also carry practical implications for teaching. Insights from participants' stories can inform instructional strategies and curricular decisions that more fully represent diverse voices and perspectives (Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Garcia, 2020). Incorporating biracial and multiracial narratives into lessons, literature selections, and classroom discussions ensures that Black-White students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. These changes not only support Black-White biracial students but also enrich the learning experiences of all students by broadening their understanding of identity and culture. An inclusive classroom environment fosters belonging, which research consistently connects to stronger engagement, confidence, and academic success (Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Gay, 2023; Howard, 2020).

Perhaps most importantly, engaging with the voices of Black-White biracial participants fosters empathy and understanding among educators. When teachers listen deeply to the lived realities of their students, they become more attuned to the subtleties of identity and better able to connect with and support them (Delpit, 2012, 2021). As America becomes increasingly diverse and biracial and multiracial students grow in number (Howard, 2020), the urgency of my work only intensifies. Teachers must be

prepared to understand what it feels like for a student to grow up “half” in classrooms dominated by White peers (Williams & Ware, 2019). My study contributes to meeting this need by exploring the perceptions, feelings, and beliefs of Black-White biracial individuals raised in the South. These narratives provide educators with the insights and practical tools needed to respond with empathy, adapt their teaching practices, and create classrooms where biracial students can thrive both academically and socially.

My personal, intellectual, and practical goals for this study, as outlined in Chapter 1, reflect both my lived experiences and my scholarly commitments. Maxwell (2013) reminded researchers that these goals are not static but may evolve throughout the research process, shaping how a study is designed, conducted, and interpreted. For me, the journey of examining the experiences of Black-White biracial individuals in the South required a framework that could hold together the personal insights I bring as a White mother of a biracial daughter and a Black son, the professional perspective I hold as an educator, and the broader body of scholarship on identity development and race in Southern schools.

In Chapter 2, I build upon these goals by introducing the conceptual framework that anchors my study. This framework weaves together my experiential knowledge with key theoretical perspectives to explain not only why the study matters but also why narrative inquiry is the most appropriate method for capturing the stories of my Black-White biracial participants. Together, these elements provide the foundation for examining how Black-White biracial children define race, negotiate identity in schools and families, and find belonging in a region where racial categories remain deeply entrenched.

Chapter II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In this qualitative research, the conceptual framework served as the foundation for my study by tying together my ideas, experiences, and theoretical grounding. Maxwell (2013) explained that such a framework reflects my tentative understandings of the phenomenon under investigation, while Ravitch and Riggan (2017) emphasized that it represents a broader argument for why a study matters and why the chosen methods are suitable and rigorous. For my research, the conceptual framework functions as both an anchor and a roadmap, connecting my personal experiences as a White mother of Black-White biracial children, my years as a classroom teacher and teacher educator, and the body of literature on identity development, equity, and race in Southern schools.

This framework is not static. It integrates my lived observations of how Black-White biracial students are treated differently in schools; the theoretical perspectives I draw upon, such as Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model, and insights from a pilot study I conducted. Together, these elements establish a foundation that is both personally meaningful and methodologically sound, justifying why the topic of Black-White biracial participant's experiences in the South is urgent and relevant.

By weaving together experiential knowledge, existing scholarship, and a commitment to honoring participant voices, my conceptual framework provides the

rationale for the study's design. It explains why narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on stories as a source of meaning (Daiute, 2014; Seidman, 2019), is the most appropriate way to capture how Black-White biracial participants define race, situate themselves in school contexts, and negotiate their identities in family and community settings. More than a speculative structure, this framework ensures that every part of my research, from research questions and data collection to analysis and interpretation, aligns with the goal of amplifying the voices of Black-White biracial participants and contributing to more inclusive educational practices in the South.

The following section presents my argument for why the topic I chose to study matters and why the means used for my study are appropriate. My personal experiences with my family in my early years, my experiences with my Black-White biracial daughter, and my experiences teaching and working with young children for over 2.5 decades has shaped the way that I see race and racial issues within the schools in the South.

Experiential Knowledge

My interest in the ways in which Black-White biracial young children experience being biracial began when I accepted my first teaching assignment in 1997 and intensified when I adopted my daughter in 2010 and drives this study; I was deeply eager to understand more about the experiences of Black-White biracial children growing up in the South. Though I myself grew up in a family that valued all people, regardless of skin color or background or social status, I knew that this was not the case with everyone who my child would encounter in her life. While walking down the street or shopping in the grocery store, I began to observe people closely as they tried to figure out why this single

White woman was with this Black-White biracial child and in doing so I encountered judgment, microaggressions, and even outright prejudice.

These negative experiences contrasted sharply with the positive ones that I experienced from family and friends, feeding my curiosity and concern about how my daughter would wade through daily experiences without me once she entered the public school system. Having taught in the local public schools for over a decade, I was familiar with the teachers and principals, and they all knew me, so prekindergarten through fifth grade all passed by smoothly for my daughter, but I noticed that this was not the case with other biracial children that I would see in the schools. When I dropped my daughter off in the mornings or spent time at the school, I would observe biracial children purposely overlooked or spoken to harshly, even by the same teachers who would insist on hugging my daughter when passing in the hallway. I recall one morning in particular when I was walking my daughter into school and numerous teachers were saying good morning to us and telling my child how beautiful she looked that morning. As everyone was greeting us warmly and smiling, a biracial boy in her same grade was desperately trying to ask a teacher speaking to us a question, but the teacher shushed and scolded him, then barked at him to go the lunchroom to grab his breakfast, as if he had done something wrong by simply trying to speak to her. I abruptly ended my conversation with the teacher and loudly asked the child if he needed assistance, which he did, so I helped him; I wanted to be sure that the teacher in question, as well as the other teachers around, were aware that I would not stand for this type of unfair treatment. Exposure to other cultures, reinforced by my parents' modeling acceptance of all races, results in a strong emotional response when I see other biracial children treated differently than my child;

the People-Are-People I (Peshkin, 1988), which is discussed later in the Validity Section of Chapter 3 of the dissertation, within me activates when others experience unjust treatment resulting in me wanting to help those being treated poorly.

Being a public school teacher for over a decade and an elementary education professor for 20 plus years, also factored into my desire to explore how Black-White biracial young adults experience being biracial in the South. While educating and training preservice teachers, I wanted to ensure that I gave each one a solid foundation to work with all students, not only the predominant group in the local area where I live and they will work: White students. Conducting this study allowed me to see into the daily experiences of Black-White biracial individuals, the good and the bad, which will strengthen my teaching in the classroom when discussing racial issues with my preservice teaching students. The positive impact that I will have on my students will grow exponentially as they go out into the community and create culturally inclusive learning environments of their own, acknowledging and meeting the needs of Black-White biracial students in their classrooms. These personal goals motivated me to carry out this study, and they drove and influenced my research (Maxwell, 2013).

Positionality

My positionality as a researcher is grounded in the intersection of my personal identity, family experiences, and professional trajectory, all of which shape the lens through which I approached this study. I am a White mother of both a Black-White biracial daughter and a Black son, and my lived reality as their parent has made me acutely aware of the ways race, identity, and belonging are navigated in Southern schools and communities. While my family has always modeled acceptance of people from all

backgrounds, I quickly discovered that not all members of our community extended the same openness. As my daughter and I moved through public spaces, I experienced the stares, whispered judgments, and outright questions about why a White woman was raising a child of color. These moments opened my eyes to the constant scrutiny and microaggressions Black-White biracial individuals endure and raised important questions about how my daughter, and other biracial children, would learn to define themselves in schools where race continues to be a central, and often divisive, social marker.

Professionally, I spent over a decade as a public school teacher and more than 20 years as a professor of elementary education. In these roles, I observed persistent inequities: students of color spoken to more harshly than their White peers, families treated differently depending on their race, and Black-White biracial students forced into categories that erased the complexity of their identities. I have also worked intentionally to prepare preservice teachers to move beyond deficit perspectives and instead recognize the cultural wealth that students of diverse backgrounds bring into the classroom. Conducting this study allowed me to deepen that work by centering the voices of Black-White biracial participants themselves, thereby informing teacher preparation and fostering more inclusive school practices.

I also acknowledge that my positionality introduces both strengths and potential biases. Peshkin's (1988) framework of subjective I's has helped me reflect on these influences. My Mother-of-Children-of-Color I pushes me to protect and advocate for my children and, by extension, all children and young adults who share their experiences. My Single-Mother I makes me particularly attuned to how families that do not conform to traditional norms are perceived in schools. My People-Are-People I reinforces my

instinct to speak up when I witness unfair treatment and drives my emotional response to injustice. My White-Educated-Progressive I underscores the privilege I hold, which both grants me access to spaces of power and obligates me to use that access responsibly. These identities do not negate my ability to conduct rigorous research, but they required ongoing reflexivity so that my advocacy did not overshadow my participants' authentic voices.

My conceptual framework helped anchor this reflexivity. Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) reminded me that racism is not episodic but systemic, woven into the very fabric of schools and communities in the South. Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model challenged me to recognize and highlight the aspirational, familial, and navigational capital my participants and their families possess, countering deficit-based views. Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model provided a developmental lens that situates participants' struggles and strengths within broader patterns of biracial identity formation. These frameworks helped me balance my personal commitments with scholarly rigor, ensuring that my interpretations were not guided by emotion alone but grounded in theory and evidence.

By naming and examining my positionality, I affirm that I am not a detached observer in this research. Rather, I am a co-constructor of knowledge alongside my participants (Maxwell, 2013). My role is to listen carefully, to represent their voices with integrity, and to place their narratives in conversation with both my experiential knowledge and the broader scholarly literature (Daiute, 2014; Seidman, 2019). Ultimately, my positionality underscores why my study is both urgent and personal: the lived experiences of Black-White biracial students in the South must be heard, not only to

affirm their identities but also to inform educators and policymakers about how to create more equitable and inclusive schools. In doing so, I honor my children, my participants, and the many others whose stories remain untold, while working toward educational practices that truly see and value every student.

While my experiential knowledge is powerful and strongly influenced my desire to carry out my study, as is my position that Black-White biracial individuals experience growing up differently from White peers in the South, I also applied relevant existing theoretical literature and the findings of prior research. The main theoretical literature approaches that I referenced while conducting my study were cultural wealth theory (Yosso, 2005), critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), and Poston's biracial identity development model (1990); each are discussed in the section that follows.

Theoretical Framework

Theories provide researchers with frameworks for making sense of complex social realities by offering concepts, relationships, and explanations that help illuminate what is happening and why (Maxwell, 2013). For this study, theory plays a central role in framing the ways Black-White biracial individuals in the South experience race, identity, and belonging. Rather than treating theory as a rigid template, I view it as a set of guiding perspectives that help reveal how individual stories are shaped by larger historical and structural forces. Three perspectives are especially significant for my work. Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model emphasizes the strengths and forms of capital that families and students of color contribute to education, challenging deficit views often held in schools. Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) situates participants' narratives within the broader reality that racism is systemic and deeply embedded in American, and

especially Southern, institutions. Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model highlights the developmental processes unique to biracial children as they negotiate fluid identities in environments that often pressure them toward fixed racial categories. Taken together, these perspectives provide a foundation for interpreting the narratives of my participants while keeping their voices at the center of the analysis.

The following sections introduce each framework in greater detail, beginning with CWM as a way of acknowledging the strengths and resources Black-White biracial individuals bring, followed by CRT as a means of examining systemic inequities, and concluding with Poston's BIDM to understand the developmental process of identity formation.

Cultural wealth model (CWM)

Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model challenges the deficit perspectives historically applied to students of color by emphasizing the non-financial assets and forms of capital that marginalized communities draw upon to survive and thrive within inequitable systems. This theoretical framework was crucial to my study because Black-White biracial individuals in the South are often perceived through the lens of what they lack in comparison to White peers, rather than the strengths they bring from their families, cultures, and communities. Yosso's original 2005 work reframed this narrative by identifying six interconnected forms of capital, including aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance, which serve as resources to challenge dominant assumptions of Whiteness as the standard of value. This framework provided both a foundation for my conceptual framework and a lens to interpret the stories my participants shared about growing up in predominantly White Southern schools.

Aspirational capital reflects the ability of students and their families to hold onto hope and dreams despite systemic barriers (Yosso, 2005). For Black-White biracial individuals, aspirational capital is often exercised in quiet but powerful ways through the insistence of parents that their children can succeed in environments that may not fully accept them, or through the determination of the students themselves to imagine futures beyond the narrow expectations placed upon them. Participants in my study frequently spoke of how their goals for college, careers, or athletics motivated them to push through feelings of isolation or marginalization. Teachers who overlook these aspirations risk reinforcing deficit assumptions, while those who recognize and affirm them can strengthen students' resilience. In this way, aspirational capital provides an important lens to understand how Black-White biracial children sustain hope and envision possibilities even in the face of systemic inequities.

Language skills, modes of communication, and cultural knowledge that students bring to classrooms is recognized as linguistic capital according to Yosso (2005). In the South, where dominant norms often prize standardized English rooted in White middle-class culture, Black-White biracial students may find their communication styles scrutinized or undervalued (Delpit, 2008, 2012). Yet their ability to navigate between dialects, styles, and cultural references reflects a sophisticated linguistic capital. Several participants described moving fluidly between speech patterns with friends, family, and teachers, an act often described in the literature as code-switching but better understood through Yosso's (2005) lens as a valuable resource rather than a deficiency. Recognizing the linguistic capital of Black-White biracial students reframes their adaptability as a strength that enriches classroom dialogue rather than a marker of difference to be

corrected.

The cultural knowledge and emotional support embedded in family and community networks is recognized by Yosso (2005) as familial capital. For Black-White biracial participants, family was both a site of strength and tension. In some cases, open conversations at home about race helped them feel affirmed in their dual heritage, while in other cases silence about racial differences left them to make sense of identity alone. Regardless of whether race was explicitly discussed, families provided crucial emotional grounding that helped participants navigate school environments where their identities were often questioned or misread. Familial capital in this sense is not limited to parents but extends to siblings, grandparents, mentors, and community figures who affirmed their worth. Recognizing familial capital in the classroom requires educators to look beyond traditional assumptions of family structure and instead value the broader webs of support that sustain biracial student's development.

Social capital refers to networks of people and community resources on which students can draw for support (Yosso, 2005) and played heavily into the experiences of my participants. For my participants, peer groups, sports teams, and faith communities often provided critical sources of affirmation and belonging that schools did not always offer. At the same time, participants also described the difficulty of finding peers who fully understood their Black-White biracial experiences, particularly in predominantly White schools and family settings. Social capital in these cases often came from a few close friends or mentors who validated their identities, from specific Black family members, or from extended kinship networks that reinforced pride in their heritage. By situating these relationships within Yosso's (2005) model, educators can better

understand how Black-White biracial students seek support and how schools can intentionally cultivate networks of belonging rather than leaving students to navigate exclusion on their own.

Navigational capital refers to the skills that students of color develop to maneuver through institutions not created for them (Yosso, 2005), such as majority White schools. Black-White biracial students in the South often described the need to “read the room,” adjust behavior depending on whether they were among White peers or Black peers, and anticipate how teachers might categorize them. These strategies, while taxing, represent a sophisticated form of navigational capital that enables students to survive in racially charged environments. For example, participants recounted learning when to stay silent in classrooms where discussions of race arose, or how to leverage academic or athletic success to gain acceptance. These navigational strategies should not be mistaken for conformity; rather, they reveal the agency and resilience of Black-White biracial students who develop complex skills to function in spaces shaped by Whiteness. Schools that validate these skills can transform navigational capital from a survival mechanism into a celebrated resource.

Finally, Yosso (2005) defined resistance capital as the knowledge and skills that families and communities of color transmit to challenge inequality. In my study, participants drew upon family histories of perseverance and community narratives of survival to interpret their own experiences. Whether through explicit parental lessons about racial injustice or through the unspoken modeling of resilience, participants described how they learned to recognize inequities and push back against them. For some, this meant embracing leadership roles in predominantly White settings; for others,

it meant cultivating pride in their identity despite external pressures to conform.

Resistance capital illuminates how Black-White biracial students are not merely passive recipients of bias but active agents who draw on intergenerational strategies to assert dignity and claim space in environments that marginalize them.

Integrating Yosso's cultural wealth model (2005) into my conceptual framework provided a way to highlight the assets that Black-White biracial participants bring to schools rather than reinforcing deficit narratives that too often dominate educational discourse. Each form of capital was visible in the narratives of my participants: their hopes for the future, their code-switching and language fluency, their family networks, their supportive peers and mentors, their strategies for navigating predominantly White schools, and their resistance to racial categorization. By naming and valuing these resources, I sought to amplify the voices of Black-White biracial young adults as they reflected on their childhoods since they are frequently silenced or misrepresented in research and practice.

Moreover, Yosso's (2005) theory provides educators with a practical framework for rethinking classroom interactions. Teachers who recognize aspirational capital can encourage biracial students' goals rather than lowering expectations; those who understand linguistic capital can affirm diverse language practices; those who value familial and social capital can build stronger partnerships with families and communities; and those who acknowledge navigational and resistance capital can create spaces where students' survival skills are recognized as evidence of resilience and leadership. In these ways, cultural wealth theory not only framed my study but also underscored its urgency: the lived realities of Black-White biracial students in the South cannot be understood

through deficit lenses but must be seen through the rich, multifaceted capitals that sustain them.

Critical race theory (CRT)

Before beginning this research, I was familiar with CRT from my previous doctoral coursework. Knowing my previous experiences, it was always clear to me that CRT tenets were foundational to the experiences of Black-White biracial students. Thus, critical race theory was also used as a framing component. CRT asserts that in the education systems in the United States that race is still a factor affecting educational opportunities for non-White students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Students of color, or non-White students, do not have access to the same opportunities as White peers and therefore fall victim to hidden systems that have been in place for decades that aim to help White students while handicapping non-White students (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Lynn & Dixson, 2022). Critical race theory is a complex topic, but even young children can identify when they are not seen as good enough or lesser than peers (Gaither, 2015), rising or sinking to the expected level for their performance in the classroom.

Critical race theory (CRT) emerged from legal scholarship in the late 1970s and 1980s, largely through the work of scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Richard Delgado (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). It challenges the assumption that racial progress naturally occurs over time and asserts that racism is deeply embedded within the fabric of American social, political, and legal systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). For researchers exploring the lived experiences of Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South, such as myself, CRT offers a powerful theoretical lens to examine how race, identity, and systemic inequities intersect in shaping daily life.

CRT starts from the idea that racism is not an exception but a normal part of society, embedded in the structures and norms that shape opportunity, belonging, and social worth (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). For Black-White biracial individuals, especially those navigating predominantly White spaces, this means that their racial identity is continually interpreted and contested in ways that reflect the broader racial hierarchies of the South.

A central tenet of CRT, the permanence of racism, is particularly salient in the South, where historical legacies of slavery, segregation, and Jim Crow have left enduring cultural and institutional imprints (Leonardo & Boas, 2022). Black-White biracial individuals often find themselves negotiating their racial identity in contexts where binary understandings of race, “Black” or “White,” still dominate. This binary system can marginalize mixed-race identities, forcing biracial individuals to choose a side or endure others’ attempts to categorize them (Poston, 1990; Williams & Ware, 2019). Such pressures are not simply matters of personal discomfort; they reflect a broader social order in which racial boundaries are policed to maintain existing power structures. Within predominantly White schools, neighborhoods, and social networks, Black-White biracial individuals may encounter subtle forms of exclusion, microaggressions, and differential treatment that reinforce a sense of otherness, even when overt racism is denied or minimized (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023).

Interest convergence, another key CRT concept, posits that racial equity advances only when it aligns with the interests of the dominant group (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In the context of Black-White biracial participants in the South who participated in my study, moments of acceptance in White spaces may occur when diversity is seen as socially desirable or symbolically valuable, such as during multicultural events or in

promotional materials, but these moments often coexist with underlying resistance to challenging systemic inequities. This conditional acceptance can create an unstable sense of belonging, where inclusion is contingent on conforming to dominant cultural norms and avoiding direct confrontation with racial injustices, which was frequently expressed by my participants when discussing what behaviors were acceptable while in the presence of White individuals as opposed to situations where they were with Black individuals. My participants' stories revealed that racial identity is often treated as something to be highlighted or valued only in certain contexts, yet these moments of recognition do not disrupt the broader systemic structures that continue to marginalize them.

CRT's emphasis on counter-storytelling is particularly valuable for my study, as it centers the voices and narratives of those whose experiences are often minimized or ignored in mainstream discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). By gathering the personal accounts of Black-White biracial participants, I could challenge dominant narratives that oversimplify Southern racial dynamics into a Black-White binary. Participants' narratives revealed the nuanced realities of navigating multiple racial identities in a region where racial history is both celebrated and contested. The interviews helped me uncover how my study participants made sense of their identity in contexts that denied its legitimacy and recognize how their perspectives offered alternative understandings of race, community, and belonging. Counter-storytelling also helps illuminate the emotional labor required to educate others, defend one's identity, and navigate spaces where racial assumptions are deeply ingrained (Lynn & Dixon, 2022).

Intersectionality, a concept developed within CRT by Kimberlé Crenshaw, establishes the idea that individuals' experiences are shaped not only by race but by the

intersections of other identity markers such as gender, socioeconomic status, and regional culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). In the South, these intersections are particularly complex: gendered expectations may shape how biracial individuals are perceived and treated; class status may mediate access to certain White spaces; and regional cultural norms can intensify the racialized experiences of those who do not fit neatly into established categories (Delpit, 2021; Garcia, 2020). Recognizing the intersections of layered analysis and building it into my research methods helped ensure my study captured the full complexity of participants' identities rather than reducing them to a single dimension.

Finally, CRT's critique of colorblindness, the notion that ignoring race will eliminate racism, resonates deeply in the context of Black-White biracial life in predominantly White Southern spaces (Boutte et al., 2011; Delpit, 2021). Within this same critique, some White peers and educators may profess not to "see color," this stance often invalidates Black-White biracial individuals' lived experiences with racialization and erases the cultural and historical significance of their identities. For my participants, colorblind attitudes employed while they were growing up in the South created environments where discussing race was discouraged, leaving them without the language or space to process and share their experiences in ways that let them explore themselves and their identities outside of the dominant culture group: Whites. Such environments can perpetuate isolation and silence, as illustrated through participants' interviews, making CRT's insistence on confronting racial realities all the more vital.

In sum, applying critical race theory as Delgado and Stefancic (2023) discussed it to my study of Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South allowed for a

critical examination of how historical legacies, entrenched racial hierarchies, and contemporary social norms shaped identity formation and lived experiences. CRT underscores that these experiences are not isolated incidents for people like my participants but are rooted in systemic and structural forces that maintain racial boundaries and inequities. By featuring my participants' voices through counter-storytelling, situating their narratives within the historical and cultural context of the South, and applying key CRT concepts such as permanence of racism, interest convergence, intersectionality, and critique of colorblindness, my study was framed from early in the process for understanding the complexities of Black-White biracial identity in a region where race remains a central, contested dimension of social life.

Poston's biracial identity development model (BIDM)

Black-White biracial children frequently deal with glares, odd looks, and remarks about their family structure; the Black-White biracial child and family will meet with disfavor quite regularly (Gaither & Rozek, 2020). Poston's BIDM (1990) offers a developmental framework for understanding the unique processes by which individuals of mixed racial heritage, particularly those with Black and White parentage, form a cohesive sense of identity. Unlike traditional racial identity models that assume monoracial belonging, Poston's (1990) model recognizes the complexities of navigating two racial worlds in a society that often demands clear racial categorization. This is particularly relevant in the Southern United States, where a long history of rigid racial boundaries, anti-miscegenation laws, and the cultural legacy of the "one-drop rule" have shaped how Black-White biracial people are perceived and how they experience identity formation (Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Garcia, 2020). For Black-White biracial individuals

in predominantly White spaces, such as my participants, these structural and cultural forces can intensify the tensions between self-perception and societal categorization, making Poston's (1990) staged model a useful interpretive lens.

Poston's (1990) model consists of five stages: personal identity, choice of group categorization, enmeshment/denial, appreciation, and integration. In the *personal identity* stage, experienced primarily in early childhood, a biracial child's sense of self is shaped largely by family dynamics, personality traits, and early socialization rather than racial consciousness. For participants in my study, this stage may have been influenced by their parents' approaches to discussing race, whether race was openly acknowledged or minimized as several participants shared, and by early exposure to extended family members from both racial backgrounds. In predominantly White Southern schools, many children at this stage may not yet have been fully aware of racial difference, though subtle cues, such as who was present in their classrooms or how others reacted to their family composition, may have begun shaping early impressions (Donnor, 2022; Gaither, 2015, 2020; Leonardo & Boas, 2022).

The *choice of group categorization* stage typically emerges as children enter school and begin interacting more extensively with peers. Social pressures, both overt and subtle, often push biracial children toward identifying with one racial group over another (Poston, 1990). In the South, where racial boundaries have historically been policed and racial ambiguity can evoke discomfort (Gaither & Rozek, 2020), participants may have experienced an implicit or explicit push to choose a side. For many, the dominant White environment might have reinforced the idea that aligning with Whiteness was socially advantageous, while simultaneously signaling that Blackness was

marginalized (Donnor, 2022; Garcia, 2020). This choice is rarely free from tension; it is often constrained by the way peers, teachers, and community members racially categorize the biracial child, which may not align with their self-perception (Leonardo & Boas, 2022).

The *enmeshment/denial* stage is marked by feelings of guilt, confusion, or shame about having to choose one racial identity over the other and may include denial of one part of the self to gain acceptance or avoid conflict (Poston, 1990). In my study of participants' lived experiences, this stage might have manifested in ways that Williams and Ware (2019) identified as distancing themselves from Black cultural heritage to “fit in” with predominantly White classmates or feeling guilt for perceived disloyalty to one side of the family. In the Southern context, where narratives about race are steeped in historical hierarchies and segregationist legacies, these internal conflicts can be amplified. Poston (1990) asserted that the emotional toll of suppressing aspects of one's identity can also contribute to feelings of isolation and disconnection, especially when representation of biracial experiences in the community is scarce.

The *appreciation* stage reflects a growing acknowledgement and valuing of both racial heritages. However, appreciation at this stage does not yet equate to full integration; there may still be an uneven comfort level with each identity (Williams & Ware, 2019). In predominantly White Southern settings, biracial individuals may have begun seeking out literature, friendships, media representations, or cultural events that connected them to their Black heritage, even if these explorations occurred in relatively private or selective ways. This stage often coincides with adolescence or early adulthood, when individuals have more agency to choose environments and communities that affirm

their full identity, as participants expressed to me during interviews. For some of my participants, exposure to more racially diverse spaces, such as college campuses, travel, and online communities, sparked this appreciation and helped it grow.

The final stage, *integration*, involves the internalization of a positive and secure biracial identity, wherein both heritages, Black and White, are fully embraced as integral parts of the self. At this stage, individuals can fluidly navigate between cultural contexts without feeling pressured to choose or deny any part of their identity (Poston, 1990). For my participants, reaching integration required challenging the binary Black or White but not both racial logic that dominates Southern social life and finding strength in the complexity of their experiences; some of my participants have achieved integration more confidently than others. Integration is not a final, static endpoint but an ongoing process, as societal attitudes and personal contexts shift (Poston, 1990). In environments where Black-White biracial identity is still met with skepticism or forced categorization, such as the South, even integrated individuals may need to actively resist reductive racial labeling (Delpit, 2008, 2012; Gaither & Rozek, 2020).

When applied to the narratives of my Black-White participants who grew up in the South, Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model underscores the interplay between personal agency and societal constraints in identity development. The model illuminates how predominantly White settings can both delay and complicate movement toward integration by reinforcing racial hierarchies and limiting access to affirming representations. At the same time, it shows that identity development is dynamic and that my participants may move back and forth between stages in response to life experiences, community contexts, and evolving understandings of race (Poston, 1990). For my

participants, and many other Black-White biracial individuals living in the South, navigating these stages involves a constant negotiation between internal self-definition and the external pressures of Southern racial politics (Lynn & Dixson, 2022), making their lived experiences both deeply personal and profoundly shaped by the region's history.

Theoretical Connections to Research Questions

The theoretical frameworks guiding this study, Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model, directly informed the development of my research questions (RQ) and provided interpretive lenses for participants' narratives. Each theory aligns with a different dimension of the inquiry: Yosso's (2005) model guided questions about how Black-White biracial children define race and situate themselves in school contexts by highlighting the aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistance capitals that sustain them in predominantly White spaces (RQ1 and RQ2). Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) framed the exploration of how systemic inequities and racial hierarchies shape students' experiences in schools and homes, underscoring the permanence of racism, the impact of colorblindness, and the importance of counter-storytelling in amplifying Black-White biracial voices (RQ2 and RQ3). Poston's (1990) model of biracial identity development provided the developmental context for examining how home and family environments contribute to the racial self-perception of Black-White biracial individuals and how parents and guardians influence identity formation through dialogue, silence, and modeling (RQ3 and RQ4). These frameworks helped shape my research questions and kept the study focused on two things: the

structural barriers that limit Black-White biracial identity development and the cultural strengths and agency participants use to push back against deficit views.

The preceding sections established the conceptual grounding for my study by weaving together my experiential knowledge, positionality, and the theoretical perspectives that frame how I approached the narratives of Black-White biracial young adults reflecting on their childhoods in the South. Drawing on Yosso's (2005) CWM, Delgado and Stefancic's (2023) CRT, and Poston's (1990) BIDM, I demonstrated how these frameworks collectively illuminate the systemic, developmental, and cultural dimensions that shaped my participants' lived experiences. Together, they provided both a lens for interpretation and a justification for the use of narrative inquiry as the methodological approach most capable of capturing the complexities of my Black-White biracial participants' identity formation. Having established this foundation, the next section turns to existing research related to biracial identity, race, and education in the Southern United States. This review situates my study within the broader scholarly conversation, highlights the gaps that remain in current literature, and underscores how my research extends what is known about the experiences of Black-White biracial students in educational contexts.

Existing Research

The following section reviews existing research related to biracial identity development, racialization in educational settings, and the specific sociocultural context of the South. This literature provided the scholarly foundation upon which my study built, illustrating what is currently known about how Black-White biracial students experience identity, belonging, and visibility within schools and families. The section is

organized to move from broader discussions of multiracial identity formation to more focused studies examining the experiences of biracial individuals in classrooms, peer groups, and family environments. It also highlights the unique historical and cultural dynamics of the Southern United States that shape how race is understood and lived. By tracing these strands of scholarship, I identified both patterns and gaps that my study seeks to address, particularly the limited attention given to the voices of Black-White biracial children and youth growing up in predominantly White Southern communities. In doing so, this review situated my work within the existing body of literature while clarifying how my narrative inquiry extends the conversation by centering the lived experiences of participants whose stories have too often been overlooked.

This section is divided into four main parts. The first part examines scholarship on biracial identity development, focusing on the psychological and sociocultural frameworks that explain how individuals negotiate multiple racial heritages. The second part explores research on the educational experiences of biracial students, emphasizing how school contexts, teacher expectations, and peer interactions shape belonging and self-perception. The third part highlights studies on family influence and racial socialization, addressing how home environments, parental dialogue, and intergenerational narratives contribute to identity formation. The final part considers the Southern context as a distinct cultural and historical backdrop, where racial binaries and regional legacies of segregation continue to influence how biracial identity is constructed and perceived. Together, these areas of research illuminate the foundation upon which my study rests and underscore the need for narrative inquiry that captures the lived realities of Black-White biracial participants growing up in the South.

State of Race in Education

American public schools are tasked with teaching ideals and beliefs lauded as the keys to becoming a productive citizen, but as Wise (2008) and Kozol (2012) exposed, education is not equal for all students; Whites benefit from a plethora of privileges rooted in nothing more than their skin color, resulting in greater success in schools designed to promote societal rules as written by the culture of power (Delpit, 2008, 2012, 2021). While teachers would like to believe that schools are eons away from the “savage inequalities” described by Kozol (2012) in the early 90’s, an honest look at education presents a view that should elicit shame and anger. Black students are receiving sub-par educations in classrooms situated within one of the most privileged nations in the world and little is being done to remedy the situation (Donnor, 2022). Ongoing academic imbalances along racial boundaries hold grave consequences as demographic changes in the United States continue to shift to a more varied ethnic composition; Howard (2020) warned that if the current achievement gaps in public schools linger for the next few decades, over half of American citizens will be unable to compete in the global marketplace because of being critically undereducated, handicapping the nation politically, economically, and socially.

Educational researchers widely recognize that race is an issue in America’s classrooms (Gay, 2023; Gillborn, 2022; Howard, 2020), yet damaging views about learners grounded in race are sustained by the racialized history underpinning the entire field of education (Garcia, 2020; Ladson-Billings, 2012). To move forward and change policies that preserve inequity, researchers and practitioners must take an honest look at the prejudice that drives education policy while truthfully acknowledging the damage

inflicted by our nation's racial history (Gillborn, 2022), yet so few in the field of education are willing to tackle the issue of racial discrimination in the classroom, and that is getting worse in the political climate of the day. With such deeply entrenched racial biases present in our society, one does not need to question why there continues to be a significant cultural mismatch in the classroom between students and teachers (Leonardo & Boas, 2022). Even as the face of public school classrooms shift toward a predominantly ethnic make-up (Howard, 2020), teachers remain 84% White, 75% female, and mostly middle-class (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2021). Wyman and Kashatok (2008), drawing on 15 years of experience as teachers and researchers in Native Alaskan communities, found that Alaskan students are being educated by teachers who do not often venture outside of their realm of cultural comfort, limiting the possibility that students believe that their culture is respected and acknowledged in the classroom; Donnor's (2022) findings mirrored this sentiment as Black students and families he spoke with voiced frustration surrounding schooling as the property of Whites and predominantly White teachers not being in touch with Black culture. Delpit (2006, 2008, 2021) emphasized the need for community members and family to be included in the classroom in ways that indicate or stress the importance of Black students seeing their culture acknowledged in a positive manner and confirming their value as students. Along with better community connections and support, teachers who learn about the home cultures of their students are better equipped to recognize cultural explanations of behavior helping to ensure that minority students will not be punished for behaving differently than the norm (Foley, 2008; Lynn & Dixson, 2022; Wyman & Kashatok, 2008).

Delpit (2021) pointed out that recurring examples were seen that illustrated non-White students received less than White peers academically in American schools. She also discussed how teachers must learn to educate other people's children. Donnor (2022) further argued that U.S. education has historically functioned as a form of white property, where policies framed around choice, individualism, and colorblindness preserve white privilege while restricting Black access to quality schools. Through a critical race lens and the whiteness as property framework, Donnor analyzed the Supreme Court's *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007, as cited in Donnor, 2022) decision, showing how it redefined white families as victims of racial policies and reinforced education as a protected racial entitlement rather than a universal right. This resulted in Black and multiracial students becoming victims of subpar educations, while White students were granted access to educational opportunities because they were deemed the rightful owners to the education system in America. As I searched the literature I found three major themes that illustrated students of color receiving less in the education systems of America.

Racism in American Schools Based on Skin Color

In order to address racial tension and biases surrounding students, Ledesma and Calderon (2015) noted the importance of accepting that racism was prevalent in American classrooms and there were underlying structures and beliefs they saw inhibit educational equality for non-White students when they did a review of past literature in critical race theory in education. Research from Delpit (2021) and Howard (2020) made similar comments to what Ledesma and Calderon (2015) stated, yet there are still some who claim racism is a nonissue in today's schools (Howard, 2020; Leonardo & Boas,

2022; Lynn & Dixson, 2022). That belief is not entertained in this work for previously established reasons. Hardie and Tyson (2012) conducted 9 months of fieldwork along with student, teacher, and administrator interviews at Cordington High School in North Carolina, which consisted of more than 1000 enrolled students. Most students at Cordington were White, more than 80 percent, while more than 10 percent were Black. Participants pointed out the fact that in the South, racism is overlooked as a minor issue only concerning a certain set of people known as “rednecks” by their peers. By perpetuating the belief that it is a select few that partake in discrimination against Black and multiracial students, racism is allowed to grow and flourish. However, racism was noted by Hardie and Tyson (2012) as present in the communities they studied. They further went on to conclude that we cannot assume that only a select few wish to treat students differently based on race.

Allen and White-Smith (2014) drew from their combined years of experience working in schools in various roles and discovered that because of the underlying structures of racism in American classrooms, non-White students are not expected to do as well academically and are placed in lower ability tracks, which bolstered deficit thinking, and harmed Black and multiracial students. When schools place students in academic tracks based solely on skin color, it is foolish to deny that racism is alive and well in classrooms. Students of color are often left in these tracks, unchecked and rarely promoted, based on teachers’ perceptions of non-White parents, as well, according to Donnor (2022). Puchner and Markowitz (2015) found that teachers held deficit thinking perceptions as truth and applied their biases to non-White students in the 30 classrooms they observed. They further noted that survey results indicated 85% of teachers (N = 120)

believed that only White parents fully supported the education of their children and practiced what is learned at home. When teachers harbored biases that affect the way they treat Black students in their classrooms, parents of non-White children (Delpit, 2006, 2008, 2021) questioned the sincerity of teachers working with their child and worried their child was not treated fairly or equally.

Deficit thinking and discounting non-White parents dangerously marginalizes students of color (Howard, 2020). Even teachers with good intentions do not always act in the best interest of their students as many show “false empathy” for non-White students, displayed when a White teacher believes she is connecting or identifying with her students of color, but it is only on the surface level, lacking genuine interest and care (Warren & Hotchkins, 2015). False empathy presented in 15 out of 15 of the classrooms Warren and Hotchkins (2015) observed and impeded in-depth discussions centering on race that could lead to authentic understanding. Gay (2023) fortified the stance that good intentions are simply not enough and that teachers must acknowledge the presence of racism head on to alleviate it in our schools when she worked with the young students devastated by Hurricane Katrina, primarily children of color, as she witnessed the limitations of good intentions and the certainty that some children are always left behind through her fieldwork.

Opting for a colorblind (Boutte et al., 2011) approach, in which one overlooks or ignores race and pretends that everyone is the same while simultaneously thinking this is a good thing, in schools does not help reduce racism as racism continues to exist and the only way to address it is by acknowledging its presence (Chapman, 2013). Teachers must acknowledge the presence of racism (Delpit, 2021), which means that how schools

identify young children based upon race is of importance and must be examined to explore biases further. Boutte et al. (2011) stated that it is not possible for students of color to shed their skin so why would we assume that a teacher could simply overlook the color of her students through a colorblind approach to treat everyone equally?

Racism in schools, as discussed in this section, is still an issue in American schools (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), and that racism extends to biracial students, as well; the next section will address how Black-White biracial students are lumped in with Black students in the classroom, experiencing racism and disparities along with their Black peers. When reviewing research for Black-White biracial individuals, I noticed that often in studies researchers would use the term multiracial and biracial interchangeably. My focus has been on research that worked with Black-White participants, but I also read and reviewed some studies that categorized participants as multiracial if when reading deeper into the study I could ascertain that many or most of the participants being labeled as multiracial were actually Black-White biracial. While multiracial and biracial are often used interchangeably and assumptions can be made for both groups, for the purpose of this study it is necessary to explore literature that primarily addresses Black-White biracial individuals, as discussed further in the next segment. The following studies will focus mainly on Black-White biracial and Black individuals since I am drawing a comparison of how they are treated the same and experience the same racism in the classroom.

Biracial Students are Viewed as Black in America

Boutte et al. (2011) conducted a study of 15 children in a 2nd grade class from the southwestern region of the United States, using children's drawings and discussions

about picture books to explore how the young students interpreted and processed race. The researchers found that early childhood classrooms are vital for discouraging racism, and yet we continuously perpetuate damaging racial stereotypes rooted in skin color. Scott (2014) reinforced the previous researchers' findings when he conducted a case study of an unidentified gifted young Black female. He recorded personal events relayed by the child and elementary school events experienced by her mother, and he found that the teachers in the child's life, as well as the teachers that the mother had growing up, perceived Black children with darker complexions to be less intelligent than White peers, even when the child in question is gifted. This belief that lighter skin tones equal greater intelligence holds implications for Black-White biracial students, as well, based upon the depth of color of their skin (Delpit, 2012; Donnor, 2022).

Howard (2020) discussed that multiracial is and will continue to be the new face of America's students, increasingly so, yet when multiracial and biracial citizens are "found out" to be non-White, then they are viewed as lesser than their peers. In accordance with these findings, Korgen (1999), discovered the same thing when interviewing dozens of biracial individuals for a book that she was writing; once it was discovered that the biracial individuals she spoke to were found to not be completely White, they experienced racism and poor treatment in all areas of their lived experiences. Additionally, while researching historical events and perceptions about racial passing for her book, Dawkins (2012) furthered the argument that biracial children involving a Black parent are classified as Black by reporting that these children are not welcomed into the White community and lead a sort of half-life in the nether regions between Black and White.

If many multiracial children, especially Black-White biracial children, are viewed as Black, and it has been established that racism exists against Black students in American classrooms, especially in the South, then logically it can be presumed that Black-White biracial children are discriminated against based upon skin color due to their racial identity within the Black community (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Findings from a study of 73 participants with biracial children suggested that even though mothers attempt to offset the damage due to discrimination discussed previously through positive maternal messages (Rollins & Hunter, 2013), multiracial children with Black heritage still experience trauma resulting from their skin color, affecting their self-esteem and self-image. These findings highlight that despite parents' best efforts to nurture pride and resilience, the external realities of racial bias still penetrate deeply into Black-White biracial children's developing sense of self. This internalization of discrimination often manifests as decreased self-perception among biracial students, particularly those with Black heritage, a pattern that reflects the lasting psychological impact of navigating racialized environments from a young age, discussed further in the next section.

Decreased Self-Perception in Biracial Students

As Gaither and Rozek (2020) discussed, even White children see race in the classroom because White people continue to racially stereotype Black people, passing biases down to the youngest children that are then perpetuated in American learning environments against peers with darker skin. When assessing 1,399 Black-White biracial, Black, and White middle school students' perceptions of threat and belonging in school, they found that biracial students faced unique identity-related threats in school that White peers were free from. These surveys led Gaither and Rozek to put forth that from the

earliest school experiences, biases subtly shape social hierarchies within classrooms, influencing how students view one another and, critically, how they view themselves. Children are highly perceptive observers of adult behavior, tone, and social positioning. When teachers, intentionally or not, demonstrate lower expectations or less warmth toward students with darker skin tones, their actions communicate messages about value and worth. The racialized norms that operate in schools are thus internalized early, embedding in children's developing sense of identity and belonging. Considering the overwhelming body of research (Francis & Darity, 2021; Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Garcia, 2020; Hung et al., 2019; Leath et al., 2019) pointing to Black children not being perceived as equal in the classroom with their peers, one cannot help but wonder how these children, deemed as less capable or less worthy, come to perceive themselves in the very environment designed to nurture their growth.

This question becomes even more complex when considering biracial children, particularly those who are Black-White, whose experiences of visibility and identity negotiation place them at the intersection of privilege and marginalization. Research shows that when young children sense social disapproval or differential treatment, their self-perceptions and academic motivation are directly affected (Chao et al., 2014; Delpit, 2012, 2021). The school setting, which should be a space of affirmation, often becomes a site where racial categorization is reinforced and internalized. For biracial children, the constant question of "What are you?" can signal to them that they do not fully belong to any one group, magnifying feelings of difference. In environments where Whiteness is normalized and proximity to it determines perceived value, individuals who do not fit neatly within that category, such as Black-White biracial students, often experience

confusion and dissonance about their own self-worth (Campbell et al., 2021); they see that lighter skin may be praised or deemed more beautiful, while darker skin is problematized or ignored, and these perceptions inevitably filter into their internal dialogue and self-perception.

Arslan's (2012) correlational study of 1,049 students in the sixth, seventh, and eighth grades reported that self-perceptions and self-efficacy were highest in the primary grades, suggesting that children generally enter school with a strong sense of capability and optimism. One might hypothesize that Black and biracial children in the early grades also present high self-perceptions, particularly before they have fully encountered or comprehended the racialized hierarchies embedded within the educational system. However, as these students progress through school, declines in self-perception often emerge. For Black-White biracial students, this decline can be especially pronounced as they begin to perceive the subtle, cumulative effects of bias and exclusion. Within the framework of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), such declines are understood not as isolated outcomes but as products of a broader systemic design, an education system that, by centering Whiteness, continuously marginalizes students of color. The daily micro-interactions that communicate whose voices, appearances, and behaviors are most valued reinforce these patterns, resulting in lowered self-esteem, diminished academic confidence, and fractured identity integration over time.

Teachers play a particularly influential role in this process. As Ledesma and Calderon (2015) noted, teachers, often unknowingly, made judgments about students based on racialized expectations. These judgments influenced how they interpreted behavior, evaluated performance, and distributed attention or praise. When darker-

skinned children are disciplined more harshly or expected to achieve less, they internalized these lowered expectations as reflections of their abilities rather than of the biases directed toward them. Simultaneously, their lighter-skinned peers, who witnessed these patterns, absorbed implicit lessons about power and hierarchy. For biracial students who may be categorized inconsistently depending on context or tone, this instability becomes a constant negotiation of belonging (Gaither & Rozek, 2020). They must not only interpret others' perceptions but also decide which aspects of themselves to foreground in order to be accepted or recognized. Over time, this emotional labor becomes exhausting, contributing to a gradual erosion of positive self-perception.

Lynn and Dixson's (2022) handbook for addressing critical race theory in education highlighted that children do not enter school as "color-blind." Rather, they come equipped with the racial understandings modeled within their families and communities. When those understandings include stereotypes and hierarchies, even very young children replicate them through play, friendship selection, and peer policing of difference. In predominantly White classrooms, this dynamic often results in children of color, including biracial children with darker complexions, being othered or excluded. The impact is twofold: first, these children are forced into the role of "educator," expected to explain or justify their difference; second, they internalize the message that difference is deficiency. Such experiences compound across years of schooling and by middle school, many students of color have already absorbed the belief that their racial identity is a liability within academic spaces. This belief, whether consciously acknowledged or not, shapes engagement, participation, and long-term self-perception.

The mirror, both literal and metaphorical, becomes a powerful symbol in this

process. When children look into the mirror and see a face that does not align with the dominant image of “success” or “beauty” celebrated in their environment, they may struggle to locate themselves within narratives of excellence or belonging (Gaither, 2015). For young Black-White biracial children, the reflection can evoke conflicting emotions of pride, confusion, or shame depending on the social messages they have internalized. Each negative comment, disciplinary action, or exclusionary moment adds another layer of bias to their developing sense of self. Chao et al. (2014) argued that the accumulation of such experiences has measurable psychological effects, including decreased academic self-concept and lower overall self-esteem. Over time, what begins as external bias becomes internalized self-doubt.

Understanding this trajectory demands that educators, policymakers, and researchers interrogate not only explicit acts of racism but also the subtle curricular, structural, and interpersonal dynamics that perpetuate inequity (Gay, 2023). Classroom materials that center White narratives, history lessons that minimize the contributions of people of color, and assessment practices that privilege certain communication styles all reinforce a hierarchy of value. When children of color, including Black-White biracial children, see themselves absent or misrepresented in the curriculum, they receive implicit messages about whose stories matter. These omissions intersect with interpersonal biases, magnifying the effects on self-perception. It is not surprising, then, that self-esteem and efficacy decline as students advance through a system that rarely mirrors their identities or affirms their full humanity.

Ultimately, the pattern of declining self-perception among Black-White biracial students is not a reflection of individual weakness but of systemic design (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2023). Schools mirror the broader society's racial hierarchies, and children's developing identities are shaped within that reflection. When educational spaces fail to affirm all aspects of a child's identity, they inadvertently teach children which parts of themselves are acceptable and which must be hidden. By the time students reach adolescence, these lessons have been deeply internalized, influencing their academic performance, peer relationships, and mental health. Recognizing and addressing this issue requires not only culturally responsive pedagogy but also a fundamental reimagining of what equity means in practice (Gay, 2023).

As the research suggests, without intentional intervention, the decline in self-perception that begins subtly in the early grades can extend into adulthood, shaping how biracial individuals navigate workplaces, relationships, and society at large. The responsibility lies with educators to disrupt these cycles by creating classrooms that do not simply tolerate difference but celebrate it. Gay (2023) wrote that when teachers actively affirm multiple racial identities, model inclusivity, and challenge stereotypes in order to educate for equity through culturally responsive teaching, they can begin to counteract the decades of systemic conditioning that have taught children to question their worth. Only then can the mirror reflect not doubt or dissonance, but pride and belonging.

Conversely, Paley (2000) discovered that when teachers made a sincere effort to engage with her students of color in authentic ways, she could build strong, caring relationships with their families. Through her experience as a White teacher in an integrated kindergarten class within a predominantly White neighborhood, she learned valuable lessons from her students' Black and Brown families. Most importantly, she

realized that genuine curiosity and respect for cultures other than one's own greatly enhanced students' self-perception and sense of belonging. Warren and Hotchkins (2015), echoed these sentiments in their study of eight White teachers in urban schools as they examined false empathy and how it hindered effective teaching of diverse students and adversely affected students self-perception. They found false empathy most frequently came into play when teachers interacted with the families of Black and Brown students and families, even when White teachers purported to be well-intentioned. Unfortunately, the issues discussed previously here in the review of literature often hinder even the sincerest teachers.

Summary of Literature Review

Cultural mismatch, along with systemic racism, have been noted to be, as they should be, of grave concern for teachers as the number of minority students increases in the United States and achievement gaps continue to persist, even widen (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Donnor, 2022; Howard, 2020). Even young Black students previously noted that they were not receiving the same resources, teacher effort, or community support granted their White peers, which was seen to decrease self-confidence in the classroom (Francis & Darity, 2021; Kozol, 2012). As Black and Black-White biracial students advance through the grades, Delgado and Stefancic (2023) noted that persistent and constant exposure to insidious racism erodes how worthy students view themselves in the classroom, leading to decreased self-efficacy and increased drop-outs in high school. Based on the research Poston (1990) and more recently Williams and Ware (2019) posited it is vital that Black-White biracial children maintain positive self-perceptions in order to sustain school performance and succeed, as well as become

comfortable in their own skin.

Teacher biases and systemic racism as described within critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) negatively affect the self-perceptions of non-White children in the early grades, pointing to teachers as the main factor present depleting or boosting self-perceptions of multiracial children and decreasing school performance. As a participant in diversity and anti-racist professional development in his years as being a teacher, Brookfield (2014) found that anti-racist and diversity training helped to uncover and address microaggressions, and when coupled with White teachers tackling their own racism, classrooms moved toward becoming more equitable for all students. Conceivably, if Black-White biracial children are placed in classrooms lead by teachers who have received anti-racist and diversity training and applied it properly in the classroom, students' self-esteem should remain high, bolstering self-efficacy beliefs, thus resulting in increased school performance. In the early grades, teachers could also bolster self-efficacy and self-perceptions to insulate students as they progress in school (Arslan, 2012). If Black-White biracial students experience curriculum that values them and their abilities while in school, then feasibly they can maintain school performance because of positive self-perceptions. Acknowledging multiracial students as valued members of the classroom early in school increases how they view themselves and their worth, positively impacting school performance and increases overall self-perception (Delpit, 2006, 2008, 2021).

As the existing research emphasized, Black individuals experienced hardships growing up in the South that White peers did not experience and Black-White individuals were usually seen as simply Black, so when mentioned in the literature, which was not

often, they experienced the same struggles (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Gaither & Rozek, 2020; Lynn & Dixson, 2022). This led me to want to extend prior research by looking more comprehensively at the specific experiences of Black-White participants growing up in the South.

In preparation for exploring how Black-White biracial participants experienced growing up in the South, I conducted pilot work to refine my understanding, strengthen my skills as a researcher, and examine my assumptions. My pilot study provided critical grounding for my conceptual framework by allowing me to apply and test the interpretive lenses of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model within real-world contexts. The insights gained confirmed that these theoretical perspectives accurately reflected the lived experiences of Black-White biracial children in the South, reinforcing the framework's connection between theory and practice. With this foundation established, I now turn to the pilot study that informed and refined my research design and deepened my understanding of how these frameworks illuminated the experiences of biracial individuals growing up in the South.

Pilot Work

While I was unaware of it at the time, I began to have discussions, conversations, and ponder questions about race long before I even entered the doctoral program at Valdosta State University that shaped my study. As discussed earlier, my family had conversations while I was growing up about race that are not common in many households in the South surrounding everyone's worth and how race plays a role in the perceptions of many, I witnessed disparities with how Black and Brown children were

treated while teaching in the public school systems for over 11 years, and I have experienced behavior that is clearly shaped by racial perceptions while raising my Black-White biracial daughter and Black son. Many of these conversations and discussions turned out to be pilot work for my study that I was clearly unaware of at the time.

Along with pre-doctoral program discussions, I have also spoken to friends who parent Black-White biracial children, both biological and adoptive parents, and friends who are themselves Black-White biracial to explore experiences and what types of conversations surrounding race occur in their lives. Several pilot conversations with a friend occurred between 2022 and 2024, as she prepared to have her second child; Brittany is Black-White biracial as are her children. Speaking to Brittany about her experiences, along with her experiences parenting a Black-White biracial child, have allowed for numerous insights that align with my literature review: Black-White biracial children are more often than not viewed as Black in the South, Black-White biracial children feel lesser than their White peers, Black-White biracial children often perceive that they are treated differently than White peers in the classroom, and Black-White biracial children tend to struggle to find their place while at school. Along with casual conversations with my friends, such as Brittany, and other peers and colleagues, I also conducted a specific pilot interview, which I describe next.

Pilot studies are an essential part of qualitative research because they allow a researcher to practice and refine their approach before engaging in the full study (Maxwell, 2013). For my dissertation, I conducted the pilot interview to strengthen my interviewing skills and to evaluate the effectiveness of my interview questions. As a novice researcher, I needed practice not only in drafting and posing questions, but also in

responding to participants with follow-up prompts that encouraged them to elaborate. This preliminary interview helped me gauge the types of responses my questions would generate, and it quickly became clear that some items could be interpreted in ways I had not anticipated. Conducting the pilot interview also gave me the chance to test the flow of an interview and to reflect on the importance of not assuming that I fully understood a participant's perspective or response.

For the pilot interview, I spoke with Bryan, a colleague and young professor who worked with numerous Black-White biracial students who had grown up and attended school in the South, like himself. The interview took place at a local community college in North Florida. Because I knew Bryan personally, I was confident that he would be forthcoming and willing to provide detailed information about his experience as a Black-White biracial growing up, as well as the issues that he helped students work through while in his class. The interview lasted about an hour and was conducted in the student union lounge. I recorded the interview on my cell phone and jotted down notes so that I could more easily recall key details and return to them for clarification during the conversation. Following the interview, I transcribed the recording and practiced coding the data. This exercise was not just about analyzing content; it was also an opportunity to become comfortable with moving from transcript to codes and then to broader categories.

Analyzing the pilot transcript revealed some weaknesses in my questioning. Most of my questions focused solely on background information, such as where Bryan was born, who did he live with, where did he go to school, and what were his friends like growing up. While these questions produced useful context that I needed, they did not fully uncover the personal meaning of just what it meant to Bryan to be a Black-White

biracial individual attending school and growing up in the South. Interestingly, as the interview went on, Bryan began to reveal some of that personal meaning himself as he shared and discussed struggles that he experienced in school feeling overlooked and at other times hyper-focused on by classmates and teachers. His comments illustrated for me the deeper meaning behind his shared stories, but I realized that my questioning style had not directly encouraged him to expand on those reflections as it should have. Because of this, I revised my interview guide so that future questions would elicit stories and meaning, rather than just descriptions. Following Seidman's (2019) advice, I learned to frame prompts that encouraged participants to talk about specific experiences, such as asking how an event changed them or what significance it held, rather than directly asking, "What does that mean to you?"; this aligns with guidance I received while in classes and throughout the dissertation process from Committee Chair Dr. Richard Schmertzing.

I also thought about the importance of terminology and how my pilot participant, Bryan, used terms interchangeably. As a result of prior research, I asked questions about being Black-White biracial, and while Bryan sometimes used the same terminology, he also just referred to himself as biracial. In addition, Bryan used the terms the Deep South and the South when discussing where he grew up and attended school. He did, however, consistently use the terms Black and White, as I did, when describing his parents and family members in the experiences that he relayed. This highlighted the need to be flexible and adopt the language my participants used, both to ensure clarity and to respect their perspectives. Going forward, I used participants' preferred terms in all interviews and transcripts.

Overall, the pilot interview was a critical step in shaping my study. It helped me refine my research questions, pushed me to focus more on eliciting meaning from carefully described experiences rather than simply the facts if the matter, and reminded me to stay reflexive about how my own subjectivities shaped the process. I also learned valuable practical lessons, such as always using multiple recording methods and paying close attention to participant language. While the pilot interview data itself was not included in my study, the insights it provided influenced every subsequent stage, from designing questions, to conducting interviews, to analyzing narratives. This process ultimately strengthened the rigor and authenticity of my research with young adults who were previously Black-White biracial children in Southern schools and their identity development in the South.

In summary, the conceptual framework outlined in this chapter brought together my experiential knowledge, positionality, and the guiding theories that shaped this study: Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, Delgado and Stefancic's (2023) critical race theory, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model. Together, these frameworks illuminated how systems of race, culture, and identity intersected in the lives of Black-White biracial participants growing up in the South. To visually represent these interconnections and show how each theoretical strand informed my research questions, the following concept map provides an integrated overview of the framework that anchored this study.

Concept Map

Concept maps, as suggested by Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017), can be powerful tools for making sense of a study's conceptual framework because they

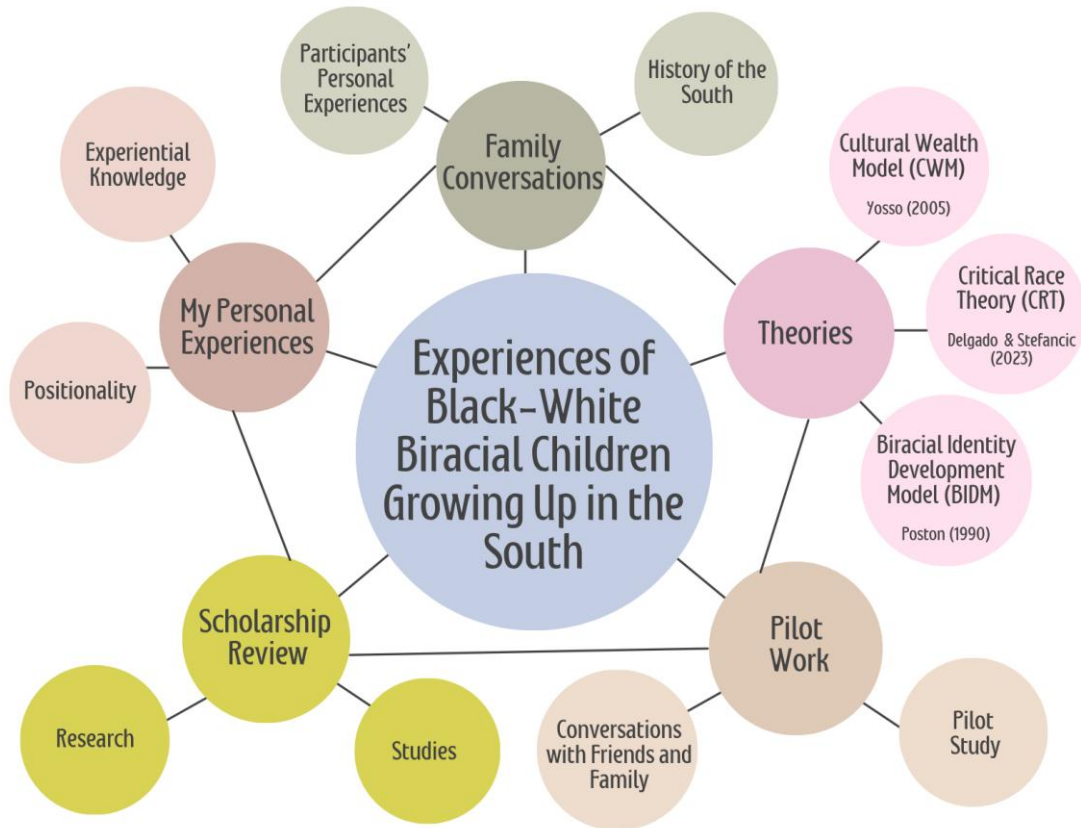
illustrate how various influences and ideas are linked together. For my dissertation, I designed a concept map to show how my personal experiences, theoretical lenses, prior scholarship, and pilot interview all interact to shape the design and focus of this study.

In the concept map (see Figure 1), the central circle highlights the study's core: the experiences of Black-White biracial children navigating identity in the South. Around this focal point, other circles represent the theoretical perspectives, personal insights, and contextual factors that framed my research. The lines connecting them convey the relationships among these elements. Some lines demonstrate direct effects, such as the ways participants' personal experiences and history of the South shape family conversations, while connecting lines signal reciprocal relationships, such as the way family conversations, my personal experiences, scholarship review, pilot work, and theories all worked together to guide my conceptual framework for examining how Black-White biracial young adults reflected on growing up and navigating identity in the South.

Rather than treating theory, personal experience, and participant voice as separate, the following concept map portrays them as interdependent, showing how each contributes to my study's foundation. It provides a visual representation of how the research was constructed and why these elements matter, making it clear that this work is both personally meaningful and rooted in scholarly rigor.

Figure 1

Theories and Concepts Related to the Experiences of Black-White Biracial Children Growing Up in the South



The concept map also reflects the integration of the three theoretical frameworks guiding my study. Yosso’s (2005) cultural wealth model helps highlight the strengths and resources Black-White biracial participants bring from families and communities. Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) situates these narratives within systemic inequities, calling attention to how racial hierarchies continue to influence schools in the South. Poston’s (1990) biracial identity development model provides a developmental lens for understanding how Black-White participants’ racial identities evolve across different stages of life. These perspectives are situated alongside my experiential knowledge as both a White mother of Black-White biracial children and a longtime educator, as well as insights from reviewing relevant literature and conducting a pilot interview.

The purposes of this study, as shaped by my conceptual framework, were to gain a deeper understanding of how Black-White biracial children in the South define race, negotiate identity in predominantly White classrooms, and make meaning of their family and community experiences. This framework not only provided the theoretical grounding for my work but also guided the choices I made throughout the research process. My positionality as a White mother of a Black-White biracial daughter and a Black son required ongoing reflection so that I remained attentive to bias (Peshkin, 1988) and ensured the validity of the study. The integration of Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model informed the design of my research questions and justified the use of narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014) as the most appropriate methodology to capture participants' voices. Prior scholarship offered direction for structuring interviews and interpreting stories, while the pilot study allowed me to refine both my research questions and my approach to analysis so that participants' experiences were represented clearly and authentically. Together, these elements anchored my study in both personal meaning and scholarly rigor, ensuring that the narratives of my Black-White biracial participants who grew up in the South were centered, honored, and translated into insights that could inform more inclusive practices in schools.

Chapter III

METHODS

Chapter 3 outlines the procedures I used to explore the lived experiences of Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South. Because the purpose of my study was to understand how participants defined race, negotiated identity in school contexts, and made meaning of family and community influences, a qualitative approach was most appropriate. Narrative inquiry, grounded in Seidman's (2019) three-interview series and Daiute's (2014) narrative framework, provided a way to center participants' stories as the primary source of knowledge. This chapter explains the rationale for selecting narrative inquiry, details the research design, describes the participants and procedures for data collection, and outlines the strategies used for data analysis and trustworthiness. By connecting these methodological choices to the conceptual framework and goals of the study, this chapter demonstrates how the research was designed to authentically capture and amplify the voices of Black-White biracial young adults who grew up in the South.

Research Design

I chose narrative inquiry as the research design for my study because narrative is a vital human activity in which even young children can participate within their environment and daily lives (Daiute, 2014). Originally young children were the focus of this work, then due to a job shift and life changes it became apparent young adults

thinking back would be more accessible and able to reflect on their childhood stories. Thus, narrative inquiry still seemed appropriate. All interactions in a person's life come together to influence their lived experience in narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014); in qualitative phenomenological research, lived experience refers to a representation of the experiences and choices of a given person and the knowledge that they gain from these experiences and choices (Schwandt, 2015). Narrative is used to interact with others, express oneself, and develop personally.

Combined these seemed to be a perfect blend for my research. A narrative inquiry approach was used employing Seidman's (2019) three-interview series to allow participants to tell their personal stories and express their thoughts in a natural way that parallels storytelling. By structuring the interview questions in an open-ended manner responding to their comments and direction I intended to reduce any stress that might arise with highly structured interviews, which could be difficult on participants when discussing race, causing them to shut down or limit their verbal expression. This narrative approach allowed participants to guide the conversation, which provided the freedom for in-depth explorations of their natural flow of thoughts and sense-making processes concerning being Black-White biracial individuals. As Daiute (2014) stated, storytelling allows people to connect with others, deal with social structures applied to their lives, make sense of their lived experiences, and create ways of fitting into varying contexts, all of which helped provide data that addressed the research questions for this study.

Storytelling also acts as a socializer, meaning that Black-White biracial individuals listening to parents, teachers, other adults, even friends and classmates in daily life impacts their values and beliefs concerning race; people do not grow up in

isolation and narrative is a major cultural process that guides a person's development from infancy (Daiute, 2014). Even though families mold who children are and who they will become using storytelling, children often adjust personal stories to the preferred social script, which is why Seidman's (2019) three-interview structure was used to allow for my participants to focus on their life history in the first interview, moving into details of their experiences in the second interview, and reflecting on the meaning of their experiences in the third interview. This interview structure was intentionally designed to encourage my young adult participants to reflect deeply on their childhood experiences, providing enough detail to analyze the early stages of their identity development. By guiding them to share memories and stories from childhood through middle and high school, and into their current college years, I was able to trace how their formative experiences influenced their ongoing development and sense of self over time. In my study I sought to hear the purest voice of Black-White biracial participants, not only what they learned from others, but also what has been discovered and determined themselves as they were growing up in the South.

Narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014) provided an essential methodological foundation for my research, as it offered a space where Black-White biracial participants could share their experiences of growing up in the South through their own voices and perspectives. This approach created a low-pressure, conversational atmosphere that encouraged authenticity and openness, enabling participants to engage with me in storytelling as a natural and familiar form of communication. Storytelling allowed them to articulate their views, beliefs, and understandings of race and racial identity, while also giving them the opportunity to reflect on how their personal histories shaped their sense of self.

Importantly, narrative inquiry valued participants not only as sources of information but also as co-constructors of meaning, positioning their lived experiences as central to the research process. When preparing Chapter 4, it was appropriate for me to trim down and retell portions of my participants' storytelling to preserve the essence of their narratives while ensuring clarity and coherence for the reader. Daiute (2014) noted that in narrative inquiry, the researcher acts as both listener and storyteller, shaping participants' words into cohesive accounts that convey meaning without altering intent. By thoughtfully condensing their stories, I honored their voices while creating a narrative structure that aligned with the study's focus and maintained readability within the dissertation format.

By structuring the study around Seidman's (2019) three-interview series, I was able to build rapport and trust over time, which deepened the quality of the stories shared. Each session invited participants to revisit, extend, and refine their narratives, allowing them to build upon what they had previously shared and to deepen their reflections over time. Through this layered process, participants clarified earlier memories, reconsidered their interpretations, and connected past experiences with their present sense of self. This recursive storytelling not only illuminated the details of specific moments but also revealed broader patterns of meaning-making across their developmental journeys. This recursive process highlighted the emotional dimensions of their stories, emotions that would surely have been flattened or lost had I relied on a one-time interview or the impersonal nature of an emailed survey. Capturing emotion was vital because feelings of belonging, isolation, pride, and conflict were often inseparable from the participants' understandings of race and identity. Thus, the narrative inquiry framework, grounded in extended storytelling, provided a nuanced lens through which I could honor and interpret

the complexity of Black-White biracial identity development in the Southern context. The narrative inquiry design of my study naturally guided the selection of participants whose lived experiences could provide rich, detailed stories aligned with the study's purpose and research questions.

Participant Selection

For this study, I used a voluntary response sampling strategy to identify and recruit participants. Because my research focused specifically on the lived experiences of Black-White biracial young adults, it was important to design a recruitment process that was both accessible and transparent while maintaining compliance with institutional requirements for research involving human subjects. First, I obtained IRB-required approvals from both Valdosta State University (see Appendix A; Appendix B) and Tallahassee State College (see Appendix C) where I intended to recruit participants. These approvals authorized me to conduct recruitment and interviews in compliance with ethical standards and to access facilities at Tallahassee State College for the purpose of meeting with participants. Recruitment materials, including my flyer (see Appendix D), were posted on the Tallahassee State College campus in prominent areas such as classroom buildings and the Student Union. Despite these efforts, I did not initially receive responses from students. It was not until the end of January 2025 that students began reaching out through the contact information provided on the flyer.

Once students reached out, I directed them to access the Qualtrics survey through my Valdosta State University via the QR code on my recruitment flyer for screening. This survey (see Appendix E) was designed to provide potential participants with an overview of the study's purpose, scope, and expectations, while also collecting

demographic information necessary to determine eligibility. The use of Qualtrics was intentional; it offered a secure platform approved by the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), allowing me to protect student data while also streamlining the process of managing responses. The survey included questions about participants' racial background, age, and enrollment status, as well as an open-ended opportunity for students to express their interest in sharing their personal experiences. In total, 18 people responded to my screening survey.

Once potential participants completed the Qualtrics survey, I reviewed the responses to ensure alignment with the eligibility criteria established in my IRB protocol. These criteria required that students self-identify as Black-White biracial, fall within the age range of 18 to 22, and be currently enrolled in a local college. After identifying students who met the qualifications, and removing those who did not, my potential participant pool decreased from 18 to 7. I then contacted each of the remaining students individually to schedule an initial conversation. These preliminary meetings served a dual purpose: they allowed me to confirm the accuracy of the information provided in the survey, and they created space for students to ask questions, clarify expectations, and decide whether they truly wished to move forward in my study. This step was essential in ensuring that participation was entirely voluntary and that students felt comfortable with the level of commitment required.

During my initial conversations with these students, I discussed several qualifying factors in greater detail. This included confirming that they identified as biracial with both Black and White parentage, ensured their willingness to engage in multiple interviews, and reviewed the time commitment required. I also explained the broader

research goals and emphasized the importance of their voices in a study that sought to illuminate the unique experiences of Black-White biracial individuals who grew up in the South. I found that these conversations were critical to building trust and rapport with students prior to the formal interview process. For some, the opportunity to ask questions and process their role in the study solidified their decision to participate; for others, it provided an avenue to decline involvement without pressure. During the preliminary meetings, several additional students were removed from the participant pool because they either could not commit to the required time or were disappointed that the study did not offer compensation. In total, I met with seven potential participants to explain the study expectations and answer questions. Ultimately, only four students were both a good fit for the research and willing to move forward with the full interview series.

Through this combination of the recruitment flyer, Qualtrics survey, IRB-approved recruitment practices, and personal conversations, I was able to finalize a group of four participants (see Table 1) out of 18 total interest responses. Each of these students was Black-White biracial, within the designated age range, and willing to share their stories through the narrative inquiry process.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Years Out of High School	Region in the South	Extracurricular Involvement
AK	22	Female	4	Atlanta, Georgia (Metro)	Sports
Cam	19	Male	1	Florida Panhandle	Sports
Lex	20	Female	2	Central Florida	Sports
Maha	20	Female	2	Central Florida	Theater

Note. Ages, locations, and extracurricular activities reflect self-reported demographic information. All names are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality.

By intentionally combining digital screening with face-to-face conversations, I not only ensured that the participants met the study's criteria but also demonstrated respect for their autonomy and the sensitive nature of my research. This careful approach to participant selection reflects the ethical and methodological rigor necessary for qualitative inquiry, while also ensuring that the voices represented in this study were included through a process of genuine interest and informed consent.

I intentionally selected a small sample for this study, recognizing that depth of understanding is often more valuable than breadth when working with qualitative research. Patton (2015) emphasized that obtaining detailed accounts from a limited number of participants can provide powerful insights that might be diluted in larger samples. By focusing on a small group, I was able to prioritize the richness of individual experiences rather than attempting to generalize across a wide population. This approach aligned with my commitment to narrative inquiry, where the goal is to highlight the complexity of lived experiences (Daiute, 2014) rather than to measure them against broad statistical trends. To ensure that the data collected would be meaningful and sufficient for addressing my research questions, I developed a structured plan for data collection. This plan was designed not only to generate ample material for analysis but also to allow me to capture the nuances, contradictions, and personal meanings that participants brought forward in their stories.

Data Collection

Maxwell (2013) described data collection as the process through which a

researcher obtains the information necessary to address the central research questions of a study. He also emphasized the importance of drawing on more than one form of data collection to capture the different dimensions of the phenomenon under investigation. In my research, this guidance informed the choices I made in collecting data about the lived experiences of Black-White biracial participants growing up in the South. I relied on Seidman's (2019) three-interview structure as the primary method, which allowed participants to share their stories in depth over multiple sessions. In addition, I kept detailed researcher memos to record reflections, patterns I observed, and insights that emerged throughout the process. This combination of participant interviews and reflexive writing provided both rich narrative accounts and a record of my evolving interpretations, ensuring that I gathered sufficient information to fully address my research questions.

Interviews

Since the purpose of this study was to understand how Black-White biracial young adults in the South interpret their identities and navigate family, school, and community contexts, I drew on Daiute's (2014) narrative inquiry approach and Seidman's (2019) three-interview series as my methodological guides. Seidman's (2019) approach, grounded in phenomenological traditions, emphasizes that experiences cannot be separated from the contexts in which they occur. In other words, meaning emerges only when personal stories are situated within the broader environments of a person's life (Daiute, 2014; Seidman, 2019).

I collected data from February through June of 2025 using Seidman's (2019) three-interview series approach with participants to explore and discuss race and growing up in the South. This was done in accordance with participants' schedules and

availability. By conducting narrative inquiry sessions and listening to deeply personal stories and experiences, I gathered knowledge about how the Black-White biracial young adults view and present themselves, as well as family members and friends, as influenced by growing up in the South. As Daiute (2014) explained, narrating is a sense making process, through which even young children figure out what is going on in the world around them and how they fit in. A narrative inquiry approach in participant interviews allowed me to explore the participants' early experiences and gain insights into how these four Black-White biracial individuals who grew up in the South were figuring out the world and their place in it.

Participants participated in Seidman's (2019) three-interview approach; each interview was scheduled for 90 minutes. As stated earlier, interviews took place at a college centrally located to participants in an area that is comforting and familiar for the participants, such as a private workspace in the library or an empty classroom, or via Zoom if participants preferred to meet online to fit their schedule. To encourage the participants to open up and share naturally, I followed essential tips for interviewing from the Dart Center for Journalism and Trauma (2018), a project of Columbia Journalism School:

- Be human first, a journalist (researcher) second: I was clear with the participants about what my purpose of the study was and what we would be exploring in each interview.
- When it is time to interview, make them comfortable: All interviews took place in a college classroom or the library where others could not hear the conversations to reduce anxiety, or via Zoom if needed. I also engaged in conversation concerning

why my study was important to me, discussed my own personal children and their well-being as children of color in the South, and being an elementary education professor with hopes of creating more inclusive spaces for Black-White biracial children in classrooms through pre-service teacher education, at the initial face-to-face meeting with participants before launching into questions concerning race. Additionally, before each of the three interviews, I read the IRB consent statement (see Appendix F) and ensured that all participants were still comfortable and willing to participate in my study. To further put the participants at ease and to encourage natural conversation before launching into questions about race, after reading the IRB consent form, I would ask how they were doing and inquire about their classes/lives.

- Leave them in a good place: Even though there was no anticipated risk for the participants, it could have been a little disconcerting to discuss race and racial issues in the interviews at times, so I always ended on a positive note, asking participants about something easy and positive, such as friends or what their favorite part of the day was.
- Verify what they have told you: At the end of each interview, I summarized the session to ensure that the participants were able to articulate their thoughts and ideas clearly, and to ensure that I had understood what they were trying to convey.
- Do not underestimate them: Though my chosen participants were younger than me, aged 18 to 22, they had a lot of big feelings about the world around them and did not mind sharing since they were comfortable and at ease.

I believe that implementing the aforementioned interview tips helped my participants feel

more open, resulting in productive interviews and rich data. All interviews with the participants were audio recorded for transcription, so that accurate recollections of the conversations were transcribed. Audio recordings and any notes/memos taken during interviews will be destroyed after transcription and data presentation, as described later in this section.

To honor this perspective, I conducted three interviews with each of my participants. This format created a rhythm that allowed the participants to share their stories, connect those stories to their lived settings, and then reflect on the significance of their experiences. The process was particularly well suited to my research questions, as it supported the collection of layered, in-depth narratives about what it means to grow up Black-White biracial in Southern schools and communities where race is often defined in binary terms.

Most of my interviews lasted about 90 minutes, although the schedule was adjusted when necessary. For example, AK's interviews were spaced out further apart due to work scheduling conflicts and struggles with family issues. I tried to space interviews about a week apart, though that did not consistently happen with all of my participants. Spreading out the interviews by at least a week gave participants time to think about the prior conversation while not going too long in between kept our discussions connected. It also allowed me time to transcribe, write memos, and generate questions that deepened the next session. This deliberate sequencing ensured that both the participant and I could engage in a collaborative process of exploring, contextualizing, and interpreting their experiences. Table 2 provides a detailed summary of each participant's interview schedule, including the specific dates and durations (in minutes)

of all sessions, as well as the locations where each interview took place. This overview helps illustrate the consistency and organization of the data collection process across my four participants.

Table 2

Participant Interview Schedule

Name	Interview 1		Interview 2		Interview 3		Place
	Date	Duration	Date	Duration	Date	Duration	
AK	4/23	84	5/27	88	6/7	92	Student Union
Cam	3/10	98	3/24	101	4/7	85	Library
Lex	4/20	78	4/30	87	5/9	82	Student Union
Maha	2/19	107	3/3	101	4/3	96	Zoom

Note. Dates show month and day. All interviews took place during the year 2025. Duration shown in minutes. All names are pseudonyms used to protect participant confidentiality.

In qualitative research, in-depth interviewing provides a way for participants to revisit, reflect upon, and articulate the meaning of their lived experiences. Seidman (2019) emphasized that the purpose of interviewing is not to test predetermined ideas or to push participants toward confirming the researcher’s assumptions, but instead to provide the space for them to reconstruct their worlds in their own words. For this reason, interview protocols should serve as flexible frameworks rather than rigid scripts. As Seidman (2019) cautioned, as a researcher I must avoid imposing my own priorities onto participants and should instead allow conversations to unfold in ways that honor participants’ perspectives. In keeping with this understanding, I developed tentative interview guides for each of the three interviews (see Appendices G–I). These guides,

along with the included the confidentiality statement that I read aloud at the beginning of each session, provided a broad structure to ensure consistency across participants' interviews. However, I approached them as flexible outlines, leaving space for participants to guide the direction of our conversations and trusting their stories to determine the flow of inquiry.

Drawing on lessons from my pilot work with Bryan and from Seidman's (2019) guidance, I worked to let participants "map the territory" of their own experiences rather than constrain them to my assumptions. This meant that my role was less about following a script and more about listening carefully, prompting for depth when participants' stories invited elaboration, and remaining open to unexpected directions. For example, several participants raised issues related to appearance, particularly hair and skin tone, that I had not originally included in my initial questions but that became central to their experiences of belonging and exclusion in Southern schools. In response, I adjusted subsequent interviews to explore these recurring topics more fully, while still maintaining consistency with the broader goals of the study. This process underscored the iterative and relational nature of interviewing. Each story revealed new insights, which then shaped follow-up questions in ways that kept my participants' voices at the center.

I stressed that the process was not something I could do alone and that the value of the project depended on their willingness to share honestly and openly. I also described how narrative inquiry values life stories as a way of understanding identity (Daiute, 2014), making it clear that their words would shape the direction of the study. To give participants a sense of control over how they were represented, I offered them the option to select their own pseudonyms. Some chose names for themselves, while others

preferred for me to assign one. These opening steps helped build trust, clarified the purpose of the study, and reinforced my commitment to treating their experiences with care.

In keeping with Seidman's (2019) guidance, the first interview in my study emphasized life history, giving participants the opportunity to revisit their earliest experiences and describe the paths that led them to where they are now. My aim during these sessions was not to press them with "why" questions that might limit responses, but instead to invite them to share "how" they came to understand themselves as Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South through experiences from elementary, middle school, high school, and eventually college. By asking about their early schooling, home life, and community contexts, I encouraged them to reconstruct the moments, relationships, and environments that shaped their identity. Some participants traced their stories back to elementary school while others focused more on adolescence and college years, but all four participants shared heavily about experiences with their families and friends. I did not force them into a rigid timeline; rather, I allowed them to highlight the periods that held the most meaning for them. This open, narrative-driven approach aligned with Seidman's (2019) call to let participants' voices unfold naturally, situating their present perspectives within the broader arc of their lived experiences.

When beginning the second interview, I often started with informal conversation to ease participants back into the process. Checking in about their week or asking what they had been doing recently created a natural rhythm and kept the interviews relational rather than transactional. These opening moments sometimes brought out stories I would not have anticipated. A passing comment about a current friendship, class project, or

family interaction often opened the door to deeper reflections about how earlier experiences in school or at home had shaped their sense of identity. In this way, small talk often revealed meaningful narratives that might not have emerged from a scripted question. Several times I was told that a participant had spoken to family members about the study; sometimes these interactions were positive but at times participants relayed encountering the same measured silence they had already shared with me.

The heart of the second interview, however, was guided by Seidman's (2019) emphasis on eliciting the concrete details of participants' lived experience. I asked participants to walk me through specific moments that illustrated what it was like to grow up Black-White biracial in the South. They described ordinary school days, classroom interactions, athletic practices, and family routines, often weaving in memories of how others reacted to their presence and how those reactions shaped their own understanding of self. I encouraged them to describe their relationships with teachers, peers, and family members, situating their experiences within broader social contexts. One such instance was when I asked Cam to expand on a story that he shared in the first interview about a fellow student who made comments about his hair and how the teacher joined in; it was obvious that even though this story occurred when he was in elementary school, it still pained him to think about it when discussing it with me over 10 years later. At times participants worried aloud that their stories were off track or not what I was looking for, particularly Maha, but I reminded them that their voices and their perspectives were the core of the study, and that their stories were powerful and valuable.

The third interview invited participants to step back from recounting events and instead reflect on the meaning those experiences carried in their lives. Following

Seidman's (2019) framework, this stage emphasized interpretation, allowing participants to consider how their family histories, schooling, and peer relationships had shaped their understandings of race and belonging. I encouraged them to think about how earlier experiences connected to their present sense of identity, often asking what lessons they carried forward or how certain moments continued to influence them in college and young adulthood. These conversations created space for the participants to articulate the significance of their stories, moving from description into interpretation in ways that highlighted both struggle and growth.

This reflective interview also deepened the trust and rapport that had been built across the first two sessions. Because participants were familiar with the process by this point, they often spoke with more openness and confidence, weaving together ideas related to resilience, family influence, silence, and affirmation. Like when Lex shared again how much it confused her as a child for her mother and grandmother to direct her to tell people that she was "just White" and how that confusion had turned to resentment as she got older. They considered not only what had happened to them but also what those experiences meant in the broader context of being Black-White biracial in the South. These meaning-making reflections revealed the ways participants positioned themselves within ongoing racial narratives and underscored the central goal of my study: to amplify their voices as they made sense of identity across time and place.

Seidman's (2019) three-interview series created the time and space needed to build genuine relationships with my participants and allow room for introspection that would enrich the next interview session, as Dr. Richard Schmertzling had spoken to me about numerous times (R. Schmertzling, personal communication, July 14, 2023). By the

conclusion of the process, many remarked that they valued the chance to pause and think about how their earlier experiences connected to the people they were becoming; AK and Maha even noted that the interviews felt affirming and empowering as they were allowed to speak so openly about their race and coming to terms with it growing up. Another participant, Lex, explained that the conversations encouraged her to look back on childhood moments she had not revisited in years because she always felt she had to deny the Black side of herself due to pressure from White family members, while Cam shared that reflecting on both challenges and successes helped him better understand his current perspective and the direction he wanted to take for his life after college. These deeper insights became especially clear in the final interviews, when participants shifted from describing events to interpreting their significance.

By the third conversation, the tone often felt less like a formal interview and more like an exchange between people who had come to know and trust one another. Some participants stayed after the official session ended to continue talking about their lives, classes, or personal reflections. These unscripted moments underscored that the interviews were not only a source of data but also a space where the participants felt acknowledged, seen, and supported. Their willingness to share in such open ways reinforced the importance of this study and my responsibility to honor their voices. In addition to the interviews and transcripts, I also kept notes and memos as I built a relationship with each participant.

Memos

Memos are vital for a qualitative researcher to ensure data is collected and reflected upon often and thoroughly (Maxwell, 2013) so I memoed throughout my study,

a practice I started years earlier in my life after numerous conversations about its value with Dr. Richard Schmertzing (R. Schmertzing, personal communication, August 9, 2018). Writing memos enhanced my data exploration, made connections from raw data to abstractions that explained phenomena discovered in my research, and helped me explain findings more clearly by referencing memos; shared portions of my thoughts, reflections, and memos will be italicized. I purchased a set of notebooks that I could write memos in with ease when I conducted interviews with the participants. Participants were allowed to access my memos to provide clarification and transparency throughout my study.

The following is an excerpt from a memo I wrote after speaking to Lex when she shared that her White mother and grandmother told her to say she was “just White” if she was ever asked:

In today’s second interview, Lex opened up about something really important from her childhood. She said her White mom and grandmother told her not to say she was “mixed” but instead to say she was “just White” whenever anyone asked. That stuck out to me because it shows how her family pushed her to hide part of herself and fit into a version of Whiteness that maybe they thought would keep her safe or more accepted. It was not just silence about race though, it was an active message to deny a piece of who she is, which made me sad for her.

Lex talked about how that made her feel conflicted. On the one hand, she wanted to respect her White family members that she lived with and was always around, but on the other, she knew it didn’t match what she felt inside or how others saw her. She shared how confusing it was when people questioned her

identity and she was supposed to stick to the “just White” answer. It sounded like it caused her a lot of discomfort and left her feeling like she was being asked to erase part of herself just to make others comfortable.

I also noticed how this guidance came from two generations, her grandmother passing it down through her mother, which shows how long these survival strategies have been in place. But for Lex, it didn’t really shield her from racialized experiences at all. It just created even more internal conflict about who she could be and how to show up in different spaces. This feels like a key part of her story about family silence and pressure to assimilate. (J. Barfield, personal communication, April 30, 2025)

After each interview, I found myself thinking carefully about what the participant had shared, and I used those reflections to shape the follow up questions so that the next conversation could go deeper. It was not until I had completed the entire three interview series and memoing, though, that I stepped back to do the more intentional work of categorizing and connecting the data, looking for patterns that stretched across their full stories and connecting pieces of their individual stories.

Data Analysis

In line with Maxwell’s (2013) guidance, I carefully immersed myself in all of the materials I gathered, including interview transcripts and memos, before moving into the analytic phase. I began with multiple rounds of coding (Saldaña, 2016), drawing on in vivo, using emotions, values, process, and concept coding, to stay close to my participants’ words while also identifying deeper patterns. This initial stage required pulling the data apart through categorizing strategies in order to notice distinctions and

nuances. Just as importantly, I worked to bring the pieces back together in context as I crafted narrative accounts for each participant by using connecting strategies (Maxwell, 2013). I extended the analysis by mapping codes into broader categories and using categorical data to create themes that revealed both points of convergence and areas of divergence across the four participants. This process allowed me to trace how Black-White biracial children in the South narrated their identities in relation to schools, families, and communities. The resulting thematic findings are woven together in Chapter 5, where I highlight how their stories collectively illustrate the pressures, silences, and sources of resilience that shaped their lived experiences.

Categorizing Strategies

The process of categorizing my data was one of the most important stages of my analysis because it moved me from fragmented codes into meaningful groupings that could answer my research questions. Maxwell (2013) reminded me that categorizing is one of the most widely used analytic strategies in qualitative research, and I experienced its importance firsthand in my study. After rounds of coding that produced dozens of codes across multiple interviews, I needed a way to make sense of the abundance of data in a manner that honored participants' voices while also drawing out the shared dimensions of their experiences. Categorizing strategies gave me a way to see beyond surface details and to begin identifying the patterns that ran through the lives of my participants.

From the beginning, I chose to take a very hands-on approach to my data analysis. Rather than relying on software, I printed every transcript, highlighted passages, and physically transferred key phrases onto color coded Post-it notes. Each Post-it became a

tangible unit of meaning, holding a word, phrase, or sentence that carried significance. These notes were then spread across a large empty wall in my office, and that wall quickly transformed into a visual map of my participants' stories. What had felt overwhelming to me in a thick stack of transcripts became more approachable once I could see each excerpt separately and move it into relation with others. This act of externalizing the data as I was literally pulling it off the page and placing it in front of me made the analysis not just an intellectual task but also a physical and visual one. Each type of coding I used yielded interesting results and will be demonstrated separately.

In Vivo Coding. In vivo coding served as the entry point into my data because I wanted to preserve the exact language of my participants, allowing their words to anchor the interpretation of their lived experiences. As Saldaña (2016) emphasizes, in vivo coding helps keep analysis grounded in participants' authentic voices rather than the researcher's imposed terminology. Lex's story of being told by her White mother and grandmother to deny her Black-White biracial identity and to say she was "just White" became one of the first in vivo codes I placed on the wall. The phrase carried immense weight, encapsulating both family protection and identity denial in one breath. Cam's recurring memory of being asked "What are you?" also became an in vivo code that appeared repeatedly across interviews and in other participants' narratives, underscoring how often biracial children in the South are positioned as racial curiosities. Similarly, AK's statement that she "just wanted to fit in" during middle school captured the deep desire for belonging within predominantly White settings. By clustering these direct quotations during the coding process, I began to see how these phrases linked across participants, forming patterns around belonging, identity negotiation, and silence.

Across participants' narratives, a series of additional in vivo codes emerged that vividly captured how Black-White biracial young adults in the South experienced identity, belonging, and resilience. Several participants, including AK and Maha, shared that "we didn't talk about race at home," a phrase that illuminated how silence shaped early understandings of race. Lex's White grandmother's advice to "bite your tongue" contrasted sharply with a Black aunt's insistence to "stick up for yourself," revealing generational and cultural divides in how to respond to racism. Cam's reflection that "baseball saved me" spoke to the power of extracurricular spaces as both refuge and proving ground. Each phrase carried emotional resonance and provided an entryway into larger themes of silence, protection, belonging, and self-definition that formed the foundation of the participants' stories. Together, these words brought forth the tension between invisibility and expression that defined the biracial experience for my four participants in the South.

Other in vivo codes illuminated how participants managed belonging and authenticity in everyday spaces like schools and communities. Cam's reflection that "my hair got talked about more than my homework" revealed the hypervisibility of racialized features in classrooms, while Lex's acknowledgment that she had to "be more Black in sports" captured the pressure to perform racial identity to gain acceptance. Maha described feeling that she was "supposed to know the rules but didn't," explaining how unspoken social norms left her on the margins. Her comment that she "became a chameleon" reflected the quiet adaptations that my Black-White biracial participants made to navigate belonging, and her insight that "reading and drawing were my escape" showed how creative outlets became safe spaces for self-expression. These phrases

revealed how participants alternated between blending in and standing out, between protecting the self and asserting it, as they negotiated identity in environments that often overlooked and misunderstood them.

Finally, the in vivo codes connected to resilience and affirmation revealed powerful moments of personal growth. Lex's advice to "be who you are and don't let anyone take that from you" and AK's reflection that wearing her natural hair "was the start of accepting myself" illustrated a movement from suppression toward self-acceptance. Maha's realization that she "didn't have to be a stereotype" and that her favorite teacher "made me feel seen" demonstrated how representation and affirmation created spaces of authenticity and belonging. Additionally, Cam's statement to "protect your joy" captured the spirit of emotional resilience that defined his journey toward self-understanding. Taken together, these in vivo codes rooted entirely in the participants' own words became the foundation for the broader themes of family silence and conversations about race, belonging and visibility, assimilation and performance, and resilience through self-expression. Preserving the participants' language ensured that their voices guided the analytic process and honored the power of their lived experiences in shaping the meaning Black-White biracial identity in the South.

Emotions Coding. Alongside in vivo codes, I layered emotion coding to capture the affective dimensions of participants' stories because, as Saldaña (2016) notes, virtually everything we do has accompanying emotion(s). AK described feeling "embarrassed" when her teachers touched her hair without permission in front of classmates, an emotion that revealed how microaggressions became moments of public exposure and discomfort. That word became an emotion code and a Post-it note that I

placed near other accounts of shame and self-consciousness, like when Cam was “upset” that children, and even his teacher, commented on the texture of his hair. Lex recalled feeling “angry” and “hurt” when her grandmother told her to “just say you’re White,” a moment that communicated both rejection and deep internal conflict. Maha, meanwhile, expressed feeling “confused” when classmates mispronounced her name and laughed, a recurring emotional thread tied to identity invalidation. By mapping these emotions, I began to see patterns emerge where negative feelings like embarrassment, shame, anger, and confusion clustered closely together, signifying the recurring emotional toll of on my participants as they navigated biracial identity within predominantly White, often racially insensitive, environments.

At the same time, participants described emotions of strength, hope, and belonging that counterbalanced these painful experiences. Cam shared that playing baseball made him feel “free” and “safe,” emotional expressions that stood in stark contrast to the alienation he felt in academic spaces. AK described feeling “happy” when she finally wore her natural hair with confidence, realizing it represented her acceptance of self rather than a rejection of others’ standards. Lex described feeling “confident” in high school after learning to embrace her biracial identity, while Maha described feeling “proud” of her Haitian heritage, even though she also admitted that she sometimes felt “confused” about how others perceived her. Coding these emotional expressions created visible contrasts in the data as joy, pride, and freedom clustered beside anger, shame, and isolation, mirroring the back and forth between empowerment and marginalization that shaped participants’ identity journeys. Emotion coding, in this sense, allowed me to trace how external validation and self-acceptance often emerged in resistance to earlier

emotional wounds.

Across participants, 10 prominent emotion codes emerged: embarrassment, shame, confusion, anger, hurt, isolation, pride, joy, confidence, and freedom. These recurring codes captured the emotional rhythm of biracial identity formation for this study's participants in the South. Each emotion told part of a larger story: embarrassment and shame illuminated early encounters with racial difference, confusion and anger reflected the internal negotiations of identity, and pride, joy, confidence, and freedom represented moments of personal reclamation and growth. Taken together, these emotions showed that for the four participants in this study, biracial identity development unfolded in cycles rather than in a straight line, continually moving back and forth between feelings of vulnerability and empowerment. Through emotion coding, I was able to see how participants' emotional experiences mirrored the progression of their stories, shifting from feelings of externally imposed discomfort to a sense of self-assurance grounded within themselves. This process not only gave structure to their emotional landscapes but also honored the depth of feeling embedded in their lived experiences, revealing that the journey to self-acceptance was as emotional as it was intellectual for participants.

Values Coding. Following the layers of in vivo and emotion coding that captured the participants' language and feelings, I next turned to values coding to better understand the principles guiding their choices and the beliefs underlying their experiences. Values coding highlighted beliefs and priorities (Saldaña, 2016) and revealed what mattered most to participants and how they framed their experiences through deeply held convictions. Cam often emphasized "respect" when describing friendships and sports teams, explaining that what mattered to him most was being

treated fairly and recognized for his effort rather than his racial identity. That same value surfaced when he discussed moments of injustice, showing how respect functioned as both a guiding principle and a protective standard. Lex repeatedly expressed a longing for “acceptance,” describing how she adjusted her behavior and appearance to fit in at school while navigating the pressure to deny parts of her identity. AK spoke about “confidence” as a learned value, explaining that sports gave her the assurance she lacked in classrooms where she felt invisible. Maha highlighted “family pride” in her cultural heritage, particularly in Haitian traditions that reminded her of her mother and reinforced her connection to her roots. These values codes notes became central anchors, words such as *respect*, *acceptance*, and *confidence* sitting at the heart of each cluster, reminding me that identity is not only about external forces but also about what participants held sacred within themselves.

Beyond these personal beliefs, additional values codes emerged that reflected participants’ guiding philosophies about belonging and fairness. Lex valued “honesty” and “authenticity,” particularly when reflecting on her decision to stop hiding her biracial identity in high school. Her insistence on being her full self, despite social risk, showed how authenticity became both a moral and emotional compass. AK discussed “hard work” and “determination” as family values, explaining that her parents taught her to always persist. Maha valued “creativity” and “expression,” describing art and theater as outlets that allowed her to explore identity on her own terms. Cam, meanwhile, connected his love for sports to a belief in “teamwork” and collective achievement, saying that success meant nothing if it came at the expense of others. These values of respect, authenticity, honesty, creativity, and teamwork reflected the participants’ moral

foundations and how they sought connection and justice in environments that often questioned their belonging.

Across participants, 10 core values codes of respect, acceptance, confidence, family pride, honesty, authenticity, hard work, determination, creativity, and teamwork, captured what guided their decisions, relationships, and self-concepts. These values provided a moral through-line that extended beyond specific incidents of racism or belonging. They reflected a collective ethic of perseverance, fairness, and integrity that anchored each participant's response to the world around them. Through values coding, it became clear that while experiences of marginalization shaped participants' stories, their beliefs shaped their resilience. The participants' words and choices demonstrated that identity was not merely something imposed upon them by others but something they consciously constructed through the principles they lived by. This layer of analysis illuminated how deeply held values became both a compass and a source of strength for participants in the ongoing process of biracial identity development while growing up in the South.

In line with Saldaña (2016), I engaged in second cycle coding as a means of reorganizing and refining my initial codes to identify broader patterns and categories that captured the depth of participants' lived experiences. After I completed the first cycle coding described previously, focused on labeling and summarizing significant statements, I moved into second cycle methods with process coding and concept coding to group related codes and develop more abstract themes. This stage allowed me to synthesize participants' stories across interviews and contexts, revealing larger conceptual linkages that aligned with my study's research questions and conceptual framework.

Process Coding. Process coding, as described by Saldaña (2016), is a method that uses gerunds (-ing words) to capture and label actions, interactions, and processes that occur within the data. It emphasizes what participants are doing, experiencing, or feeling over time rather than focusing solely on static concepts or categories. This approach was particularly useful in this study as I explored change and development in identity formation because it highlighted participants' ongoing engagement with their environments and experiences. By focusing on verbs like "negotiating," "adapting," or "resisting," process coding allowed me to trace sequences of behavior and thought, uncovering how participants actively constructed meaning within their lived realities as Black-White biracial individuals who grew up in the South. This lens helped me see identity as fluid and evolving rather than fixed, and showed how participants engaged in continual acts of sense-making, performance, and reflection across time.

This method made visible how participants' stories unfolded through ongoing processes. AK's experience of "navigating beauty standards" captured her shift from straightening her hair in middle school to later embracing her natural curls as an act of self-acceptance. This process connected with broader themes of belonging and self-definition, illustrating how identity construction was rooted in lived, bodily experiences. Maha's process of "learning to speak up" illustrated her growing sense of empowerment, beginning with her tendency to stay silent during classroom discussions about race in high school and culminating in her confidence to lead those conversations in college. Similarly, Cam's "finding a voice in sports" represented how he transformed exclusion in academic spaces into agency on the baseball field, where he developed leadership and visibility. Lex's "hiding her identity" captured a process of suppression and negotiation

and illustrated how she carefully managed what parts of herself to reveal and to whom. These codes overlapped with categories of family silence, belonging, and resilience, and revealed the interconnected nature of identity development for the four participants in this study.

Additional process codes such as “performing belonging,” “balancing expectations,” and “code-switching communication” captured how participants continually adjusted to their surroundings. Lex’s “performing belonging” illustrated her learned ability to blend into different social groups, while still feeling internally divided. AK’s “balancing expectations” referred to how she managed the competing standards of her family, friends, and school, striving to be accepted without betraying either side of her identity. Maha’s “code-switching communication” captured her ability to shift language, tone, and behavior to align with different audiences, an act of survival that also demonstrated emotional intelligence and social awareness. These ongoing actions reflected participants’ mastery of navigating racialized contexts that often demanded adaptation and self-protection. Rather than viewing these as passive responses, process coding revealed them as deliberate, strategic acts of meaning-making and agency.

Several participants also described processes of questioning, reclaiming, and integrating that reflected deeper transformations in how they understood themselves. Cam’s “questioning identity labels” represented his internal conflict with being categorized as Black by peers and teachers, even when he self-identified as biracial. AK’s “reclaiming confidence” described how she moved from internalized shame toward pride by embracing natural beauty and voice. Maha’s “integrating her heritage” reflected her effort to connect her Haitian and American roots into a unified sense of self as she

matured. Lex's "redefining success" showed her transition from equating success with social approval to understanding it as self-acceptance. These process codes together illustrated identity formation for the participants as an iterative, reflective, and often nonlinear process that involved cycles of questioning, reclaiming, and integrating across time and space.

Across the data, I identified 10 process codes: navigating beauty standards, learning to speak up, finding a voice in sports, hiding identity, performing belonging, balancing expectations, code-switching communication, questioning identity labels, reclaiming confidence, and integrating heritage. Each gerund captured movement, struggle, and transformation, and demonstrated that participants were not merely experiencing race but actively engaging with it which illuminated the dynamic nature of biracial identity development for the participants. Through process coding, I was able to trace how participants' identities were continually in motion, shaped by environments that both constrained and empowered them. This method revealed identity as a living, ongoing process marked by adaptation, resistance, and self-definition. By representing participants' actions as evolving rather than fixed, process coding provided a textured understanding of how this study's four Black-White biracial participants constructed, negotiated, and sustained their sense of self within the layered social realities of the South.

Concept Coding. Concept coding (Saldaña, 2016) is a method used to capture broader, more abstract ideas that emerge from qualitative data rather than focusing solely on specific actions or emotions. Instead of describing what participants are doing, concept coding identifies the underlying meanings, theories, or constructs that the data

represent. This approach was especially effective in my study because it allowed me to move from description to interpretation and connected the participants' lived experiences to the theoretical frameworks that guided my research. By labeling data with terms such as "belonging," "identity negotiation," or "cultural capital," concept coding helped me trace how each participant's story reflected larger social and cultural patterns shaping biracial identity formation in the South for them. This process transformed my Post-it wall from a visual map of quotes into a conceptual model of relationships between themes, illustrating how participants' experiences aligned with frameworks like critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model.

Concept coding allowed me to uncover how individual experiences were connected to systemic patterns. Lex's statement that she was told to say she was "just White" linked directly to the concept code "family silence," which reflected how avoidance of race talk served as a strategy for assimilation and protection. I coded this alongside "racial identity suppression," revealing how participants were encouraged to downplay parts of themselves to maintain social harmony within both family and community spaces. Similarly, Cam's narratives about baseball became concept coded as "counterspace," aligning with Yosso's notion of "community cultural wealth" by showing how extracurricular spaces provided support, affirmation, and visibility that classrooms often denied. Maha's reflections on balancing her Haitian, Black, and White heritage became the concept code "biracial identity integration," aligning with Poston's framework by illustrating the process of combining multiple cultural influences into a coherent sense of self. Through these codes, I began to see how participants' daily

experiences mapped onto broader constructs of race, culture, and resistance.

Several other concept codes emerged from repeated patterns across interviews. AK's stories about learning to love her natural hair and reclaiming her confidence became connected to the code "resisting assimilation," emphasizing self-affirmation as a form of resistance against dominant Eurocentric standards. Lex's and Cam's discussions of code-switching and self-presentation developed into the code "navigating social boundaries," reflecting how they as biracial individuals continually adjusted to fit within racially coded expectations. Maha's reflections on her artistic expression evolved into "cultural resilience," connecting her creativity to a larger pattern of survival through art and storytelling. Cam's statement that he had to "build his own crew" became "community formation," aligning with cultural capital theories emphasizing how social networks operate as support systems. These codes revealed how identity construction was tied not only to personal reflection but also to the navigation of social hierarchies and communal belonging.

Across the full data set, 10 primary concept codes: family silence, racial identity suppression, counterspace, biracial identity integration, resisting assimilation, navigating social boundaries, cultural resilience, community formation, belonging, and cultural capital. These concept codes captured how participants' stories reflected both individual experiences and collective realities. Concept coding was instrumental in connecting participants' lived experiences to the broader social and theoretical frameworks that shaped biracial identity while growing up in the South for the participants. Through this lens, I could see how moments of silence, resistance, creativity, and connection were not isolated events but rather reflections of deeply embedded cultural and structural

dynamics. These concept codes provided the scaffolding that allowed me to interpret my participants' narratives not only as personal testimonies but also as contributions to a larger discourse about race, power, and belonging within the Southern context.

The Post-it wall where I mapped out my codes became a living display of the cyclical nature of my analysis. It was never static; notes constantly shifted as I pulled them down, regrouped them, split clusters into subcategories, or combined them into larger categories. Each rearrangement prompted reflection on the participants' words and meanings. Surrounded daily by their voices, I often paused to reread a phrase or sit with a cluster before moving it again. This iterative and embodied process mirrored Saldaña's (2016) assertion that coding is cyclical rather than linear. It kept me in continuous dialogue with the data, ensuring that my categories emerged authentically from the participants' lived experiences rather than being imposed from outside.

From this recursive process, categories began to take shape that reflected both the individuality of each participant's story and the collective threads that connected them. The overlap of in vivo codes such as "What are you?" with emotion codes like "confused" and values codes like "acceptance" revealed a clear category around assimilation pressures. The pairing of process codes such as "navigating silence" with concept codes linked to CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) gave rise to a category centered on family silence, while clusters related to athletics and peer recognition formed a category associated with belonging. By the end of this stage, my Post-it wall had evolved into a thematic map capturing the complexity of growing up Black-White biracial in the South for the four participants. What began as scattered excerpts became organized evidence of how the participants navigated identity, belonging, and family

dynamics. This categorizing process was more than analytic; it was personal and deeply interactive. Through physically engaging with in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding in line with Saldaña's (2016) guidance, I created categories that honored participants' voices while linking them to larger theoretical patterns. This recursive, reflective process laid the foundation for the themes presented in Chapter 5.

As I went through the hundreds of pages of transcripts from the three interviews with each participant, I chose to lock down my codes for the categorizing phase because after generating a large number of in vivo, emotion, values, and process codes, the volume quickly became unwieldy and difficult to navigate. Establishing a stable set of codes allowed me to bring order to the early layers of analysis and ensured that I could begin grouping data in a more intentional and coherent way. By pausing to solidify these codes, I created a manageable structure that prevented the constant expansion and redefinition that felt overwhelming as I was qualitative coding. This step also helped me stay analytically grounded, ensuring that my interpretations were tied to patterns I was noticing routinely from participants' language rather than the sheer abundance of raw codes. Locking down the codes allowed me to move confidently into second-cycle analysis with a clearer sense of direction and purpose. It strengthened the reliability of my process by giving me consistent anchors to return to as I compared narratives across participants. This decision made the analysis more systematic, more organized, and more reflective of the storylines embedded in the data.

Table 3 provides an overview of the categorizing strategies that guided the organization and interpretation of participants' narratives throughout the data analysis process. As detailed in the previous Categorizing Strategies section, both first- and

second-cycle coding methods were used to move from raw data to meaningful analytic categories. Drawing on Saldaña (2016), this table summarizes the five primary coding approaches of in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding, and provides representative examples from the study. Together, these strategies illustrate how participants’ words were systematically examined to identify recurring patterns, shape analytic categories, and align emerging findings with the theoretical frameworks that guided this research.

Table 3

Categorizing Strategies and Example Codes from Data Analysis

Coding Type	Purpose/Definition (Saldaña, 2016)	Example Codes from Dissertation	Category Developed	Theoretical Alignment
In Vivo Coding	Captures participants’ exact words to preserve their voice and emphasize authentic language.	“What are you?”; “Just say you’re White.”; “My hair got talked about more than my homework.”; “I had to be more Black in sports.”; “I became a chameleon.”; “Reading and drawing were my escape.”; “Protect your joy.”; “Be who you are.”	Identity Negotiation and Belonging	BIDM (choice of group categorization); CRT (social labeling and racial performance); CWM (navigational and aspirational capital)
Emotion Coding	Identifies feelings or affective responses expressed by participants.	Embarrassed; Ashamed; Angry; Hurt; Confused; Upset; Frustrated; Happy; Proud; Free; Safe.	Belonging and Exclusion	CRT (emotional labor of racialization); CWM (navigational and aspirational capital)
Values Coding	Highlights beliefs, priorities, and principles that shape participants’ sense of self and relationships.	Respect; Acceptance; Confidence; Authenticity; Resilience; Family pride; Loyalty; Equality; Fitting in.	Resilience and Identity Integration	BIDM (integration phase); CWM (familial and resistance capital)

Coding Type	Purpose/Definition (Saldaña, 2016)	Example Codes from Dissertation	Category Developed	Theoretical Alignment
Process Coding	Uses gerunds (-ing words) to capture ongoing actions and interactions over time.	Navigating beauty standards; Learning to speak up; Finding a voice in sports; Hiding identity; Shutting down conversations; Adapting to spaces; Negotiating belonging; Seeking affirmation.	Negotiating Identity and Voice	BIDM (integration phase); CRT (agency and resistance); CWM (navigational and aspirational capital)
Concept Coding	Labels abstract ideas or constructs that connect individual stories to theoretical frameworks.	Family silence; Assimilation pressures; Counterspace; Cultural capital; Visibility and invisibility; Resilience through self-expression; Identity integration; Belonging and performance.	Family Silence and Cultural Navigation	BIDM (identity synthesis); CRT (silence as racial avoidance); CWM (navigational and aspirational capital)

Note: Codes listed reflect first- and second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2016).

What I gleaned from categorizing, breaking apart, and coding was then strengthened through the use of connecting strategies discussed next. These strategies allowed me to weave together patterns that were not immediately visible in the initial cycles of coding. Together, they provided a more cohesive understanding of how each participant's story fit within the broader patterns emerging across the dataset.

Connecting Strategies

While categorizing strategies allowed me to group codes into broader patterns, the process of connecting strategies deepened my analysis by situating those patterns within the lived experiences of my participants. Maxwell (2013) described connecting as an analytic move that emphasizes relationships and sequences across data, helping the researcher preserve context rather than stripping it away; Committee Research Member Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing also stressed to me that data could not be truly understood

without context, which is what connecting strategies emphasize (L. Schmertzling, personal communication, September 18). Where categorizing let me see the data in terms of similarities and differences across participants, connecting returned me to the flow of each person's story, illuminating how their experiences unfolded over time and across settings. This dual attention to both context and relation is especially vital in narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014; Saldaña, 2016), where the goal is not only to identify themes but also to capture the ways events, relationships, and emotions are intertwined in the fabric of a life.

I relied on connecting strategies described by Maxwell and Miller (2008) as a way of linking codes to one another within the context of participants' stories. For example, in Cam's narrative, initial in vivo codes such as "baseball saved me" and "they saw me as just an athlete" became more than isolated statements once I traced how they connected to emotion codes like "feeling included" and "pressure to perform." By mapping these codes along the chronology of his schooling experiences, I could see how baseball functioned not only as a site of belonging but also as a relational bridge offering him acceptance in predominantly White spaces while simultaneously burdening him with the expectation to assimilate through athletic success. This connecting work helped me preserve the temporal flow of his story while also drawing out the relational consequences of his involvement in sports.

Similarly, in Lex's interviews, connecting strategies revealed how family directives to "just say you're White" intersected with her own emotional responses of confusion and suppression. In isolation, those statements could have been read as simple commands from her White mother and grandmother. However, by connecting them to

values coding around identity and belonging, and later to process codes that marked “shutting down conversations,” I began to see a chain of silences that structured her upbringing. This highlighted how identity suppression was not a single event but an ongoing process that shaped her social interactions, her willingness to disclose, and her broader developmental trajectory. Connecting strategies allowed me to represent this silence as active and patterned rather than incidental, reinforcing how the absence of dialogue in the family context reverberated through her school and peer relationships, as I saw with the other participants, as well.

Maha’s story further illustrated the importance of connecting for me. Her in vivo phrase, “my name made me different,” initially seemed like a single point of difference during her childhood. But once I traced it across her narratives, linking it with emotion codes such as “embarrassment,” “frustration,” and later “ownership,” I recognized the progression of how a moment of early ridicule evolved into a source of resilience and pride in her college years. Connecting her experiences across time highlighted the developmental arc of her identity formation. It also underscored how resilience is not only a trait but a relational and temporal process, unfolding as she navigated different environments. Without connecting strategies, these moments might have remained fragmented; with them, they became part of a coherent narrative thread that illuminated her journey from othering to empowerment.

AK’s experiences offered another example. Early codes like “we didn’t talk about race at home” linked directly to later process codes such as “learning through peers” and “finding mentorship in sports.” Connecting these pieces uncovered a common thread: family silence created a void that peers and mentors eventually filled. Sports became not

only a space of belonging but also a counterbalance to the lack of direct racial affirmation at home. By situating these codes in sequence, I was able to highlight how one context (family silence) directly influenced the significance of another (sports mentorship). Using connecting strategies allowed me to trace the cause-and-effect relationships and the sequence of events in her story, insights that categorizing strategies alone could not fully reveal.

Throughout this analytic stage, I returned repeatedly to Saldaña's (2016) reminder that coding is not the end but the beginning of analysis. Codes are building blocks, but it is through the active linking of those blocks, by connecting them into sequences, networks, and storylines, that meaning deepens. In practice, this meant creating visual maps that traced connections across time and context. On my Post-its coding wall, I displayed participants' quotes chronologically, drawing connections between recurring motifs such as silence, assimilation, mentorship, and belonging. This process helped me see not only what topics were repeated but how they developed, shifted, and intersected throughout the participants' lives.

Connecting strategies also protected the integrity of narrative inquiry by keeping me close to the storied quality of participants' accounts. Rather than flattening their experiences into static categories, connecting encouraged me to retain the narrative flow of who said what, when, and under what circumstances. This was particularly important in honoring the ways participants themselves made sense of their lives. For example, when Lex recounted her college decision-making, she framed it not only in terms of academics but also in relation to her grandmother's insistence on silence about race. By connecting those codes, I was able to reflect how family expectations influenced

educational choices, something that would have been obscured by categorizing alone.

In summary, connecting strategies provided a methodological counterbalance to categorizing. Categorizing brought order to the data, allowing me to detect commonalities and overarching patterns. Connecting returned me to the lived complexity of participants' stories, situating those patterns within the flow of real lives. By moving between these strategies, I could both honor the individuality of each participant and identify the relational, developmental, and structural forces that threaded across them. For a study grounded in narrative inquiry, this dual movement was essential: it allowed me to craft narratives that are at once coherent and richly complex, tied to participants' voices and lives rather than abstracted from them (see Chapter 4).

Data Presentation

To ensure that the stories of my participants were represented with both authenticity and clarity, I chose to present the data in a format that aligns with narrative inquiry and highlights the lived complexity of identity formation. Each participant's story in Chapter 4 was presented chronologically to capture the natural progression of their experiences. However, during the three interviews, participants often moved back and forth in time sharing new experiences, revisiting earlier memories, and clarifying previous discussions as their stories unfolded. This sequencing preserved the temporal and developmental elements of their narratives, showing how early family conversations, school encounters, and peer interactions built upon one another to shape their sense of identity. I presented the data in this way to allow readers to experience participants' journeys as unfolding stories rather than fragmented responses.

Each narrative was written in a warm, personal voice, using in vivo coding to

maintain participants' exact words where possible. This strategy honored Saldaña's (2016) call to keep analysis grounded in participants' own language, ensuring that their words carried forward into the interpretive stages. Emotion and values codes were embedded within the narratives to highlight the affective and moral dimensions of participants' experiences, like moments of pride, shame, belonging, or resistance, that are critical to understanding identity work. Many times, these were stated from my perspective as the narrator but drawn from the data in the transcripts. Interweaving these codes within the life stories provided depth without overshadowing the centrality of participant voice.

Ultimately, my goal in presenting the data was twofold: to preserve the uniqueness of each participant's life while also drawing out the shared patterns that illuminate what it means to grow up Black-White biracial in the South. This approach kept the integrity of narrative inquiry intact, centering participants' voices and experiences while guiding the reader toward the themes that address my research questions and contribute to broader conversations about race, identity, and belonging in Southern schools and communities. In maintaining this balance between honoring individual stories and identifying shared meaning, it was equally essential to ensure that the study's interpretations were credible, dependable, and grounded in rigorous qualitative practice. The next section outlines the strategies I used to establish validity and trustworthiness throughout the research process.

Validity

Maxwell (2013) and Seidman (2019) both emphasized that validity in qualitative research is not guaranteed by simply choosing the right method or strategy. Instead, it

depends on the researcher's ability to recognize potential threats and to put intentional practices in place that ensure findings are trustworthy. Because I was the primary instrument of my study, my positionality and subjectivities were ever present. As Peshkin (1988) stated, my subjectivity is like a garment that I cannot remove. For me, this meant being critically self-aware of how my identity as a White Southern woman, as well as my personal role as the mother of Black and Black-White biracial children, shaped not only my motivations but also my interpretations. Rather than denying this influence, I worked to make it visible and accountable throughout the research process, weaving reflexivity into every stage of design, data collection, and analysis.

Maxwell (2013) identified researcher bias and reactivity as the two central threats to validity. Bias was a particular concern for me because I came to this work not as a detached observer but as a mother, teacher, and advocate. For example, when Lex shared that her White mother and grandmother had instructed her to deny being "mixed" and to say she was "just White" if anyone asked, I immediately felt a visceral reaction as both a parent and a scholar. My instinct was to protect her, to push back against the harm of that instruction. Yet as a researcher, I had to pause, memo my reaction, and return to her words rather than rushing toward my own judgment. My memos became essential in these moments. They allowed me to name my feelings, set them aside, and come back to the data more analytically.

Reactivity was also unavoidable. As Maxwell (2013) explained, the presence of the researcher always influences what participants say and how they say it. In my case, my openness about being the White mother of a Black-White biracial daughter created an immediate layer of trust and rapport. Participants often said things like, "I know you get

it,” or “You’ve probably seen this with your daughter.” This connection helped them feel safe but also risked shaping their responses in ways that mirrored what they thought I wanted to hear. I had to be mindful of this dynamic and worked to balance transparency with restraint. For example, when Maha described how her unique name marked her as different in school and often became a site of teasing, I did not jump in to share my daughter’s experiences, though I could have. Instead, I encouraged her to expand on her own memories and meaning making. By limiting my own story, I kept the focus on my participants, while still communicating empathy through my listening and follow up questions.

According to Peshkin (1988), researchers should remain deliberately attentive to how their subjectivity shapes the research process, as I mentioned earlier when discussing my positionality in Chapter 2. His idea of subjective I’s helped me reflect on the identities most noticeable in my research. Two of my I’s were particularly present: my Mother-of-Children-of-Color I and my People-Are-People I. The first compelled me to feel protective of participants when they shared painful stories, such as AK recounting how teachers often overlooked her unless she excelled in sports, or Cam explaining that he was sometimes called racial slurs by teammates but felt he had to remain silent to stay on the field. As a mother of Black-White biracial children, I wanted to shield them from these experiences; as a researcher, I had to ensure that my protective instinct did not silence or soften their narratives. Instead, I channeled that subjectivity into careful representation, making sure their words were presented faithfully.

My People-Are-People I emerged when I witnessed patterns of inequity across narratives. For instance, multiple participants described how school environments

privileged White comfort over honest conversations about race. Maha's story of teachers mispronouncing or mocking her name, Lex's silence around claiming her Black-White biracial identity, and AK's reliance on sports for affirmation all revealed systemic inequities. My instinct was to frame these immediately as injustice, which of course they are, but I knew I had to let the participants' voices illustrate these patterns rather than imposing my own outrage. Recognizing these I's helped me stay reflexive, documenting my responses in memos and ensuring that the themes that I developed were grounded in participants' accounts rather than filtered solely through my emotions and advocacy.

Seidman's (2019) three interview series was foundational in producing the rich, layered data that supported validity. The structure of three separate sessions including life history, details of experience, and reflection on meaning, created multiple opportunities for participants to clarify, expand, and connect their stories. By the third interview, I observed participants returning to central ideas that had already surfaced earlier, which indicated saturation. For example, AK repeatedly returned to the idea of sports as a space where she finally felt seen and valued, even as other parts of school life made her feel invisible. Lex circled back multiple times to the silence in her family about race and how that shaped her sense of self. Maha's reflections consistently emphasized how her name and cultural background shaped her early awareness of difference. Cam's narrative returned again and again to his experiences of being both hypervisible and invisible in school sports. When participants began revisiting and reinforcing these same topics across interviews, I believed saturation had been achieved.

Saturation was described by Saldaña (2016) as the moment when no new codes or categories are discovered during analysis. In my coding process, I saw this clearly. After

several cycles of coding, the same codes surfaced repeatedly, and no fundamentally new patterns appeared. For instance, codes like “family silence,” “appearance and belonging,” and “sports/extracurriculars as belonging spaces” were so prominent across participants that they became the foundations for core themes. This recursive process of hearing, coding, and re-hearing participants’ stories ensured that the findings were not rushed or prematurely closed, but truly represented the full depth of participants’ meaning making.

To counter threats to validity further, I relied on multiple strategies. Triangulation occurred through the use of multiple interviews, reflexive memos, and analytic comparisons across participants. Memoing, in particular, was essential to documenting how I moved from codes to categories to themes. For example, after coding Cam’s transcripts, I wrote a memo noting how often he framed belonging through sports, which I later connected to AK’s similar emphasis on athletics. These memos became an audit trail that showed my thought process and decisions step by step.

I also engaged in informal peer debriefing with colleagues and mentors. Sharing tentative themes with others allowed me to test whether my interpretations made sense beyond my own lens. For example, when I first identified “family silence” as a key component in participant experience, I worried I might be overemphasizing Lex’s story. In discussing this with peers, I was reminded to look across participants again, which confirmed that silence was indeed a cross-cutting area of experience, also evident in Maha’s story of her parents’ lack of racial dialogue and AK’s reflections on her family normalizing race without discussing it.

I sought to ground every claim in participants’ words to help ensure confirmability and integrity across the study. As the narrator, I often conveyed ideas

through my own interpretive lens, yet those ideas consistently grew out of the participants' voices and the data within their transcripts. My role was to connect, contextualize, and interpret their stories while remaining accountable to the truths they shared. This approach allowed my narrative presence to coexist with their lived experiences, maintaining a balance between researcher interpretation and participant authenticity. Direct quotations are woven throughout the findings so that readers can trace the alignment between data and interpretation. For example, rather than simply stating that Lex felt pressured to deny her Black-White biracial identity, I included her own words: "They told me if anyone asked, I should just say I was White." Similarly, when AK described her experience of recognition through sports, I allowed her phrasing to carry the weight: "On the field, I wasn't half this or half that, I was just AK." These quotations ensured that my interpretations remained anchored in participants' voices and allowed their lived realities to remain at the center of the narrative.

Merriam (1998) explained that transferability is not about making statistical generalizations; instead, it requires offering thick, detailed description so that readers can judge for themselves whether the findings resonate with their own contexts. I provided detailed accounts of each participant's context noting rural schools, predominantly White communities, and multigenerational families, so that readers can judge how the findings may apply to their own settings. The goal was not to claim that all Black-White biracial children share identical experiences, but to offer rich narratives that illuminate common patterns while honoring individual differences.

Finally, ethical practices fortified validity at every stage. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym, and identifying details were carefully altered or omitted.

Confidentiality was reiterated at the start of each interview, and the three interview design itself respected participants' time and emotional well-being by spacing conversations and allowing reflection between sessions. These commitments built the trust necessary for participants to share vulnerable and personal stories, which in turn strengthened the authenticity of the data.

Validity in this study did not rest on eliminating subjectivity but on engaging with it transparently. By acknowledging my positionality, monitoring my subjective I's, addressing bias and reactivity, gathering rich and saturated data, triangulating sources, writing memos, seeking peer input, and privileging participants' voices, I constructed a design that reduced threats to validity. Maxwell (2013) warned that validity always requires attentiveness to possible threats, and my study reflects that attentiveness. Seidman's (2019) interview design, Saldaña's (2016) analytic strategies, and Peshkin's (1991) insights on subjectivity all worked together to create findings that are not only rigorous but also faithful to the lived experiences of my Black-White biracial participants in the South.

Overall, Chapter 3 details the methodological choices that guided this study of Black-White biracial young adults in the South. Grounded in qualitative research, I used narrative inquiry as the most fitting approach to explore how participants defined race, negotiated identity in schools, and made meaning of family and community influences. Following Seidman's (2019) three interview structure allowed participants to share their experiences chronologically and reflectively, while Daiute's (2014) narrative framework supported the construction of rich, layered stories. Data were gathered through a series of in-depth interviews, supplemented with memos that I wrote to track my reflections and

evolving interpretations. This approach kept participants' voices at the center of the study while also requiring me to acknowledge my own positionality and subjectivities as the primary research instrument.

The chapter also describes the analytic and trustworthiness strategies I used to ensure rigor. After transcribing each interview, I engaged in multiple coding cycles, including in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding, to capture both the language and meaning embedded in the narratives. Codes were then categorized and connected to identify themes across participants. Trustworthiness was addressed through credibility strategies such as member checks, peer debriefing, and gathering thick description to allow for transferability. Dependability and confirmability were enhanced by maintaining an audit trail of memos, coding decisions, and analytic shifts, while ethical considerations, including informed consent and confidentiality, were upheld throughout. Taken together, these methods provided a transparent process for honoring participants' stories and for generating findings that reflect both the complexity of their lived realities and the broader implications for educators in the South.

With the methodological foundation established, the focus now turns to the narratives themselves. In Chapter 4, I present the life stories of each participant, constructed from their three interviews and supported by quotes and contextual details. These narratives bring forward their lived experiences in their own words, allowing their voices to remain central as I trace the ways they navigated identity, family, and schooling in the South. By moving from methods to stories, the study shifts from the procedural to the personal, offering a window into the complex realities my participants shared.

Chapter IV

NARRATIVES

Narrative inquiry, grounded in Seidman's (2019) three-interview series and Daiute's (2014) narrative framework, was selected for this study because stories allow us to see how individuals make meaning of their lives across time, place, and context (Daiute, 2014). For the participants in my study, four young adults who identify as Black-White biracial and who grew up in the South, this approach made it possible to explore how early childhood, family influences, and schooling experiences informed their present understandings of identity and belonging. To capture the depth and nuance of my participants' experiences, I used Seidman's (2019) three-interview approach. This structure allowed participants the time and space to reflect on their lives in layers: beginning with their background and early experiences, moving into the details of their present circumstances, and finally making meaning of those experiences as a whole. Because Black-White biracial identity was shaped across family, school, and community contexts for participants, the three-interview format provided a rhythm that encouraged them to revisit and expand on key moments, leading to reflective narratives. This approach also aligned with the relational nature of narrative inquiry, fostering trust and allowing participants' voices to flow authentically.

Stories hold particular value in the context of this research. They illuminated the complexity of identity development for the four participants in ways that numbers or

isolated snapshots cannot. As Daiute (2014) noted, life stories offer an in-depth understanding of the whole person. The narratives shared here carry two important qualities: they provided intimate portraits of how the four Black-White biracial participants grew up in predominantly White spaces while pushed back against deficit-oriented or monoracial framings of race in the Southern schools and communities of their upbringing. These accounts, rooted in lived experience, become counter-stories that challenge dominant assumptions and give voice to perspectives often overlooked in educational discourse (Gaither & Rozek, 2020).

The narratives that follow were also interpreted through a conceptual framework grounded in critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model. Together, these lenses highlight both the systemic inequities participants encountered and the cultural assets and developmental processes that shaped their responses. CRT acknowledges that racism is woven into the structures of Southern schools and communities; CWM reframes participants' strategies for survival and success as strengths rather than deficits; and Poston's (1990) BIDM offers a way of seeing how identity shifts across stages of personal growth.

Each participant's story is presented with a brief biographical introduction, followed by their narrative, and then my researcher's reflection. The reflections draw from my analytic memos and are intended to connect individual experiences to broader patterns, as well as to acknowledge my own positionality in the interpretive process. In honoring the stories of AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha, I sought not to impose conclusions but to let their lived realities stand as meaningful knowledge in themselves.

Ultimately, these narratives revealed both the pain and the resilience of growing up Black-White biracial in the South for the participants. They also illustrated the subtle ways schools, families, and communities communicated messages of belonging or exclusion, sometimes simultaneously. By listening carefully to participants' voices, future educators might better understand the complexities of Black-White biracial identity and the urgency of creating more inclusive educational environments.

Please note that although participants themselves drew attention to their physical appearances and traits throughout the interviews, as reflected in the following narratives, I intentionally chose not to describe their physical features in my initial introductions. This decision was made out of respect for the deeply personal and often painful ways in which all four participants shared that their appearances had been a source of unwanted attention, judgment, or misunderstanding throughout their lives. Each described experiences in which their racialized features became the primary lens through which others saw them, often overshadowing their personalities, talents, and individuality. To avoid replicating that same reduction, I deliberately refrained from framing them through physical description. Instead, I sought to honor their full humanity by centering their voices, experiences, and self-understandings rather than the external gaze that had so often defined them. In doing so, I hoped to resist the tendency to objectify or essentialize biracial identity through appearance and instead privilege the interior narratives that reveal who they are beyond what others see.

AK

AK, a 22-year-old Black-White biracial woman from Atlanta, Georgia, grew up in a home where her Black father and White mother were still married, with her younger

sister and brother, and where race was rarely discussed yet constantly present in subtle ways. Her parents' silence around racial identity coexisted with visible differences in how the world responded to her appearance. Throughout her childhood, she found refuge in sports, which became both a protective shield and a source of affirmation. Her story revealed the tensions she experienced of navigating beauty standards, assimilation pressures, and family dynamics while slowly developing confidence and self-advocacy in adulthood.

AK's Life Story

AK was born into a home where love was steady, but conversations about race were quietly absent. Her mother, who was White, and her father, who was Black, did not emphasize racial differences inside the household. For them, her identity as biracial seemed ordinary, unremarkable, almost invisible in daily life. "It was really never talked about," she reflected, noting that her parents appeared to view her background as normal, a fact so natural that it did not require naming. Within this silence, AK grew up believing her mixed identity was simply part of who she was, not something in need of explanation.

Her family was close. She grew up alongside an older brother and younger sister, all children of the same parents. The stability of two parents who remained together and a household filled with siblings provided her with a sense of belonging and security. Yet even in this warmth, the quiet omission of race meant she had little language to describe or make sense of differences that the outside world would later force her to recognize.

From the time she was 2 years old, AK was enrolled in a private school where she would remain until she graduated at 18. The school was small and familiar; everyone knew each other. Yet one fact shaped her experience more than any other: throughout

most of her childhood, there were almost no other Black students at her school. “There was maybe like three Black people in the whole school until we got to like junior year of high school,” she recalled.

At the time, she did not fully register the absence. As a young child, she went about her school days without focusing on racial categories. “I didn’t really think about it,” she admitted, explaining that only in hindsight did she recognize that her friendships, teachers, and daily interactions were almost entirely White. Though she occasionally visited her father’s side of the family, the relatives she knew best were on her White mother’s side. This pattern reinforced her immersion in a world where whiteness defined the norm.

In her earliest years, AK did not feel overtly excluded. Teachers praised her as a strong student, noting her diligence and achievement. She worked hard, consistently earning high grades, and was often described as an “A-plus student.” Her friendships stretched across social groups; she was not among the most popular students, but neither was she isolated. She remembered herself as the kind of person who could talk to everyone, and yet, subtle moments began to shape her awareness that she was different. One of the earliest realizations came not through schoolwork or teachers, but through the tender world of childhood crushes.

You know, when you're younger you want, you have all these crushes, you want boys to have crushes on you. I was never that girl that boys had crushes on because it was always the White girls, and I was always like the only Black friend of the group. So. I think I felt left out in that area. As I got older, I realized like, oh, maybe it's because I'm Black or because of my hair. I remember trying to

straighten my hair to look like all the other girls. That's when I started realizing how different I actually was.

Looking back now that she is older, she has connected this exclusion to her appearance and shared further that she has often wondered just how much her race played a role in being overlooked when she was younger.

These quiet realizations built gradually. As she moved into later elementary years, she began to experiment with her appearance, hoping to mirror the girls who seemed effortlessly desired. Hair became a central part of this process. Like many biracial girls, she wrestled with its difference from her peers' straight hair. She often asked her mother to straighten her bangs before school, trying to make them fall neatly like the other girls.

I always wanted to straighten my hair. I remember in elementary school, I always had my mom straighten my bangs before school because I wanted my hair to look like all the other girls. It's not that anyone said anything to me, it was just how I felt. I needed to look this way so I could fit in with my friends. It wasn't until later that I realized how much I was trying to blend in and how much of myself I was hiding just to make other people comfortable.

Straightening was not forced on her by teasing or cruelty; rather, it was an internal decision shaped by a longing to blend in. Still, the ritual spoke volumes about the subtle assimilation pressures she felt even as a child.

If school rarely named race, home was equally silent. Dinner conversations did not address difference. Her parents never sat her down to explain what it might mean to be both Black and White. To AK, this silence translated into an unspoken message: that being biracial was simply fine, not worth worrying about, but also not something to be

celebrated. “We saw it as a normal thing, like that it was okay,” she said simply.

Her extended family offered a different kind of quiet support. Though she did not see her father’s side often, her aunt on his side became an important figure. When questions about hair care arose, her mother turned to this aunt for guidance. “She talked to my dad’s sister, I definitely think she talked to her the most about that kind of stuff,” AK explained. This connection, though somewhat distant, offered her mother a bridge into a world of textured hair, braiding, and products that otherwise felt unfamiliar. It also gave AK a subtle reminder that she had resources beyond her immediate household in people who could affirm her difference as something worth tending and learning.

As she grew older, the effort to belong became more conscious. By middle school, AK was highly attuned to the ways her appearance set her apart. Straightening her hair became habitual, a nearly daily practice. She felt pressure to look like her White friends, even if no one explicitly demanded it. This was less about cruelty and more about subtle standards of beauty. Her peers did not mock her, but their admiration consistently flowed toward White girls, reinforcing the belief that to be seen as beautiful meant to mirror their style.

Assimilation extended beyond hair. AK also worked hard to keep up with the trends her friends followed like the slang they used, the clothes they wore, the shows and music they discussed. She admitted that much of this was typical for any adolescent wanting to “stay in the loop,” but for her, the stakes felt higher. She wanted to ensure she could move through her White friend group smoothly, without standing out as too different.

Sports, especially softball, gave her a space where belonging came more easily.

On the field, her talent spoke louder than appearance. She excelled in travel softball, often playing with predominantly White teams but earning respect and affirmation through her skill. Softball became both an outlet and a shield, a place where her identity as a strong athlete overpowered questions about race.

Despite her success in school and sports, moments of difference occasionally surfaced. By late middle school, she began to hear new conversations as more Black students entered her private school, often recruited for athletics. She recalled classmates being curious, sometimes asking inappropriate questions about language and culture. Students wondered aloud if they could use the N-word, sometimes even asking her permission. “Why are you asking me?” she remembered thinking, bewildered at being positioned as the authority on Blackness.

Though these instances did not define her middle school years, they marked a shift. For the first time, AK began to notice that her peers viewed her through a racial lens, whether she wanted them to or not. Her identity, once silently normalized in her family and unremarked in childhood classrooms, she shared was now becoming visible. These moments planted seeds of awareness that would continue to grow as AK entered high school.

By the time AK reached high school, she was well established in her private school community. After more than a decade in the same environment, she knew everyone, and everyone knew her. The small size of the school created a sense of familiarity that shielded her from some of the harsher treatment other biracial students might have encountered in larger, less personal settings. “Everybody knew everybody,” she explained, suggesting that the comfort of continuity allowed her to move through her

days without feeling constantly marked as different. Still, the world around her was beginning to change. More Black students, particularly boys, began attending the school, often recruited to play basketball or football. Their presence altered the dynamics of the student body in noticeable ways. Suddenly, race was not only a quiet undercurrent but a visible factor in how peers interacted. For AK, this was the moment when conversations about difference became unavoidable for her.

She recalled classmates asking awkward questions like “Can I say the N-word?” around you, often justifying it by pointing out that another Black student had supposedly given them permission. These encounters left her unsettled. “Why are you asking me?” she remembered thinking, both confused and frustrated at being pulled into conversations she had not invited. Her childhood sheltering was slipping away, replaced by a dawning recognition that her biracial identity would always be noticed, even when she wanted to remain invisible.

Amid these shifts, softball remained her grounding force. By high school, she was a standout athlete, widely recognized as one of the driving forces behind her team’s success. Teachers and peers alike saw her not only as a strong student but also as the primary starter who had elevated the softball program. “They all supported me in that,” she said with quiet pride. On the field, she found belonging. Her talent commanded respect, giving her a kind of shield against exclusion. Athletic spaces allowed her to transcend some of the social pressures of race and appearance that lingered in hallways and classrooms. Teammates cheered her skill; coaches affirmed her leadership. For AK, softball was more than a sport; it was a space where her identity was centered on ability rather than difference. Yet even within sports, she noticed that race was never entirely

absent. Most of her teammates were White, and though she bonded deeply with them, she remained one of the few players of color. Outside of the game, she still felt pressure to align with White norms of beauty and behavior. The field gave her recognition, but she explained it did not erase the assimilation demands she encountered in everyday life.

High school was also the time when AK's relationship with her hair became most complex. For years she had straightened it, convincing herself that only by mimicking the silky locks of her White peers could she belong. She remembered straightening her bangs in elementary school, then moving on to full straightening routines in middle and early high school. The ritual was not born out of direct cruelty but from subtle comparisons. "Everybody always commented more so when I would straighten it," she noted, remembering how friends seemed more excited by her hair when it resembled theirs.

By her freshman year, though, she began to feel weary of the constant effort. Slowly, she transitioned toward embracing her natural curls. It was a quiet act of resistance, but a powerful one. Wearing her hair curly was not just about style; it was about learning to accept herself. She recalled the moment as an epiphany, as she shared:

I was always like, why is my hair different? Why can't my hair be as long as theirs? I straightened it so much because I wanted to fit in. But once I started wearing my hair curly, I think that was the first time I really started to accept myself as biracial. I love my curly hair now, it's one of the things that makes me, me. I feel like that boosted my confidence, because it was the first time I stopped trying to hide and just started to love who I am.

Her confidence grew as she embraced authenticity. Though her White peers commented less when she wore her natural curls, she herself felt stronger, freer, and more aligned

with who she truly was. It was a turning point, she stated, one that would set the stage for deeper self-acceptance in college.

High school also exposed AK to experiences outside her insular White friend group. She became close with a Hispanic classmate and was invited to her Quinceañera. For AK, the event was eye-opening, and she saw it as a chance to immerse herself in a cultural celebration unlike anything she had experienced before. “That was definitely something different for me,” she said, describing how she began spending time at her friend’s home, eating her family’s food, and observing traditions.

These moments sparked curiosity about cultures beyond her own, even if she did not yet have the time or resources to dive deeper. They revealed that identity could be celebrated rather than hidden, and they hinted at the diverse world she would later encounter in college. Still, despite this exposure, her own family remained largely silent about race. She continued to navigate her identity alone, with little explicit guidance from parents. Much of her adolescence was spent balancing school, sports, and friendships, leaving her little time for intentional exploration of her Black-White biracial heritage.

As her school became more diverse, so did the questions from peers. Some were curious about her hair, her skin tone, or the way she spoke. Others used stereotypes to categorize new Black students as “ghetto,” comments that AK recognized as thinly veiled judgment. “They weren’t open to a different culture,” she explained, describing how her peers’ curiosity was often laced with condescension. For AK, these moments were disorienting. On one hand, she was deeply rooted in the White social world she had always known. On the other, she was beginning to see how her peers treated students of color as spectacles rather than equals. She herself was sometimes drawn into these

dynamics where she was not overtly rejected but subtly positioned as the “different one” in her friend group. Her response was often to downplay difference, to “fly under the radar” by keeping up with slang, trends, and social media. Code-switching was less about changing her speech and more about adapting her interests and behaviors to ensure she fit in. She managed this balancing act well enough to avoid conflict, but it left her with little room to explore her identity on her own terms.

By the end of high school, AK had built a strong reputation: an excellent student, a standout athlete, a dependable friend. Yet beneath these achievements was a growing awareness that her Black-White biracial identity carried weight in how others viewed her, in the choices she made about her hair and appearance, and in the subtle exclusions she sometimes felt.

High school did not bring the explicit racism or overt hostility that other Black-White biracial peers might have faced for AK. Instead, it confronted her with quiet pressures like the desire to conform, the longing to be chosen, and the balancing act of fitting in while slowly learning to stand apart. Sports particularly gave her confidence, culture gave her glimpses of possibility, and hair became a site of transformation. Together, these experiences laid the foundation for the more profound shifts that would come in college, when AK would encounter diversity in ways she had never known and finally begin to claim her identity with pride.

When AK left her small private school and entered college, she stepped into an environment unlike any she had ever known. After nearly 2 decades of moving in spaces that were overwhelmingly White, she suddenly found herself surrounded by a diversity of students and experiences. It was, in her words, like “a whole other world” opening up

before her. The shift was both exhilarating and disorienting. For the first time, she encountered peers who celebrated their racial and cultural identities openly, rather than minimizing or silencing them. She met classmates who wore their natural hair proudly, who embraced traditions and languages from their families, and who spoke freely about race and belonging. This openness contrasted sharply with her earlier years, when race was barely acknowledged at school and rarely discussed at home.

AK quickly realized how sheltered she had been. While she had never experienced overt exclusion in childhood, much less open racism, she now recognized that her understanding of race had been limited, shaped by an environment where she was usually “the only one” and where difference was treated as something to assimilate rather than embrace. College forced her to rethink not only how others saw her, but how she saw herself.

One of the most powerful transformations in college centered on her hair, a lifelong marker of difference for Black-White biracial individuals. By the time she arrived on campus, she had already begun to step away from constant straightening. In college, surrounded by peers who wore curls, braids, and natural textures with pride, she felt more comfortable than ever embracing her own. “I love my curly hair now,” she said with a huge smile, reflecting on how far she had come from the girl who begged her mother to straighten her bangs before school. Her curls became more than a style; they became a symbol of self-acceptance. Each day she wore her natural hair was a statement that she no longer needed to conform to White beauty standards to belong. The change brought a boost in confidence, visible not only in how she looked but in how she carried herself. “It boosted my confidence and made me feel like I was beautiful just the way I

am,” she admitted, describing how her decision to be authentic gave her a sense of pride she had long been searching for since middle school.

The contrast with her younger sister’s experience also stood out to her. By the time her sister reached adolescence, their mother had learned much more about how to care for curly hair, seeking out products and resources that had been absent when AK was younger. Visiting home, AK noticed shelves filled with new conditioners and gels tailored to textured hair. “Every time I go home, I see different products all the time,” she laughed, recognizing her mother’s growth and the ways it reflected a broader acceptance of their Black-White biracial identity within the family.

As she adjusted to college life, AK also reflected on how others perceived her. She recalled that as a teenager, compliments often revolved around her appearance: her curls, her skin tone, her “difference.” In college, those comments continued, but she processed them in new ways. At times in high school, it felt flattering; at other times, it felt objectifying, as if she were a novelty rather than a person. “I feel like I got complimented more,” she explained about entering college, acknowledging the double-edged nature of being noticed for features tied to race, but noting how it felt affirming and positive now that she was attending classes and social events with so many teammates and peers that were also diverse like her.

Instead of internalizing these comments as she once might have, she began to view them critically. She realized that while society’s acceptance of biracial people had grown and indeed, she now saw more people who looked like her than ever before, biases and stereotypes still lingered. She noticed how quickly people commented on how much darker she became in the summer, treating her tan lines or skin tone shifts as something

worth pointing out. At first, these remarks irritated her. Over time, she came to shrug them off. “Don’t let other people’s comments affect you in any negative way,” she concluded, turning the constant observation of her body into a lesson in resilience.

Softball remained an important part of AK’s college life, but her identity was no longer defined solely by the sport. While athletics had once been her primary refuge in White spaces, in college she found affirmation in broader communities. She was no longer just the star player on a mostly White team; she was part of a campus where multiple cultures intersected, where Black-White biracial identity was neither rare nor invisible. This shift allowed her to grow into herself in new ways. She became more confident in speaking about her experiences, more comfortable in claiming the fullness of her identity, and more assured in spaces where difference was not erased but embraced. College gave her the freedom to experiment with self-expression, to build friendships across lines of race and culture, and to realize that her story carried value beyond the quiet effort to fit in.

Reflecting on her journey, AK often returned to the silence of her childhood home. She did not fault her parents, recognizing that their decision not to emphasize race may have come from a place of love by presenting a belief that treating Black-White biracial identity as normal was enough, but she now understands that the absence of conversations around race left her unprepared for the realities of navigating a racialized world. She had to figure much of it out on her own.

Her experiences led her to offer advice for others. To young Black-White biracial students, she says: learn to love yourself. Do not allow comments about hair, skin tone, or appearance to define your worth. “People will always have opinions, but your identity

belongs to you,” she stated firmly. To teachers and counselors, she urges: make space for conversations. She cautioned, “Do not assume that silence from Black-White students means comfort.” AK stressed that students need affirmation that their identities are valid, celebrated, and worth naming. Her message is clear: acceptance starts within, but schools and families play an essential role in supporting that journey.

Now, as a young adult, AK speaks about her identity with warmth and assurance. She no longer sees her difference as a burden to hide, but as a strength to carry. She has learned that belonging does not require assimilation, and that authenticity is far more powerful than conformity. The girl who once felt overlooked in crushes and friendships because she was “the only Black friend” has grown into a woman who celebrates the fullness of her Black-White biracial identity. The teenager who straightened her hair to blend in now wears her curls proudly. The student who once remained silent about race now offers advice to others about navigating identity with confidence.

AK’s story is one of quiet resilience not marked by dramatic acts of resistance, but by small, steady choices to accept herself and claim her voice. Her journey from childhood silence to college confidence illustrated the complex, layered process of growing up Black-White biracial in the South, and it reminds educators, peers, and families alike that identity is not something to erase or flatten, but something to nurture, honor, and embrace.

My Reflection: AK

When AK reflected on her life so far, she often compared the innocence of her early years to the awareness she carries now. As a child, her Black-White biracial identity was normalized in the silence of her family home and invisible in the classrooms of her

private school. She was sheltered from overt racism, but also woefully unprepared for the subtle ways it would shape her experiences. “It was just really never talked about,” she remembered of her childhood. That silence felt comfortable at the time, but in hindsight, she recognizes the absence of language and conversation left her to make sense of her identity largely on her own.

Her adolescence deepened this awareness. High school gave her new perspectives as more students of color arrived at her school, yet those experiences were filtered through peers’ curiosity and judgment. She was asked questions she could not have imagined as a child like “Can I say the N-word?” and suddenly realized how others viewed her as a representative of Blackness, even when she did not claim that role. These moments were not always hostile, but they were exhausting, pressing her into a position she never sought.

College provided the breakthrough. For the first time, she encountered a community where diversity was abundant and celebrated. It was in this setting that she began to embrace her natural hair, her heritage, and her confidence. “I love my curly hair now,” she said with pride. The transformation was not instant, but each small step of letting go of straightening, accepting compliments without overanalyzing them, finding affirmation in peers who shared her journey all moved AK toward a stronger, more assured self.

AK’s resilience has not come from dramatic confrontations but from the quiet work of learning to love herself in spaces where she often felt othered. She remembers the sting of being overlooked in childhood crushes, the longing to fit in by straightening her bangs, the subtle comments about her skin tone. Each of these moments could have

chipped away at her confidence, yet over time, they became reminders of her strength. Her ability to excel academically and athletically gave her anchors of belonging. Teachers admired her diligence; teammates respected her skill. These spaces affirmed her worth even when social dynamics left her questioning herself. In this way, sports and school achievement functioned not only as accomplishments but as shields against the insecurities of assimilation.

By adulthood, these layers of experience had taught her that self-acceptance is both a personal act and a daily practice. She has learned to view comments about her appearance not as judgments to internalize, but as reflections of other people's limited perspectives. She has come to see that confidence does not mean ignoring race, but rather embracing it as an integral part of her identity.

One of the most powerful themes in AK's reflections is her deep desire to encourage younger Black-White biracial students. If she could speak to them directly, her message would be simple yet profound: "Learn to love yourself the way you are, because people are going to make comments no matter what." She would remind them that hair, skin tone, and appearance are not measures of worth, and she would urge them to resist the pressure to conform to someone else's standards of beauty or belonging. Instead, she stated she would encourage them to embrace the very differences that may sometimes make them feel overlooked, because those differences are also what will one day make them strong, unique, and proud. To those who are just beginning to navigate the complexities of identity, she would emphasize patience. Self-acceptance does not happen overnight. It grows with time, with experiences, with supportive relationships, and with the courage to be authentic.

Equally important to AK are the lessons her story offers educators, counselors, and schools. While she was never treated poorly by her teachers and often thrived in her private school environment, the lack of open conversation about race left her without the tools to process her identity. She emphasized that silence is not neutrality. When educators avoid discussions about race, they may believe they are sparing students from discomfort, but in truth, they leave them unprepared to navigate the inevitable questions and comments they will encounter. AK urged school leaders to create intentional spaces where biracial students can share their experiences and where their identities are acknowledged and celebrated rather than overlooked. She also highlighted the importance of representation. For years, she was one of only a handful of students of color in her entire school. While she managed to succeed academically and socially, the lack of peers who shared her experiences left her isolated in ways she did not fully recognize until later. Schools, she believes, must intentionally hire diverse staff, include diverse literature, and showcase diverse role models so that students like her can see themselves reflected.

Finally, she stressed the need for cultural awareness among teachers. Simple acts like learning how to support a child with curly hair, recognizing the microaggressions in peers' comments, and affirming the value of all identities can make a powerful difference. These gestures may seem small, but to a biracial child navigating questions of belonging, they signal acceptance and care. Teachers do not need to have all the answers, but they do need to be open, attentive, and willing to learn. AK believes that when educators take the time to notice and validate students' identities, they help create a school culture where difference is not just tolerated but embraced, allowing students to

grow with confidence rather than in silence.

In our sessions, AK spoke with confidence about her identity, not as something to defend but as something to share. She knows that being Black-White biracial in the South means carrying complexity where she is at times invisible yet at times hypervisible, but she no longer sees that complexity as a burden. Instead, she views it as a gift, one that allows her to navigate multiple worlds and contribute a perspective that others cannot. Her journey from childhood silence to adult advocacy reflects not only her own growth but also the resilience of Black-White biracial identity itself. She has lived the questions, felt the pressures, and carried the insecurities, yet she emerged with a voice that is steady, authentic, and strong. In telling her story, AK “hopes that other Black-White biracial children will find themselves reflected, and that teachers and communities will listen closely.” Her life is a reminder that identity is not static or simple; it is layered, evolving, and deeply personal. And when supported with affirmation and understanding, it becomes a source of pride and strength.

Next, Cam’s story offered another window into the complexities of growing up biracial in the South for participants. His experiences, shaped by life in a small town and the steady influence of his White mother, revealed how belonging was often negotiated through both solitude and sports. Baseball, in particular, became the place where questions of identity, recognition, and resilience quietly converged for him.

Cam

Cam, a 19-year-old college athlete raised in a small town in the Florida Panhandle, described his Black-White biracial identity as both a challenge and a source of strength. Raised by his White mother and surrounded exclusively by his White family

members until college, Cam grew up as an only child in the same home he had known his entire life; he was separated from his father until his senior year of high school. In communities where racial categories were often rigid, he frequently encountered others' attempts to define him before he could define himself. Baseball emerged as a central anchor offering recognition, belonging, and a space where his identity felt less questioned and more valued. Cam's narrative captured the ongoing tension between invisibility and hypervisibility, while it also highlighted how mentorship and peer relationships shaped his growing confidence and understanding of self.

Cam's Life Story

Cam grew up in Red Hills County, Florida, a small and tightly knit Southern community where everyone seemed to know each other's grandparents, cousins, and Little League scores. His earliest memories were shaped by the rhythms of this place, its fishing trips and church potlucks, and by the love of his mother who raised him largely within her White family. From the beginning, Cam understood himself as different, even if those differences were not openly spoken about at home. His mother loved him fiercely, but race was not something they discussed openly. "My mom loved me loud - field trips, late-night projects, all of it - but she was scared of the conversations. Her way of protecting me sometimes meant pretending danger wasn't there." That silence meant that, as a boy, Cam absorbed both the deep affirmation of her love and the quiet confusion of facing the outside world without a script.

Some of his first memories of realizing he was different happened in school. As early as the playground years, peers pointed out his skin and hair, making him acutely aware of how others saw him. He remembered one classmate asking why his skin looked

“dirty” and another reaching out to jab at his curls with a pencil, laughing that they felt like a Brillo pad. Instead of stopping it, the teacher joined in. “She actually ran her hand across my head and told the class how thick my hair was. I tried to laugh it off, but I felt like a pet in a classroom. That was the day I figured out that my hair would get talked about more than my homework.”

Moments like these accumulated, shaping how Cam moved through childhood spaces. He noticed how much people wanted to place him in a category, to pin down his identity for themselves. On the bus, peers debated whether he was “Mexican or mixed,” speaking about him as though he were a puzzle to be solved. “It wasn’t mean exactly, just ignorant, but it makes you hyper-aware, like you’re a multiple-choice question people want to answer for fun.” Although many of these encounters were delivered casually or even jokingly, they stung, leaving Cam with the sense that he was always being evaluated and explained.

At home, he felt loved but sometimes uncertain. His White family embraced him, but comments about his appearance made him wonder about his place. “My mom’s side always loved me, but there was an unspoken difference. Comments about my hair or skin tone would come up, not like in a mean way, but enough that I noticed.” Cam felt that his mother never intended harm, and her protectiveness gave him stability, but she often avoided the harder conversations about race. Adults around him framed his father’s absence as “complicated,” leaving Cam to grow up piecing together a story from fragments, photos, and silences.

By the time he reached middle school, Cam’s awareness of difference had sharpened. He recalled vividly a moment in eighth grade when he was waiting after

practice for his mother to pick him up. A peer asked, “So what are you, exactly?” in a way that was half curious, half skeptical. Before he could answer, another boy cut in: “He’s not really Black. He just tans good.” The group laughed, but Cam felt the sting, as he shared with me:

That night I looked in the mirror and tried to figure out what part of me they were seeing or not seeing. I realized I’d been switching myself up depending on who I was with: I’d talk and act one way with my White friends and another way when I had chances to be around Black family at reunions Mom would let me attend. It felt like I had these closets of selves and I kept changing outfits.

That realization planted something inside him. He did not yet have the vocabulary of “code-switching” or “biracial identity development,” but he knew he did not want to keep splitting himself in two, as he stated to me:

That was the first time I told myself I didn’t want to split like that forever. I still didn’t have the words I know now like code-switching, mixed identity, all that, but I knew I wanted to be the same me in the classroom, in the dugout, and at church.

The middle school years were a turning point, a time when Cam first began to voice, even if only to himself, that he was both Black and White and that he did not want to keep being forced into choosing. Even so, these years were difficult. The South, with all its warmth and familiarity, also bore contradictions that Cam could not ignore. Confederate flags fluttered from fishing boats on the nearby river, even as neighbors showed kindness and hospitality during storms or power outages. As he put it, “The South will say, “bless your heart,” and then call the cops. It’s polite and mean at the same

time.” These contradictions taught Cam that belonging in North Florida was always provisional; offered generously in some moments, questioned sharply in others.

High school became the next defining chapter in Cam’s life. If middle school had been marked by questions and painful realizations, then high school was where he began to find spaces of belonging. Baseball was at the center of it all. For Cam, the game was more than a sport. It was a lifeline, a place where performance mattered more than appearance, where being on the team gave him a role and an identity that could not be reduced to skin color. “Baseball saved me, honestly. The first time I put on the Fighting Tigers jersey, I felt like I didn’t have to explain myself; I just had to hit the cutoff man. In the dugout, dirt doesn’t care what you are; it just sticks.”

On the field, he became the center fielder, sprinting across the grass, reading the ball off the bat, and learning to trust his instincts. There was freedom in that role, a kind of certainty he could not always find in classrooms or community spaces. He discovered that the game itself was an education. “I played center field which is a lot of running, a lot of reading the ball off the bat, which is how I learned to read people, too.” Yet even within this sanctuary, racism found its way in. Away games often brought jeers from the stands, reminders that his presence on the field was seen through a racial lens. “There was racial stuff for sure. I had away crowds shouting ‘Lock him up!’ when I stole second, or a coach from another county calling me ‘fast for a mixed kid,’ like speed had a race.” These moments could not erase the safety he felt with his own teammates, but they underscored how conditional acceptance could be beyond the dugout.

Inside his team, though, Cam found something rare: a group of peers who defended him before he even had to speak. “We had rules: You mess with one, you mess

with all. When a teammate shut down a slur before I even heard it, that's what belonging felt like." His catcher in particular became a steady ally, someone who not only shared the field with him but also shielded him from the weight of constant questioning. "My catcher in high school never let anybody talk crazy to me. If someone said I wasn't 'really Black,' he'd be like, 'Then why'd you throw him a fastball like that?'"

Baseball also gave him some of his most cherished memories, moments that became metaphors for identity itself. He recalled one district semifinal, tied in the bottom of the seventh. His coach gave him the bunt sign but whispered that it was only if the third baseman was asleep. Reflecting on that pivotal moment that shaped his understanding of self-trust, he recalled:

First pitch, he's asleep. I drop a drag bunt and beat it by half a step. Crowd's yelling, their pitcher's rattled, and our cleanup hits a sac fly to win it. After the dogpile, Coach says, "You trusted your read." That's what baseball taught me about identity: trust your read on who you are, even if the world's playing you to pull.

High school classrooms were different. Unlike the safety of the dugout, academic spaces often left him wary. He described how he carefully adjusted his voice, words, and demeanor depending on the teacher. "With some teachers, I kept my answers tight and proper so I wouldn't get labeled 'loud' or 'emotional.' With certain friend groups, I let more slang out and didn't explain every reference." These daily adjustments became a form of survival. He knew instinctively how to keep from drawing too much attention in ways that might be misinterpreted, but it left him feeling fractured at times. At his part-time job in a hardware store, he felt those same pressures. Customers looked twice, some

surprised by his politeness, others surprised by his presence. “Yes, ma’am. No, sir. Slow smile. Hands visible. Clean hoodie. That’s survival and customer service rolled together.” He understood early on that his body carried stories for others, and he learned to manage how people read those stories.

Still, there were moments of affirmation, spaces where he felt fully himself. One came when a friend’s cousin took him to a Black barbershop in a nearby metropolitan area. For Cam, it was a revelation. “That was the first time I looked in the mirror and thought, ‘Oh, that’s me.’ Nobody asked ‘what are you?’ They asked, ‘You want a part, young blood?’ That day stitched something back onto me I didn’t know I was missing,” he reflected. In that small shop, with clippers buzzing and men trading stories, he felt a belonging that classrooms had not offered him.

The contrast between spaces could be dizzying. In one setting, he was reduced to a curiosity or stereotype; in another, he was affirmed without needing to explain himself. He carried both realities, learning to shift, to adapt, and to survive, and yet, beneath the shifting, he held onto his growing determination not to split himself in two forever.

As Cam moved further into high school, he began to grow more conscious of how race shaped his experiences both on and off the field. The contradictions of the South pressed in on him constantly. On one hand, his home county was a close-knit community where people came together for football games, fish fries, and Sunday services. On the other, it was a place where he told me he saw Confederate flags everywhere and where jokes about race were slipped into classrooms as if they were harmless. “Red Hills’ small. Folks know your grandparents and your Little League stats. That closeness is a blessing and a trap,” he shared during one session with heaviness in his voice.

It was during this time that Cam also became more vocal about race, testing his voice against the silences with which he had grown up. He remembered the first time he explicitly named racism in front of peers in high school. “The first time I said, ‘That joke was about my race,’ it was awkward, but it made people pause. Sometimes they doubled down, but sometimes they apologized. Either way, I wasn’t carrying it alone.” Naming these moments became a way of reclaiming power and refusing to let ignorance define Cam in silence.

Still, the absence of his father loomed over these years. For much of his life, Cam’s father had been a distant figure, more ghost story than person. He had photos, one of his dad holding him as a baby and another from a park visit, but not much else. “Adults would say ‘It’s complicated,’ which usually means ‘It hurts,’” when he asked about his Black father. His mother had told him his father was not reliable, and relatives hinted that it was better this way, but as Cam entered late adolescence, he began to wonder what half of himself was missing; “Part of me believed it, part of me wondered what half of my face looked like when it got older.”

The reconnection happened during his senior year, at a small diner off Highway 256. He was nervous, expecting anger to rise up in him, but instead he felt something different. He shared, “I thought I’d be angry, but when he walked in, all I noticed was how our hands matched; same veins, same crooked pinky. He smelled like motor oil and peppermint.” The encounter was awkward at first, with both fumbling between a handshake and a hug, but slowly, they found rhythm in conversation. His father admitted that he had been scared and selfish, and that he had let the relationship with Cam’s mother collapse until there was nothing left. Cam told him how much he hated missing

father–son moments, like learning to shave or having a dad in the stands at games. They sat with that grief, neither trying to erase it.

Then the conversation shifted to baseball, a point of connection they both shared. His father had played second base in high school, and when they went outside to toss a ball from Cam’s car, it felt like a bridge being built through the simple rhythm of leather meeting leather. Describing this moment of quiet connection that reshaped their relationship, he shared:

We went out to the lot and tossed a ball, not saying much, just letting the sound of leather do the talking. I’m not pretending it fixed everything, but now I’ve got a number I can text, a voice I can call, and a history I can ask about. That matters.

This reconnection marked a turning point. For years, Cam had struggled with feeling split between his mother’s White family and the Black heritage he barely knew. Meeting his father gave him access to a fuller story, not only of where he came from but of who he could become. Critically examining how silence and absence shaped his early identity story, he shared:

I wish I’d asked more questions about my dad way sooner. I let other people’s adult issues become my identity story. If I could go back, I’d tell little me: your dad’s mistakes aren’t your blueprint. Keep asking. Keep pushing for your whole story.

Graduating high school, Cam carried these new connections with him as he entered college. His first months on campus were both liberating and unsettling. College brought him into contact with more diverse groups of peers than he had ever known, but it also forced him to keep navigating stereotypes. In classrooms, he sometimes felt

reduced to his appearance, seen as “diverse” rather than as a whole person. Thankfully, he also found professors who encouraged authentic conversations and peers who wanted to listen rather than categorize.

At this stage of his life, his reflections began to deepen. “Over time, my understanding of my identity has shifted from confusion to confidence. Meeting my dad played a huge role in that.” He spoke more openly about the challenges of code-switching, about the times he had silenced himself in school, and about the relief of finally claiming both sides of his identity. He also began to think more critically about his own privileges. Though he had endured bias and racism, he also recognized the ways his lighter skin shielded him at times. “I also know my lighter skin makes people treat me different sometimes, but the cop who pulled me over didn’t care I was lighter, just that I was Black.”

These realizations brought both pride and responsibility. Cam wanted to use his story to support others, to be visible in a way that might help younger students see possibilities for themselves. He began to envision a future in teaching and coaching, places where he could pass on lessons learned from both struggle and resilience. “I want to coach youth ball and maybe teach. I want kids in my hometown to see a young Black-White coach who doesn’t shrink or split.”

College became both a testing ground and a place of integration for Cam. Away from the daily familiarity of Red Hills, he found himself surrounded by new people, new expectations, and new questions. At times, the questions were the same as those he had grown up with like “What are you?” asked half-jokingly at parties or in dorm lounges but now he had the language and the confidence to answer differently. “That moment back in

middle school when I told myself I didn't want to split forever, it's still with me. Now I can say, 'I'm Black and White,' and not apologize for it." He also carried with him the lessons from baseball and from his reconnection with his father. Teamwork and trust had taught him how to read both people and situations. Meeting his father had grounded him in a history that was no longer missing. These experiences came together as he began to see himself not as half and half but as fully whole.

The contradictions of the South still weighed on him, and he continued to notice how race played out in everyday life. In classrooms, in stores, in casual conversations, he picked up on the thousand little nudges that told him where people thought he belonged. "People see how teachers treat me versus my darker-skinned teammates. They see how a cashier looks twice at my mom when I'm with her, then looks twice at me when I'm with my dad." These subtleties were just as powerful as the overt insults he had faced, shaping how he understood race in the Deep South. Yet despite the contradictions he also discovered joy in claiming his full self. He spoke about loving country music and Kendrick Lamar, about enjoying both boiled peanuts and collard greens, about feeling at home at both a shrimp boil and a fish fry. "You're not a contradiction; you're a collage, lots of little parts and pieces put together," he explained, a statement that revealed how far he had come from the days of feeling split and confused.

College also gave Cam a chance to reflect on what support had meant most to him. He recalled a teacher who insisted on pronouncing names correctly and who shut down racial "jokes" before they could take root. He remembered an assistant coach who checked in on him without making it into a spectacle. A counselor who gave him the words microaggressions, code-switching, identity development thereby helping him name

what he was living, and always his catcher, who offered a simple, steady, “We got this,” when the weight grew heavy. These people reminded him that small acts of recognition and care could change a student’s sense of self.

Looking ahead, Cam envisioned himself stepping into those roles for others. He wants to become a teacher and a coach, someone who could guide young people not only in skills but in confidence. “I want kids in Red Hills to see a young Black-White coach who doesn’t shrink or split.” His goal is not only to teach but to model authenticity and to show students that identity need not be fractured even in the face of social pressure. At the same time, he recognized the risks that would always be part of his life. “My concern is always safety like traffic stops, assumptions, the kind of bias you can’t unsee once you’ve seen it.” The contradictions of the South remain, and he knew they would continue to shape his journey, but alongside those concerns, he carried hope. “My hope is for strong families, however they look, kids knowing both sides when possible, and schools that help with that, not hurt it.”

By the time he reached the close of his undergraduate years, Cam’s story had come full circle. From the silence of his childhood home to the noise of middle school teasing, from the safety of baseball fields to the sting of racist jeers, from the absence of a father to the reconnection that restored a missing piece, his journey revealed the complexity and resilience of growing up Black-White biracial in the South. Where he once felt fractured he now felt he was whole and worthy of pride. “When I stopped feeling like a bridge with feet in two different rivers and started feeling like the river that connects them, I got a lot lighter inside.”

My Reflection: Cam

Cam's story pulled me in immediately because of the raw honesty with which he described both painful and affirming moments. His recollections of being singled out in classrooms, like when a teacher ran her hand across his curls in front of classmates, echoed the everyday microaggressions that research identified as shaping biracial children's experiences in predominantly White spaces. For me, hearing Cam narrate these memories underscored how normalized these moments become in schools, often invisible to teachers who view them as harmless. Yet, as Cam's words showed, they leave lasting impressions on identity.

I was especially struck by the central role baseball played in Cam's journey. On the field, he found belonging, affirmation, and a sense of identity not constantly questioned. His teammates' protection when racial slurs surfaced demonstrated how peer groups can become safe harbors when institutions fall short. Sports, for Cam, were not only an outlet but also a site of affirmation, a reminder that spaces outside the classroom often carry as much weight in identity formation as those within it.

Cam's reconnection with his father also resonated deeply with me, both as a mother of biracial children and as a researcher. His description of realizing "we have the same knuckles" is such a simple yet powerful image. It reminded me that his biracial identity was not only negotiated through societal labeling but also through intimate family connections that affirm belonging. Poston's biracial identity development model (1990) speaks to this integration stage, where individuals move from tension and split loyalties toward embracing both heritages. Cam's reflections illustrated that process of moving from confusion and fractured identities to confidence and wholeness.

I also noted the resilience in Cam's refusal to choose sides. When he explained, "I'm not choosing. I'm showing up," he named an act of resistance that disrupted binary frameworks. His words reminded me of Yosso's (2005) concept of cultural wealth, in which navigating multiple worlds is not a deficit but a strength. Cam's ability to read spaces, adapt, and still claim both parts of himself reflect this wealth.

As I reflected on Cam's narrative, I also considered my own positionality. As a White mother raising a Black-White biracial daughter, I recognize how silence and avoidance, even when born out of protection, can leave children to navigate racial realities alone. Cam's mother loved him fiercely, but he felt her fear of judgement for having a child with a Black man in their small Southern town sometimes meant avoiding conversations that could have better prepared him. His experiences pushed me to remain intentional with my own children, to speak truth even when it is heavy, and to create the spaces at home that affirm both of their heritages.

Cam's story contributed to my broader study by showing how identity in the South was both context-dependent and deeply relational for the participants. His narrative can remind educators that biracial children carry not only the questions and assumptions of peers but also the weight of institutional silences. His reflections call us to disrupt those silences in classrooms and to see biracial students not as divided, but as whole.

Cam's journey highlighted the complexities of growing up Black-White biracial in the South, where identity is continually negotiated in classrooms, on fields, and within families. His narrative revealed how silence and misunderstanding can wound, yet also how reconnection, mentorship, and sports can affirm and restore. As Cam moved from the questions of childhood into the confidence of adulthood, his story underscored the

resilience and strength that emerged when the biracial participants of this study claimed the fullness of who they are by their own definitions.

Turning now to Lex, another participant whose experiences further illuminated these themes, we see both echoes of AK's and Cam's struggles and distinct differences shaped by context, family, and community. Lex's story, like AK's and Cam's, added another perspective to the mosaic of what it meant to grow up Black-White biracial in the South for participants.

Lex

Lex, a 20-year-old student from rural Central Florida, spoke openly about how family expectations, school environments, and peer interactions shaped her Black-White biracial identity growing up. Raised mostly in predominantly White settings with her White mother and grandmother, she often questioned why her biracial brother was allowed to visit their father and Black relatives while she was not permitted to do so until late middle school. Throughout her upbringing, Lex grappled with feelings of belonging and acceptance, especially when teachers or classmates imposed narrow definitions of race. Her story revealed both the resilience needed to navigate dual identities and the importance of affirmation from trusted adults and peers in building her confidence.

Lex's Life Story

Fruit City, Florida, located in the center of the state was the whole world to Lex as a little girl. The town sat quietly, tucked into the landscape of central Florida, and its streets felt both familiar and confined. "I lived in the same hometown since I was born. It was called Fruit City, Florida. It's a really small town," she said. That smallness shaped her life in countless ways. Stores, schools, and ball fields were all within minutes.

Teachers remembered siblings and cousins and family ties ran so deep that Lex could not even walk into the grocery store without someone recognizing her.

Growing up, she never thought to question the closeness of her town. Childhood was filled with the simple rituals of southern small-town life: she shared that warm afternoons with friends were endless, evenings at church with extended family were a constant, and days where she could ride her bike without ever leaving sight of her house were her whole life. Her graduating class years later would total just over 200 students, but in those elementary years she knew almost every face, and they knew hers.

Inside her home, however, things were less certain. Her parents had separated almost before she could form memories. “My mom and dad would have issues in the house. They weren’t together basically since I was born,” she explained. The separation meant that for much of her life, her father was absent. “I wasn’t allowed to see my dad for the longest time, so I would say I grew up in a White household until maybe my 7th or 8th grade year of middle school.”

Her White mother’s side of the family filled that space with familiarity and routine. Holidays were spent in the company of grandparents, cousins, aunts, and uncles who all looked like her mother and race was not something they named. It was not denied, exactly, but it was simply ignored. When Lex described her childhood, she said it was normal. “I wasn’t really thinking about my racial identity because I was just a kid. I didn’t really know any better,” she said. To her, those early years were defined by the comfort of knowing her place. She belonged to her mother’s family, to her school community, to the small town that was all she had ever known.

Yet even in her description of normalcy, there were hints of something missing.

Her father wanted to be more present. “He wanted me to explore that side of me definitely,” she remembered, but the court battles and strained relationship with her mother kept that from happening. For years, she lived entirely within the world her mother provided, a world that was White and small and familiar. Looking back, she acknowledged how that shaped her sense of self. “I think maybe because of my family situation, I might have perceived myself as more White when I was younger,” she admitted. The comment was not an indictment of her family but a reflection of what happens when a child only sees one side of who she is affirmed. Without her Black father’s presence, the balance of her Black-White biracial identity tipped almost entirely toward her mother’s world.

School in those early years felt easy and uncomplicated for Lex. Teachers knew her family by name, cousins shared classrooms, and friends lived nearby. Race was not part of her self-concept. She was just Lex, the girl who liked to play outside and spend time with her friends. She described those days as “fairly normal,” a phrase that carried both the innocence of a child who simply lived as she was told and the silence of a deeper story she had not yet been given the tools to tell.

Middle school marked the first real shift in Lex’s world. Until then, she had lived almost exclusively in her mother’s orbit, surrounded by White family members, guided by teachers who knew her mother and cousins, and immersed in the routines of a small Southern town. But adolescence has a way of peeling back layers that childhood keeps hidden, and for Lex, those years became the first doorway into her fuller identity.

The change began with her father. After years of absence, she finally started spending time with him and the wider circle of her Black relatives. It was both a

revelation and a disruption. For so long, she had lived as if only half of her story existed, and felt resentment that her biracial brother was allowed to visit her father and his side of the family freely. Now she found herself stepping into rooms where faces mirrored hers in ways her mother's family never had. It was affirming and disorienting all at once. "I felt like I didn't fit in as much compared to all of them," she admitted, reflecting on those early visits. "Sometimes I couldn't even understand what they were saying because of their accent." Her words carried both humor and honesty. There was joy in hearing laughter that sounded like hers, in being embraced by family who had long wanted to know her, but she also felt the distance of years spent apart. Their cultural shorthand, their inside jokes, even the rhythms of their speech highlighted the gap between what she should have always known and what she was just beginning to learn.

This introduction to her father's family also ushered in her first real consciousness of race. "I definitely seen a change because I did start hanging out with my Black family," she explained. "So, I started to be more aware of those things that were going on around me." Awareness came not only through what her relatives said but also through what she noticed in school and community spaces. Small moments such as comments from peers, glances in the hallway, the way groups clustered by race in the cafeteria all began to stand out to her once she began spending time with her Black father and his family.

Then there was her hair. In her White household, no one had known how to guide her in caring for it and she shared that her peers at school commented on it frequently. Reflecting on how her hair became a racialized marker in predominantly White spaces, she shared:

I would say in middle school, whenever like I wouldn't wear my hair a certain way, because I didn't know how to do my hair. So, my hair was a mess, and I grew up with my White mom, so she really didn't know how to take care of my hair. So, my hair was a mess, and they were like, why is your hair like that? I was like, oh, like I'm not supposed to take care of my hair like a White person, you know, like that's a big one for me.

The question cut deep. For her peers, hair was just another part of appearance. For Lex, it became the most visible marker of her difference. Each day she fought to tame it with a straightener, pressing heat into her strands until they were brittle. She remembered the routine vividly: "In middle school my hair was dead, and I would straighten it every day. I would put it in a slick back ponytail, and they'd be like, 'Why is it so messy?' I didn't even know what to say." The struggle with her hair was more than cosmetic. It reflected the tension of being Black-White biracial in a world where beauty standards tilted toward Whiteness but her hair carried a different truth. Straightening was her attempt to blend in, to pass unnoticed in the hallways and to avoid questions she could not answer. Though she tried to fit in, the damage was visible, and she shared that her strands started breaking, her curls were damaged and lost, which she now sees as part of her identity being suppressed.

In retrospect, Lex saw that those years were her first education in cultural difference. What her White mother could not teach her, she would eventually teach herself. But in middle school, the journey felt really lonely. She was piecing together her sense of self while standing between two families, two cultures, and two sets of expectations. Still, there was growth happening beneath the surface. Being with her

father's family, even in limited ways, gave her glimpses of belonging she had never known. Their laughter, their gatherings, their insistence on welcoming her made an impression. Lex said, "It was powerful, even though I was learning so much late." Those visits with her Black family planted seeds that would grow into confidence later, teaching her that she was not half of anything and that she was fully part of both.

Middle school was not just about awkward dances, first crushes, or endless homework for her. For Lex, it was about standing at the threshold of a fuller identity. It was about the embarrassment of not knowing how to care for her own hair, the ache of feeling slightly out of place among her Black father's family, and the dawning realization that race was something she would always carry. Looking back, she recognized how pivotal those years were. They were not easy, but she shared that they were necessary. They marked the moment when she began to move from childhood innocence not even considering race to adolescent awareness. Middle school was where she started to see herself not only as her mother's daughter in a White family, but as Black-White biracial person; Black and White, belonging to both, even if she did not quite know exactly how.

Thankfully, Lex told me, high school felt different from the moment she walked through the doors. She was no longer the child who lived only in her White mother's household, nor the middle schooler who struggled each morning with a flat iron and unanswered questions. She entered ninth grade carrying the lessons of those awkward years, but also with a new determination to shape her story rather than be defined by it. She described the transition with a sense of clarity: "Once I got to high school I really started embracing it, I would say, just from like the people around me or me actually realizing it and bringing in the culture some." This was not a single moment but a gradual

unfolding for her. High school brought exposure to more diverse peers, broader experiences, and the freedom to experiment with identity. Each year, she allowed herself to lean a little further into her full self.

Hair once again became a symbol of that journey. By sophomore year, Lex reached a breaking point; years of daily straightening had left her curls lifeless, and she was tired of hiding. “In sophomore year of high school, I cut off basically all my hair,” she said with quiet pride. “I was really big into it, and I educated myself on how to take care of it.” That decision carried both risk and relief. Cutting off her hair meant showing up to school exposed, without the protective layer of straightened strands that had once allowed her to blend in, but it also meant freedom. With every inch she cut away, she shed years of frustration and shame, she said. Each new curl that grew back healthy felt like a small victory to her, a visible sign that she was learning to care for herself in ways her White mother had not known how to teach.

Her peers noticed the change. Some complimented her bravery, while others stared, unsure of how to respond. Lex shared that held her head high either way. For the first time, she was not trying to please anyone else. The choice was hers, and she refused to regret it. “I just knew I needed to change,” she explained. “I didn’t want to keep damaging myself like that.” As her hair grew back in its natural texture, so did her confidence. She began to walk the hallways with a stronger presence. Teachers saw it and friends commented on it. Lex said that after she cut her hair she carried herself differently, as if she knew she belonged in every space she entered because she was truly herself and was not hiding behind her hair to look like others anymore. That presence protected her in subtle but important ways.

High school exposed her to the reality of racism more directly. She saw classmates being targeted with racial slurs and watched tensions flare in ways she had been shielded from before. “There would be kids that would say stuff, like somebody just called them the N-word, and I’d be like, oh my gosh,” she remembered. These moments shocked her, but she rarely found herself the direct target. “I never had someone use like racial discrimination towards me,” she said. She believed her confidence played a role in that. “People don’t want to confront me, because the way I portray myself. I can hold my own.” That strength did not erase the sting of what she witnessed, though. It was painful to watch friends and peers suffer words she knew too well, even if they were not thrown at her. The incidents deepened her understanding of what it meant to be Black-White biracial in the South. Sometimes she could pass unnoticed, protected by her demeanor or her environment. Other times, she felt the weight of being both Black and White in spaces that wanted her to choose only one.

Even in her confidence, Lex carried a quiet longing. She often wondered how different things might have been if she had grown up knowing her Black father’s family more fully. “Maybe like being more in tune when I was younger with that side of my family, or having a conversation earlier on, maybe would have put things in a different perspective,” she admitted. The absence of that early connection left her feeling like she had arrived late to a part of herself. Despite this, she refused to let the absence of her Black family and his family define her. Instead, she built her own balance. High school became the place where she learned to trust her instincts, to honor her identity, and to reject the idea that she needed to be anything other than herself. Her hair became the most visible marker of that transformation, natural, healthy, unapologetic, but her voice,

her presence, and her resilience told the deeper story.

High school was not without its challenges even if it was easier than middle school, but for Lex, it marked the season when she shifted from merely surviving to truly thriving. She was no longer the unsure girl of middle school but a young woman learning to stand tall in her identity, more aware of the complexities of race in the South yet no longer intimidated by them. She explained that excelling in softball played a central role in this transformation, giving her both a sense of pride and a platform where her abilities spoke louder than stereotypes. Even though few of her teammates looked like her, the field became a place where she felt valued and visible because of her skill. The recognition she earned through sports helped her trust her own voice and reinforced the idea that her differences did not diminish her worth but added to her strength. In this way, she said, “athletics became more than an activity,” it was a pathway to self-assurance and resilience.

By the time Lex stepped onto her college campus, she was no longer the uncertain child who had grown up in her mother’s White household, nor the middle schooler battling her hair with a straightener each morning, nor even the high schooler still searching for balance between two families. She arrived as a young woman who had cut her hair, reclaimed her curls, and learned to carry herself with a presence that made people take notice. College did not create her identity, but it gave her the freedom to embrace it fully. For the first time, she was surrounded by peers who did not know her family or her small hometown in Central Florida. She could choose how to introduce herself and how much of her story to share. That independence felt liberating. “It’s really nice sometimes when you have that community around you. It’s very powerful,” she said.

College offered opportunities to find those affirming spaces, places where her Black-White biracial identity was not questioned or minimized but welcomed. She shared that she was thrilled to see that a few of her college teammates looked like her, adding to the feeling of finally being fully welcomed and seen.

Hair, once a source of insecurity, became a symbol of strength in these years. She no longer straightened it daily; far from it. “I give myself two or three times a year to straighten my hair,” she explained. “Like when we just went to the conference tournament, I straightened it for the banquet, but that was my third time for the year, and I won’t do it again until it gets cold again.” Her words carried both discipline and pride. She had learned the damage of constant straightening, and she had no desire to return to those days. Still, the trauma lingered. “I just have PTSD from me straightening my hair every day,” she confessed. “I’m scared that my curls won’t come back. Even when I do straighten it one or two times a year, there are a few strands that won’t go curly until like another week or so, and I’m panicking, like, no, I worked so hard for this.” The tenderness in her voice revealed how much her curls meant to her now. They were not only hair but history and proof of her resilience, reminders of the girl she had been and the woman she was becoming.

College also gave Lex the space to reflect on what her journey meant for others. She shared that she often thought about the advice she would give to younger Black-White biracial students navigating similar challenges. Drawing on her own experiences to encourage self-definition, she advised:

I would say, just be who you are, and don’t let anyone take that from you, whether it’s from culture, your hair, or your clothes you put on. Don’t let anyone

tell you one is better, like, for instance, ‘Oh, your straight hair is better,’ or that ‘These clothes are better for you.’ Be who you are, even if it’s more your White culture or more of your Black culture, be who *you* think you are. Don’t let anyone take that from you at all.

Her words may have sounded simple, yet they carried the weight of years of trial and error. They came from mornings spent battling her own reflection in the mirror, afternoons feeling out of place with her father’s family, and high school hallways where she finally chose to stop hiding. That advice reflected her own determination to resist the pressure to choose between her Blackness and her Whiteness. “Even if it’s more your White culture or more of your Black culture,” she insisted, “be who you think you are. Don’t let anyone take that from you at all.” In her voice was the clarity of someone who had been pushed and questioned and doubted, and who had decided that none of it would dictate how she saw herself.

At the same time, college gave her a new perspective on what she wished had been different. Looking back with the clarity that came from college, she reflected:

I would say being more in tune when I was younger with that side of my family, or knowing what to look out for, or having a conversation maybe earlier on. Just to know maybe would have put in different perspectives if something did happen to me, knowing younger what I actually was, or who I was when I was younger.

Lex shared this without bitterness in her voice, only recognition. She knew her childhood had been shaped by absence, but she also knew it had made her stronger. She even laughed gently at how much of her struggle had been centered around her hair. “The only thing I would have really changed about maybe my culture is my hair,” she admitted.

“Being more aware about how to take care of my hair, because it’s been a very long journey. Cutting it off four years ago and just now getting my curls back to what they’re supposed to be.” That journey, she realized, was as much about identity as it was about style. Each stage of her hair mirrored a stage of her self-understanding: straightened and hidden in middle school, cut short and reclaimed in high school, healthy and celebrated in college.

In her classes, on her softball team, and in her friendships, Lex shared that she carried herself with a steadiness that drew others in. She had grown into her identity in ways that made her both confident and compassionate. When others struggled, she reminded them of what she had already come to know: “Be who you are.” Those four words became her refrain, her anchor, and her gift to others. Looking back over her journey, Lex spoke with clarity about what had carried her through. “I would just say being more aware and being more in tune with my culture when I was younger would have helped, but also just being myself,” she repeated. That longing remained, but it did not overshadow the pride she carried in who she had become despite being kept away from the Black side of her family for so long.

College did not erase the complexities of being Black-White biracial in the South for Lex. It did not silence all of the questions, nor did it eliminate the moments of discomfort, but it gave her the strength to hold them without apology. She was both Black and White. She was the child of a small town and a young woman reaching for wider horizons. She was the girl who once straightened her hair every day, and the woman who now celebrated each curl as a sign of growth. She shared with a smile that she was so proud of how she truly felt strong and able to handle herself better than any

other time in her life since she entered college.

Her story, woven through childhood innocence, middle school awareness, high school confidence, and college wholeness, revealed the layered process of identity for Lex. It was not a straight line but a winding path, full of both struggle and resilience. And for Lex, it has led to a place of pride and authenticity. “Be who you are,” she tells others. In those words, she offers not only advice but the hard-earned wisdom of her own life.

My Reflection: Lex

Writing Lex’s story reminded me that identity is never something handed to us neatly wrapped; it is something we piece together, often slowly and imperfectly, from the fragments of family, culture, and experience that surround us. Lex grew up in a White household where race was rarely spoken aloud, and so she learned to see herself first through her White mother’s world. Yet as she matured, she was drawn toward the missing side of her story. The result was a childhood that felt “normal” on the surface but was already shaped by silence, absence, and unanswered questions.

Middle school opened the door to that missing world, and Lex’s honesty about feeling out of place with her Black father’s family stayed with me. She described listening to their accents, struggling to catch jokes or understand cultural cues, and wondering where she fit. Her experiences reminded me how Black-White biracial children often encounter belonging belatedly, invited into a community that has always been theirs but that feels foreign because of years spent apart. Lex’s account illustrated how the past and its silences came forward, shaping the present in subtle but powerful ways for her.

Her frequent reflections on hair added another profound layer. Lex spoke of the

“dead strands” of her middle school years, burned from daily straightening, pulled tight in ponytails that never hid the questions of her peers. Hair, for her, became the site of both struggle and liberation. When she cut it off in high school, she did more than change her appearance, she reclaimed a piece of herself. Listening to her describe that choice, I was reminded of how the smallest acts of self-care can carry the deepest meaning for students negotiating race and identity. Hair, in Lex’s story, was not cosmetic; it was cultural, emotional, and political. She felt that by wearing her hair natural that was her way of saying that she was unapologetically herself and that means Black and White.

What impressed me most in Lex’s high school years was the confidence she began to embody. She described herself as someone people did not want to “confront,” not because she was combative but because her presence carried weight. In Yosso’s (2005) terms, this was resilience and navigational capital at work as she developed the ability to move through spaces not built for her while holding her ground. It seemed that to me that she wore her confidence and resilience as armor, yet Lex never boasted about this; instead, she spoke matter-of-factly, as though strength had become her survival strategy.

By the time she reached college, Lex’s story shifted into a different key, one of self-assurance, clarity, and advice for others. “Be who you are and don’t let anyone take that from you,” she told me, and I was struck by how much weight those words carried given the path she had traveled. They were not theoretical. They were her lived wisdom, drawn from years of trial and error, from mornings spent panicking over whether her curls would return, from afternoons spent wishing she had known her Black father’s family sooner, and from nights spent realizing she could not be anything but herself.

Her longing to have been “more in tune” with her culture earlier in life was poignant, but what struck me most was the absence of bitterness in her voice. Instead, there was a steady pride in how far she had come despite that absence. Lex showed me that Black-White biracial identity is not only about claiming heritage but about learning to live fully in the balance of what you were given and what you had to claim for yourself.

As a researcher, I found myself deeply moved by her resilience. As a mother and educator, I found myself thinking about the countless other children who, like Lex, may be quietly navigating hair struggles, family absences, or subtle silences around race in their schools. Lex’s story reminded me why narrative inquiry matters: because children are not statistics or case studies, they are living stories, carrying with them all the beauty and tension of identity.

Lex’s voice, layered with honesty, humor, and hard-earned confidence, enriched this study. Her story is both unique and common: unique in its details of Fruit City, Florida, her family’s history, her personal hair journey, while also common in its portrayal of what it means to grow into oneself against the backdrop of the South for all of the participants in this study. Her reminder of “be who you are” is not only her advice to others but also the gift of her narrative to this dissertation.

Lex’s account showed how Black-White biracial children growing up in the South often navigated questions of belonging in both subtle and overt ways. Her story, woven with themes of family expectations, peer interactions, and self-discovery, highlighted both the vulnerabilities and the strengths that accompanied growing up Black-White biracial in the South for the participants. Just as Cam and AK’s stories underscored the

role of sports, silence, and family reconnection, Lex's narrative deepened my understanding of the everyday negotiations Black-White biracial students face. The final participant, Maha, brings yet another perspective, one that intertwined questions of heritage, name, and cultural difference with the pressures of Southern schools and communities. Her reflections broadened the lens further, showing how identity is never static but continually shaped by context, memory, and resilience.

Maha

Maha, a 20-year-old from Central Florida, recalled numerous times how her unusual name became an early marker of difference in school, alongside her biracial appearance. Raised in a close-knit family with her Black Haitian mother and White father, who are still together, Maha grew up with her older sister and younger brother in a household where they were well provided for, but race was never discussed. Although her Haitian and Black heritage was not openly discussed at home, aside from her Black Haitian grandmother's visits, her experiences of mispronunciation and teasing foreshadowed broader challenges of racialization. By college, Maha had come to firmly identify as a Black woman, a shift shaped by experiences of exclusion, resilience, and her search for affirming spaces. Maha's narrative underscored the ways silence, cultural pride, and peer relationships intersected in her development of Black-White biracial identity as she grew up in the South.

Maha's Life Story

Maha's story began in Sycamore, Florida, where her family moved when she was just two years old. Though she was born in Utah, those early years left little impression. "I was originally in Utah for my first 2 years and then moved to Lakeland after I turned

2,” she recalled. “My childhood’s there.” From that point forward, Sycamore was the place she associated with home, with family, and with the experiences that would shape her sense of self.

Her family was unique, though she shared she did not always see it that way as a child. Despite being raised by her White father and Black Haitian mother, Maha said grew up in a home where race was not a frequent topic of discussion. “It was never really anything that was talked about,” she said of her childhood. “If anything, it was more talked about the fact that my mom’s Haitian. So, I’d probably say I was like a Haitian girl.” When Maha was young, this meant that her early identity was framed more by cultural cues than racial ones. She did not spend her earliest years feeling set apart or different, she shared. Instead, she moved through her classrooms with ease, surrounded by children from a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds.

Those first few years of school felt diverse and comfortable. Maha explained that she did not feel pressured to identify with one group or another. “I never really had like a specific desire to make friends with someone that was a specific race or that specifically looked more like me,” she reflected. For her, she shared, everyone was just “part of the mix.” She remembered thinking, “We were all just about like a mixed bag. And I was like, oh, this, this is how it is. Everyone’s just, it is what it is.”

But even in those years, small moments began to shape her awareness of difference. One of the first came in the form of comments about her hair. Children in her class seemed fascinated by her curls, which stood out from their straighter textures. “They’d be like, oh, your hair looks so curly,” she remembered. At the time, she admitted she was uncertain about how to feel. That attention, even though it was ambiguous, left

an imprint on her and how her hair was not like other people's hair.

The shift from one school to another was what truly awakened Maha's awareness of her difference, she shared. Up until fourth grade, she had attended schools with a healthy mix of children who shared a variety of racial and cultural backgrounds, but when she transferred into what she later called "the White school," the change was immediate and startling. For the first time, she looked around her classroom and saw herself as the lone exception. She described the experience vividly. Describing the moment she became aware of racial isolation in her classroom, she shared:

I didn't realize that that was something I valued until like I lost it, like having other people like me, that looked like me and even different from me, but not all White. And then a girl transferred into my school that was also Black. And then we just became the best friends like instantly. So, I was not totally alone.

That single friendship became a lifeline. In a space where she felt invisible, finding someone who shared her experiences was grounding. "It was almost like my little brain didn't process that until I looked around and realized none of them look like me," she recalled. What might have seemed like a small detail to others was for her a pivotal realization. Another memory that stayed with her from "the White school" came from the car pick up line after school. She recalled looking around one afternoon and suddenly realizing she did not resemble any of the other children as she was seated waiting on the school's front porch. "I was like, wow, like everyone is like White and has like straight hair. Like none of them look like me," she said. The moment carried weight, not because she had been excluded, but because the car pick up line, along with her new predominantly White classroom, fully opened her eyes to the reality of her difference.

For the first time, she recalled that she felt herself on the outside looking in at “the White school.”

Even though her family rarely discussed race, aside from her Black Haitian maternal grandmother when she visited, her Black mother’s protective instincts influenced Maha’s experience. For years, she thought her mother avoided school events because she disliked driving or did not enjoy those settings. It was only later, during a family dinner, that her mother told her the truth. Describing a long-unspoken family truth that later reshaped her understanding, she explained:

Honestly, my family didn’t really play a big part ’cause this isn’t only something that’s ever came up like very, very recently, like addressing comments with race where they’ll tell me things that I didn’t know about my past. Like my mom told me that because I just thought she didn’t like driving. But then in hindsight, she told me she didn’t go to any of those events because she didn’t want them to treat me differently because they’d see the Black mom coming to the event.

That revelation reframed Maha’s childhood memories. What she once saw as absence, she came to understand as love and protection from her mother.

Maha shared the strongest and most painful memory for her of this time in fourth grade again centered on her hair, but this time it was not just the seemingly innocent comments of her hair being curly like from her earliest school days. Recounting a defining incident that reshaped her understanding of difference and visibility, she shared:

Most of the stuff that I’ve picked up or learned, or honestly unlearned, came from that one year of going to what I call the White school. Like, in fourth grade, people loved my hair because it was different, but not in a good way. They’d say,

‘Your hair looks like a squirrel’s tail,’ or ‘You’re just like a squirrel, it’s so puffy.’ And I remember thinking, I still don’t know if that’s a compliment, but at least people were paying attention to me again. It was the first time I realized how something about me that I couldn’t change made me stand out. Like really stand out.

She went on to share that the “squirrel’s tail” comments made Maha feel both confused and singled out, unsure whether the attention she was getting was admiration or cruel mockery. Although she tried to laugh it off as a child, the experience quietly taught her that her natural hair, and by extension her identity, was viewed as something unusual or unacceptable. From that moment on, she internalized the idea that there was something inherently not good enough about her appearance and, by implication, about herself.

In fifth grade, she transferred again, this time to a historically Black school that had once been segregated. That move brought a new sense of belonging, she shared; she finally felt that she was back in a place that she could be more herself. “My new school used to be a segregated school just for Black people until desegregation,” she explained. “That school had a large majority of Black people in the school. And that’s whenever I got to see more of an emphasis on that culture in specific.” Maha shared that the shift was transformative. Reflecting on how transferring to a predominantly Black school reshaped her sense of belonging, Maha shared:

Going to Rockford changed how I saw myself. It was a predominantly Black school, but everyone there was so different. It made me realize that there’s no single way to ‘be Black.’ I could just be whoever I am without trying to fit someone else’s definition. That was the first time I really felt like I could just

exist as me.

Where she had once been isolated, she now found herself immersed in a community that embraced and celebrated Blackness, something that was expectedly absent in the school that Maha referred to as “the White school,” but also missing from the more diverse schools of her early years where race was not acknowledged or discussed, either.

Even as she navigated those school transitions, Maha often turned inward for comfort. She was a child who loved her own company, often retreating into books and sketchpads. “I felt like I spent like a solid amount of time alone and picking up hobbies that I could do alone without people,” she explained. “I liked reading. I liked drawing.” Those solitary pursuits were more than pastimes; they were ways of protecting herself from environments that sometimes made her feel misunderstood. Church was one such environment. Her parents took her and her siblings regularly, but she did not enjoy the experience. Forbidden from using a phone or other distractions, she eventually persuaded them to let her bring a sketchbook. Recounting how reading and drawing offered refuge during challenging environments, she reflected:

I would always just spend my time at church just drawing the whole time and kind of ignoring everyone. I think reading and drawing were both coping and avoiding mechanisms. I liked doing them, but they also gave me a way to stay in my own world and keep my mind off things. It was a way to express myself when I couldn't really do that out loud. Even at church, when I didn't want to be there, I'd just draw quietly through the whole service to kind of disappear for a while. Art became her refuge, a place where she could express feelings she did not have words for. She often reimagined superheroes or cultural icons, giving them braids or Afros to

look more like herself. “It was a way I could like be in my own world and doing what I wanted to do.” Reading also offered escape, she said, though representation was often absent. She followed the Sunshine State Readers list because it was assigned. “That was the list. They said, you should want to read this, and I said, okay, I’ll read it,” she explained. But she noticed that the characters rarely looked like her. “It was just about White people that can do different things. Then they’re not actually different characters,” she observed. Later, she turned to horror novels, enjoying their suspense and unpredictability, but noted that even then, she rarely saw characters who reflected her reality. She emphasized again that this is why she drew characters that looked like her to fill the void that she saw in the books and art that surrounded her at school.

Interactions with peers sometimes underscored that absence for Maha. One example she remembered clearly was trying to describe Haitian food to her classmates. “I said booyah, which to me was like ramen, and they didn’t really get what I was talking about,” she recalled. The misunderstanding left her feeling on the outside. Recounting how she learned to adapt herself in peer spaces to avoid standing out, she reflected:

I felt like I was kind of missing a piece that everyone else had, like there was this unspoken set of rules or knowledge that everyone seemed to know, but I didn’t.

So, I just tried to keep up with what they liked and what they thought was funny instead of talking about what I actually wanted to talk about. It was easier to blend in than to explain myself all the time.

As Maha’s quote described, to cope she sometimes adjusted her behavior. She described herself as blending in by following the lead of others. “In conversation, I would try to keep up with whatever they liked, instead of whatever I actually wanted to talk about,”

she said. As she reflected later, she realized she had often withheld parts of herself: “I just didn’t necessarily share parts of me. I just allowed them to kind of do most of the talking.”

Even while she adapted as the result of feeling the need to assimilate, there were anchors of support for her at school, as well, she shared. Her fifth-grade teacher, Miss Pace, became a figure of safety. “I’ve always appreciated teachers more because they’re kind of like paid to force to bond with me,” Maha said with a smile. “She would just have conversations with me whenever I’d go up to her, and like she would always acknowledge whenever there was something I wanted to say or do.” That willingness to listen mattered deeply. “She wasn’t just my teacher to me,” Maha remembered. “She was just like a friend.”

Middle school marked another shift in Maha’s journey, a time when awareness of difference became harder to ignore. Her name, which carried meaning and heritage, often became a source of discomfort in classrooms where few people took the time to say it correctly. “People were always making fun of my name, stuff like that,” she recalled, noting how routine it became. At times she shortened it to something easier, not because she wanted to, but because it spared her constant mispronunciations. Her hair also continued to draw attention she did not always welcome. Comments from classmates made her hyperaware of her appearance, leaving her uncertain of how she was being perceived. In those years, she often felt herself on the outside looking in, navigating the tension between being noticed and being understood.

To cope, Maha again turned inward, finding refuge in quiet activities that did not require explanation. Books and art once again gave her both escape and control, a way to

create worlds where she was not reduced to mispronunciations or stereotypes.

Friendships, when she did seek them, were carefully chosen. “I gravitated towards a lot of like-minded like weird people that were also like minorities,” she said. This instinctive gravitation toward peers who were different in some way allowed her to carve out small spaces of belonging, even when the broader environment felt unwelcoming. She admitted she preferred solitude over shallow acceptance, a choice that reflected not withdrawal, but discernment on her part.

Out of this resilience grew the confidence to step into new spaces, and theater became the most transformative of them. Unlike the classroom, where difference often felt like a burden, theater celebrated individuality and creativity. It was here that Maha felt she could bring her full self forward showcasing her humor, her ideas, and her voice, without fear of ridicule. The friendships she formed there deepened that sense of belonging. What middle school had taught her in isolation, theater transformed into affirmation. In that community, she explained, she no longer had to edit or withhold; she could simply be and explore different sides of herself. The stage became both a safe space and a testing ground, a place where the quiet endurance she had carried through middle school transformed into visible confidence and pride.

High school expanded Maha’s world even further in both challenging and affirming ways. She became more deeply involved in theater, a space where she said she truly found community. That mix created a space of acceptance that contrasted with some of her earlier experiences, but high school was not without its difficulties. Maha recalled moments when theater teachers revealed blind spots. Describing a space where she felt mostly free to be herself despite lingering blind spots, she shared:

I'd say theater has definitely been one of my biggest support systems. The people in theater are all different kinds of people, and the teachers are used to dealing with that diversity. It felt like a space where I could just be myself without judgment, because everyone was a little odd in their own way. Even when there were moments of microaggressions, like when one teacher said he'd want to play a big Black woman because it would be 'fun' which was weird and awful, but most of the time, it was a place of acceptance. Theater gave me room to breathe and to just exist as me.

Maha explained that she and her classmates did not think the teacher's comment was okay at all. "We had a discussion in the group chat about like, excuse me. And we all agreed that that was weird and just never brought it up again." Although the group did not confront him directly, their silent rejection of the comment showed a shared understanding that certain remarks crossed lines.

Outside of theater, Maha continued to lean into her art and her books. Drawing allowed her to process emotions she did not always express verbally, she explained. Reading gave her the chance to escape, though she remained keenly aware of the absence of biracial or Black heroines in most of the books she encountered which was annoying and painful for her. She continued to fill that gap through imagination, sketching her own characters and rewriting familiar ones to reflect her vision of the world. Drawing popular characters with physical attributes mirroring her own made Maha happy and she even shared some pictures of her sketches with me from her cell phone several times throughout interviews.

At home, her sister remained a steady support. "If I have an issue, even now, and

it's like a racial issue, I could always go to my sister, and she'll like talk trash with me. That makes me feel better to have someone to talk trash with." Together, the sisters navigated experiences that their younger brother, with his more indifferent approach, often shrugged off. "He's kind of like a nonchalant guy, anything that happens he's just like, yeah, that happened low key," she explained. That difference in responses meant that she and her sister carried much of the burden of making sense of racialized experiences, often shielding their little brother from harder conversations.

High school also marked the years when Maha began reflecting more consciously on her identity. Unlike in elementary school, when she might have described herself simply as Haitian, she began to see the complexity of her experience as Black-White biracial. She noticed that peers, teachers, and strangers often categorized her differently than she categorized herself. Those subtle negotiations of identity became part of daily her life.

By the time Maha entered college, she had carried with her a lifetime of moments; frequent comments about her hair, silent realizations of difference in school car lines, protective silences from her mother, and the comfort of drawing and reading when she needed to retreat. College gave her the space to look back on those moments and put them into words. She reflected that as a child, she had not possessed the language to describe race. "Because as an 8-year-old, no, I wouldn't have had a concept of race at that point," she admitted, but college was different. Surrounded by new peers and new communities, she found herself naming her identity more directly. "I most definitely identify as a Black woman, just from all my experiences that I've had that most definitely couldn't fall under any other category of person." That statement carried the weight of

years of learning, observation, and lived truth for Maha.

The transition to college also required her to seek out communities intentionally. Unlike her earlier middle and high schools, where diversity had often been present in the mix, college sometimes demanded that she actively look for spaces where she could belong. “Having like, a racial identity, is more important,” she explained, “because it’s like something I’d have to actively seek out in the community, as opposed to having like those differences just mixed in within the people I normally see every day in class.” This new awareness pushed her to step into her identity with confidence. At the same time, she said she carried forward the lessons learned from her earlier years. The solitude she had cultivated as a child remained part of who she was as she still turned to drawing and reading as outlets. She also still relied on her older sister as her closest confidant when race came up. “If I have an issue, and it’s like a racial issue, I always go to my sister,” she reiterated, and she seemed truly grateful for that steady presence.

College also expanded her ability to reflect critically on what she had experienced in childhood. For example, she thought back to the moment when her mother explained why she had stayed away from school functions. In her younger mind, it had seemed like avoidance. In her adult mind, it was an act of love. “She didn’t want them to treat you differently because you had the Black mom coming,” Maha remembered her mother saying. That revelation became emblematic of how her family navigated identity; not by discussing it openly, but by protecting one another in subtle ways.

She came to see her resilience as something shaped by the variety of spaces she moved through. At “the White school,” she learned the sting of isolation, looking around and realizing no one else looked like her, while at Rockford, the historically Black

school, she discovered the grounding power of seeing herself reflected in the majority. In theater, she experienced both moments of affirmation and the sting of microaggressions. At home, she and her sister learned to laugh through pain, while her brother chose to brush things aside. Each environment carried its own lessons, and together they shaped how Maha came to understand and embrace her identity as she grew into adulthood.

Looking back, Maha described her journey as a process of discovery rather than a sudden awakening. She did not see herself as having been forced to choose between Black and White identities. Instead, she felt that she grew into an understanding of herself as a Black woman, informed by Haitian culture, supported by family, and tempered by experiences in schools across the South. “I never really had like a specific desire to make friends with someone that was a specific race or that specifically looked more like me,” she said of her early years. But in college, she acknowledged that the world around her often required those distinctions, and she had come to embrace the one that fit her lived truth.

Maha’s life narrative was one of quiet resilience, steady growth, and evolving confidence. From childhood moments of being teased about her hair, to adolescent years of sketching superheroes with braids during church services, to high school theater performances and college reflections, her story demonstrated the complexity of growing up Black-White biracial in the South.

Her experiences underscored how identity is shaped not only by overt lessons, but also by silences, protections, and subtle cues. Her mother’s absence from school events, once puzzling, later revealed a profound act of love. Her sister’s companionship gave her the space to voice frustrations without fear. Teachers like Miss Pace provided affirmation

in ways that made her feel valued. Her own creativity allowed her to imagine worlds where she belonged fully. In her words, the journey culminated in clarity: “I most definitely identify as a Black woman now, just from all my experiences.” That self-assurance reflects a lifetime of navigating spaces where she was sometimes invisible, sometimes hypervisible, and always learning what it meant to be herself.

My Reflection: Maha

Listening to Maha’s story reminded me of the subtle ways silence, protection, and creativity can shape a child’s sense of self. Her words revealed how often she made sense of difference on her own, whether through drawing superheroes with braids, reading books where she rarely saw herself reflected, or adapting her conversations to fit the comfort of others. What stood out to me was her resilience in navigating those moments without bitterness, even though she often did this in solitude, leaning instead on her imagination and the quiet strength of her sibling relationships.

I was also struck by how deeply her mother’s protective choices influenced her journey. For years, Maha thought her mother’s absence from school functions was a matter of preference and maybe even negligence, only to later learn it was a conscious effort to shield her from being treated differently because she had a Black mother. That revelation reframed her childhood memories and showed how parents carry unseen burdens to protect their children. It also underscored how family silence around race, though protective, can leave children to interpret experiences on their own.

Maha’s narrative highlighted the importance of teachers and mentors who take the time to see children fully. She found affirmation in teachers like Miss Pace, who acknowledged her voice and gave her space to feel valued. The difference that one

teacher made revealed the power educators hold in shaping identity and belonging for biracial children who might otherwise feel unseen.

As Maha reached college and embraced her identity as a Black woman, her story came full circle. What began with uncertainty and solitude matured into confidence and clarity. Her life stories illustrated that identity development for her was not a single moment of recognition, but an ongoing process nurtured by family, peers, teachers, and creative expression through drawing and theater. Maha's journey reminds us that biracial children need spaces where they can be themselves without compromise and that their voices, like hers, are essential in reshaping the narratives of belonging in Southern classrooms.

Narrative Conclusion

The narratives presented in my study illuminated the textured and often complex realities of growing up Black-White biracial in the South for the four participants. By centering participants' lived experiences in their own words, these stories reveal the ways family silence, school environments, friendships, sports, and cultural expectations shaped their developing sense of identity. Each participant's narrative is deeply situated in personal, familial, and social contexts, demonstrating that identity was never formed in isolation but through the ongoing negotiation of belonging and difference. Preserving their voices through narrative inquiry allowed the richness of their perspectives to come forward (Daiute, 2014), capturing both the challenges and affirmations that influenced how they saw themselves and their place in the world. At the same time, these narratives did not exist in isolation from one another; rather, they overlapped in powerful ways, with repeated words and shared sentiments underscoring the common threads that wove

their individual stories together.

To further illustrate these shared experiences, I created a word splash (Figure 2) by uploading participants' interview transcripts into a text-analysis tool to identify the most frequently occurring words across the dataset. After generating the high-frequency terms, I arranged them visually, using larger fonts for the most common words, to highlight the key ideas emerging from participants' language to offer a visual representation of the words and sentiments that appeared most often across participants' stories throughout the interviews. While each narrative is rooted in individual context, the word splash demonstrates that participants often returned to similar language when describing their lives, identities, and struggles. Words connected to family silence, belonging, race, friendship, and sports surfaced repeatedly, revealing a collective pattern that stretched across their distinct accounts. This visual emphasizes that even as participants spoke from personal standpoints, their stories were deeply interwoven, pointing to broader constructs like negotiation, resilience, and identity formation that transcended any single perspective. The prominence of certain words in the splash also highlights the emotional weight carried by these recurring ideas, showing how participants navigated both affirmation and struggle in parallel ways. By capturing their shared vocabulary, the word splash makes visible the connective tissue across individual narratives, reminding us that their experiences, though unique, were bound together by common challenges and aspirations.

Chapter V

THEMES

In qualitative research, the setting of a participant's life is inseparable from the meaning of their story; Dr. Richard Schmertzinger taught me this from the moment I entered my very first class session with him over a decade ago (R. Schmertzinger, January 10, 2015). He discussed how Maxwell (2013), a close friend, described context as central to any attempt to understand human experience, and that Mishler's (1986) work, also revered by Dr. Schmertzinger, reminded us that speech and action cannot be interpreted apart from the circumstances in which they occur. Even Patton (2015), whose text was one of the first I read in my doctoral journey, directed me as a qualitative researcher to move beyond the surface of interviews to uncover the deeper patterns that make those accounts significant. With this in mind, I chose to begin by presenting the full narratives of my participants, constructed from data gathered through Seidman's (2019) three-interview approach, before turning to the themes that I later created. In doing so, I was able to foreground how each Black-White biracial participant's story unfolded within the Southern communities that shaped them, while also preparing to examine how those individual accounts intersected and diverged. During analysis, I drew upon Maxwell's (2013) suggestion to use categorizing and connecting strategies as complementary processes for data analysis, which enabled me to honor the distinctiveness of each participant's journey while also tracing the shared struggles and insights that illuminate

what it means to grow up both Black and White in the South.

After transcribing the interviews, I coded the transcripts using in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding procedures (Saldaña, 2016). Through iterative cycles of coding, I examined how individual codes could be grouped into categories and then connected to one another. From these categories, I identified recurring patterns across participants' narratives, which allowed me to construct broader themes that reflected the shared dimensions of their experiences. To preserve the chronological flow of participants' lives while tracing these thematic connections, I organized the interview data into timelines and wove the codes and categories back into the unfolding life stories. Finally, I aligned the themes with my research questions to structure the analysis and provide coherence to my findings.

Theme 1: Family silence about race forces biracial children to interpret identity through personal experiences.

In this section I unpack how my participants' narratives and the first theme I constructed support the theoretical components that framed this work relating to family silence and conversations about race. Theme 1 indicates family silence about race complicated identity progression, but did not prevent participants from eventually embracing their biracial identity through personal experiences. Critical race theory emphasizes that racism is not an anomaly but rather deeply embedded within American society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Within this framework, silence surrounding race is not neutral; it functions to maintain existing hierarchies and allows racial inequities to persist unchallenged. Participants' stories reflected how familial silence mirrored the broader Southern cultural context, where White comfort often dictated the terms of racial

dialogue. For example, AK described how her parents rarely addressed race in the home. She explained:

My mom and dad didn't really talk about race when I was growing up. They kind of just acted like it wasn't a big deal, and I think they thought that made things easier for me. But when I got to school, it was like everyone else saw me as Black, and I didn't know what to do with that because no one ever talked about it at home.

AK's family silence reflected the CRT perspective (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) how the avoidance of race, even with good intentions, leaves Black-White biracial children unprepared for the realities of racialization in public spaces. This absence of preparation reinforced the societal norm that conversations about race are uncomfortable or unnecessary, ultimately maintaining White-centered frameworks of silence.

Similarly, Cam recalled moments when his questions about race were dismissed that left him feeling confused and alone:

I remember telling my mom and family about kids at school making jokes about my hair or calling me names, and they would just say, 'Don't let it bother you. Just ignore it.' I felt like they didn't want me to talk about it, like it was better to just stay quiet.

Cam's account highlights how silence operated as a form of complicity, leaving him to navigate racialized experiences without acknowledgment or support. In accordance with CRT tenets (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), that silence was not an isolated family choice but part of a structural pattern in which acknowledging racism was avoided in order to protect dominant White comfort.

It was clear from participants how family silence complicated the development of biracial identity and posed clear challenges as they were forced to interpret identity through personal experiences, yet there was often a substitute contribution families made. Participants' narratives revealed that, although White parents and family members often avoided direct discussions of race, Black family members provided other forms of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005) that supported resilience and identity development.

For instance, Lex explained that her aunt, her Black father's sister, pushed her toward achievement without ever naming race directly: "Do not worry about what anyone says, you are just as good. Do your work and show them." Lex's experience illustrated aspirational capital as her aunt conveyed high expectations and belief in her ability to succeed, even if silence around race left her without language to frame her challenges.

Maha shared a similar dynamic. Though her parents avoided conversations about the complexity of her mixed racial and cultural background, she recalled that her extended Black family passed down cultural practices that affirmed her heritage:

We didn't sit around talking about what it meant to be Haitian or Black and White, but I knew it from the food, the music, and the way my family carried themselves. Even if no one said the words, I learned to be proud.

Her quote exhibited that while silence is a weakness, it could be offset by other presentations of cultural recognition and acknowledgement. While Maha lacked explicit preparation for navigating racialized experiences, especially painful and embarrassing ones she experienced when younger, her family's cultural pride ultimately equipped her with resources to resist stereotypes and claim a positive Black-White biracial identity in young adulthood, supporting Yosso's (2005) familial and resistance capital tenets.

Although participants' stories demonstrated how family silence delayed or complicated their identity development, it did not ultimately prevent progression toward identity integration, which is described by Poston's (1990) BIDM final stage. AK's narrative revealed how silence extended her early personal identity, which would be Poston's BIDM stage one. Because race was not named at home, she initially described herself in nonracial terms. Only when peers and teachers racialized her as Black did she feel forced into the stage of choice of group categorization. This external push, without prior family preparation, led to confusion and frustration. It was not until college and her exposure to more diverse groups and friends that she began to talk about and explore her Black-White identity openly, which supports Poston's (1990) proposal that biracial identity develops through stages.

The enmeshment/denial stage were reflected and supported in Cam's story. Family silence left him feeling as though his Black-White biracial identity was something not to be acknowledged. He shared. "I felt like if I asked too many questions about being mixed, it would just upset everyone. So, I tried not to think about it, but at the same time it was all I could think about." This denial and confusion eventually gave way to appreciation and integration once he encountered friends and mentors in college, along with the reunification with his Black father, who affirmed his Black-White biracial identity. Silence delayed his developmental trajectory, though it did not stop it entirely.

Cultural pride intersected with silence in Maha's journey. Although explicit conversations were rare, the cultural resources of her Haitian background propelled her into appreciation and, eventually, integration, in alignment with later stages of Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model. By college, she firmly identified as a Black

woman while honoring her Black-White biracial heritage, demonstrating movement into the integration stage despite earlier gaps caused by her family's silence.

Taken together, the participants' narratives illuminated the distinct yet interconnected dimensions of family silence and informed the construction of Theme 1, which supports principles from the three theoretical frameworks guiding this study. Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) was supported in participants' stories that showed that silence is never neutral; it reflects broader Southern patterns of racial avoidance that privilege White comfort and leave biracial children without the tools to recognize or navigate systemic racism. Yet, participants' shared stories that backed up Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, as well, since silence did not eliminate the transmission of cultural resources. Participants continued to access aspirational and familial capital from Black family members which nurtured resilience and pride even in the absence of explicit conversations about race. Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model was supported by Theme 1 as participants illustrated how silence complicated or delayed identity progression while still allowing them to eventually move toward appreciation and integration of their Black-White biracial identity. Across the stories of AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha, silence initially created vulnerability, but it coexisted with cultural strengths and external supports that enabled participants to transform that silence into clarity, resilience, and a grounded sense of self.

The participants' narratives made clear that silence about race left them unprepared for early encounters with racism, but their resilience, combined with familial and cultural resources, provided by interactions with Black family members, allowed them to claim fuller, more confident identities in adulthood. Breaking this cycle of

silence in families and schools is therefore critical to supporting the healthy identity development of biracial children in the South.

Theme 2: Assimilation demands in White-dominated schools shape how biracial students navigate identity and belonging.

The second major theme I constructed from participants' narratives is based on the recurring comments made about the pressure to assimilate in predominantly White school environments. These pressures took many forms like appearance-based expectations, classroom silences, microaggressions, and the implicit demand to "fit in" with dominant norms. By contextualizing these narratives, I found that Theme 2 supported the study's theoretical framework, revealing that assimilation was not just an individual challenge, but a systemic process shaped by racial hierarchies. At the same time, moments of hidden cultural wealth helped participants navigate these pressures, making assimilation a central influence on the developmental pathways of biracial identity.

Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) highlights that schools, as institutions, are not race-neutral but are deeply implicated in the reproduction of racial hierarchies. Participants' narratives held up this claim as they showed how schools demanded assimilation into White norms while simultaneously positioning Blackness as deviant or lesser for them. For instance, AK recalled her school's unspoken but pervasive standard of beauty, which reflected White norms:

I remember straightening my hair every morning before school because that's what all the White girls did. If I didn't, people would make comments like, 'Oh, your hair is so big.' It was like my natural self wasn't acceptable.

CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) frames these experiences not as personal insecurity, but as the result of systemic racism that privileges Whiteness and stigmatizes other identities. The demand for assimilation to White aesthetics is an example of how schools enforce racial hierarchies through cultural norms.

Cam's experience reinforced this pattern further. He described being constantly monitored in the classroom:

I felt like the teachers always expected me to act a certain way. If I was too loud, I was a problem. But the White kids could joke and laugh, and it was just 'boys being boys.' I had to keep myself in check all the time.

His narrative reinforced CRT's principle that racism is normalized in everyday interactions, where Black-White biracial and Black students are disproportionately disciplined or scrutinized for behaviors tolerated in White peers (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023). Assimilation here was not optional, as Theme 2 asserts; it was demanded through scrutiny and disciplinary structures that upheld White-centered norms of respectability.

Despite systemic pressures, participants also drew upon cultural wealth, particularly resistance and social capital, that enabled them to push back against assimilation demands. Participants used these hidden resources to affirm their identities, even when schools failed to do so, backing up Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model principles. Lex, for example, recalled moments of resistance:

Everyone at school acted like you had to look a certain way and talk a certain way to fit in. But I had my group of friends who got me. We didn't have to change who we were around each other.

Lex's simple acts of defiance through finding acceptance through her friend group and

rejecting the norms imposed by the school at large are a perfect example of her exhibiting social capital.

Theme 2 underscores that assimilation pressures in predominantly White schools were a defining feature for all of the participants' experiences. While schools enforced White-centered norms through beauty standards, disciplinary practices, and cultural silences, participants demonstrated resilience by drawing on cultural wealth and navigating complex developmental trajectories. For AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha, assimilation pressures were not merely personal challenges but systemic forces that shaped how they saw themselves and how they were seen by others. In establishing these pressures within Theme 2, the theme itself strengthened the study's theoretical foundation by illustrating how principles from critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model played out in participants' lives. Together, these frameworks highlighted both the harm of assimilation demands and the strength participants showed in resisting and redefining them, demonstrating how Theme 2 directly supports and extends this research.

Theme 3: Sports, peer groups, and extracurriculars offer biracial students consistent spaces of belonging and affirmation.

The third theme I constructed from participants' narratives highlighted the critical role of sports, peer groups, and extracurricular activities as belonging spaces. These spaces often contrasted with the alienation and pressures of school classrooms, functioning instead as affirming environments where participants cultivated identity, developed confidence, and built meaningful relationships. For participants negotiating the silences of family and the assimilation pressures of school, extracurricular activities

became vital counter-spaces. Participants' experiences clearly lend support to the three theories that framed my study: critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model. The data showed how belonging spaces nurtured resistance, affirmation, and identity integration.

Critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) underscores how racism is embedded in schools, yet extracurricular contexts provided opportunities to disrupt these inequities, supported further by Theme 3. Sports, theater, and friends gave participants spaces to feel seen and in control, something they did not experience inside their classrooms. Cam described how baseball gave him a reprieve from racial scrutiny, saying "On the field, I felt like I could just play. Nobody cared what color I was as long as I hit the ball. It was one of the only places I didn't feel different all the time." Cam's reflection revealed how sports temporarily suspended the racial hierarchies enforced in classrooms. Although these spaces were not entirely free from racial dynamics, they offered him validation based on skill and teamwork rather than racial categorization. CRT (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) referred to these moments as counter-spaces where participants could experience equity, even if briefly. Maha also experienced performance spaces as liberating when she shared "When I danced, nobody asked me what I was. They just cheered. It felt good to be seen for what I could do, not for how I looked." Her account highlights how extracurricular spaces provided opportunities for recognition beyond racialized identities, challenging systemic patterns of invisibility.

Theme 3 also supported the research by illustrating Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, which emphasizes that students of color draw on aspirational, familial,

resistance, and social capital to navigate marginalization. In participants' narratives, extracurricular spaces became key sites where these forms of capital flourished, offering meaningful affirmation and positively shaping their identity development. Maha frequently remembered her theater group as a safe space, stating in one session, "In theater, I didn't feel like the mixed girl. I was just Maha. We laughed, we worked together, and nobody cared about my hair or my skin. That group gave me confidence I didn't have in school." Maha's story illustrated social capital: the strength of supportive peer networks. These connections with peers in her theater group gave her the confidence to resist assimilation pressures and nurtured her emerging identity. AK described similar affirmation from her softball team when she shared, "When I was playing, people cheered for me because I was good. It didn't matter what I looked like. That gave me the confidence to believe in myself outside of the game, too." Her narrative showed aspirational capital in action because her athletic ability affirmed her value in a context that otherwise silenced her identity in school classrooms.

Participants' experiences provided practical examples of how Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model and the idea of movement toward appreciation and integration stages could work. The spaces of belonging that each one found created a context where their identities were validated even in light of their schools and families attempts to silence or marginalize them. Maha described how her friends allowed her to explore identity openly when she stated, "With my friends, I could talk about things I couldn't bring up at home or school. We all kind of knew what it felt like to be different, and that made me feel less alone." Through Poston's (1990) lens, Maha's peer group provided the safety necessary for her to move from denial toward appreciation. Such

belonging spaces functioned as catalysts for identity development, helping participants claim their Black-White biracial identity more fully, as Theme 3 claims.

Across participants' stories, belonging spaces countered the marginalization of family silence and assimilation pressures. Stories from my participants provide support for the claims made by CRT, CWM, and BIDM. To validate CRT's notion of using counter-stories these young adults found contexts that temporarily resisted systemic hierarchies. They found capital from belonging spaces, and that illustrates the value of Yosso's (2005) cultural capital. They overcame challenges and moved through Poston's (1990) framework using spaces of belonging to facilitate developmental progression. Together, the contributions from theory and participants' stories illustrate that belonging spaces were not incidental, but central to participants' identity development.

Theme 3 underscores that sports, peer groups, and extracurricular contexts were vital lifelines for the study's Black-White biracial participants. They provided affirmation, connection, and visibility that schools often withheld. For Cam, Lex, AK, and Maha, these spaces were transformative by countering deficit narratives, fostering resilience, and advancing identity integration. Belonging spaces were more than hobbies or activities; they were sites of survival, empowerment, and self-definition.

Theme 4: Biracial students navigate constant shifts between visibility, invisibility, and scrutiny in predominantly White schools.

The fourth theme that I constructed from participants' narratives was the paradoxical experience of visibility and invisibility shared through narratives. As Black-White biracial individuals who grew up in the South, participants described how their identities were simultaneously overlooked and subjected to intense scrutiny. They all

recalled moments when schools and communities failed to acknowledge their racial realities, rendering them invisible in the curriculum, classroom conversations, and broader cultural recognition, while they also described being hypervisible, singled out, and constantly questioned about their appearance, background, and authenticity. This dual burden shaped their childhoods and adolescent experiences in ways that left lasting impressions on their identity development. Exploring the connection allowed me to demonstrate how visibility and invisibility functioned as sources of tension but also as catalysts for resilience and growth for the participants provided another point of support for the theoretical premises previously established in CRT, CWM, and BIDM.

From a critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) perspective, invisibility and hypervisibility are not random occurrences but deeply tied to racial hierarchies. Participants' stories supported this claim as they illustrated how schools, peers, and communities ignored their Black-White biracial identity in some contexts while marking them as racially different in others. This contradiction reflected the ways in which racial binaries dominated Southern culture for participants, leaving little space for them as biracial children to mature and exist authentically. Maha reflected on how she was treated as an object of curiosity by her peers, saying people always asked me, “What are you?” Like I was some kind of mystery to solve. It made me feel like I was on display, but at the same time, they never actually saw me for me.” Her account highlights the paradox of being constantly questioned but never truly seen; her racial identity was hypervisible, but her individuality and humanity were overlooked.

AK described how predominantly White schools erased her identity altogether in classroom settings:

In school projects, teachers never picked stories or history that looked like me. It was like I did not exist at all. But I learned to find my own role models, people outside of school who reminded me I mattered.

Her reflection showed how schools erased her identity by teaching curricula that ignored biracial and multicultural stories, which made her feel invisible. AK also showed resilience by finding role models outside of school since none were offered in the classroom, demonstrating her ability to build support on her own when the institution did not provide it.

During interviews, Cam often described the intense scrutiny he felt participating in athletics, reflecting “I felt like if I messed up, it wasn’t just me messing up, it was like I was representing everybody Black person I know. That was a lot of pressure, and I hated that people saw me that way.” Cam’s words revealed the pressure of hypervisibility, where mistakes were magnified through the lens of racial representation. Instead of being seen as an individual, he carried the weight of representing an entire racial group.

Appearance was the area where Lex recalled constantly being scrutinized, whether she was at school or out in the community, to the point of often feeling fetishized:

People always had something to say about my skin tone, like was I ‘Black enough’ or ‘too light.’ It made me question myself for a long time until I realized that I didn’t have to prove anything to anyone. They could think whatever they wanted.

Her experience further illustrated how hypervisibility can produce self-doubt and internal

conflict, though over time, Lex grew to reject these external judgments, moving toward self-acceptance, despite feeling fetishized time and time again. This shift required her to unlearn years of imposed narratives and to reframe her identity on her own terms, rather than through the lens of others' expectations. In doing so, she transformed experiences of scrutiny into sources of strength, reclaiming agency over how she was seen and how she chose to see herself. Her trajectory illustrates Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model, moving from confusion and denial toward appreciation and eventual integration, where she affirmed both sides of her heritage as part of a cohesive, valued self.

Although participants often felt the tension of being both visible and invisible, they drew on cultural wealth to respond and build resilience. Their stories help illuminate Yosso's (2005) framework in the way they relied on resistance, navigational, and aspirational capital to navigate these contradictions. Cam demonstrated resistance capital by refusing to internalize stereotypes; through sports and by asserting his individuality, he resisted being reduced to racial expectations. AK's story reflected navigational capital, as she actively sought role models beyond school, finding affirmation in spaces that recognized her worth and circumvented institutions that diminished her. Maha's persistence illustrated aspirational capital. Despite repeated questioning and scrutiny, she held fast to her belief that she could define her own identity, showing determination to be seen for who she truly was. Together, these examples show how cultural wealth provided participants not only with tools to endure the challenges of visibility and invisibility, but also with pathways to affirm their identities and move toward self-defined belonging.

The participants' experiences of visibility and scrutiny shaped their

developmental journeys, as they moved from confusion and denial to appreciation and integration while resisting both erasure and hypervisibility they provided examples of Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model at work. Lex's eventual rejection of others' judgments reflected a shift into appreciation, affirming her identity on her own terms. AK's resilience in seeking external role models supported her progression toward integration, as she pieced together affirming narratives of biracial identity. Cam's transition from silence in high school to speaking out in college demonstrated a movement from denial toward integration, shaped by his experiences of hypervisibility. Maha's navigation of constant questioning strengthened her self-definition, ultimately reinforcing an integrated sense of self. Together, these stories showed how participants' developmental paths were deeply intertwined with the ways they confronted, resisted, and redefined the racialized expectations imposed on them.

Theme 4 showed that constantly shifting between being unseen and being overly noticed deeply shaped how these Black-White biracial participants experienced growing up in the South. They were rendered invisible in curricula and institutional narratives while simultaneously subjected to relentless scrutiny about their authenticity. These contradictory realities created tension but also became sites of resilience and growth. Participants leveraged cultural wealth to resist erasure, navigated around unresponsive institutions, and ultimately developed stronger, more integrated identities. Their stories highlight the urgent need for schools to move beyond binary racial frameworks and affirm the full humanity of Black-White biracial children and youth. For AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha, the journey through invisibility and scrutiny was painful but ultimately transformative, fostering resilience, pride, and identity integration.

Theme 5: Resilience and identity integration develop over time as biracial students navigate silence, assimilation, belonging, and scrutiny.

I constructed a fifth theme from participants' narratives that centered on resilience and the gradual process of identity integration. For Black-White biracial children growing up in the South, resilience was not simply an innate trait but a necessity, a survival strategy shaped by the silences in their families, the assimilation pressures in their schools, and the constant scrutiny in their communities. Participants described how, over time, they developed confidence, clarity, and pride in their Black-White biracial identity despite the challenges they encountered. Their stories traced a powerful trajectory: from early vulnerability to emerging strength, from confusion and doubt to clarity and pride, and from a fragmented sense of self toward an integrated identity. By foregrounding their voices and lived experiences, this theme highlights the pathways through which AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha came to embrace resilience and claim their identities as sources of power.

From a critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) perspective, resilience must be understood within the context of systemic racism. The participants' stories revealed that resilience was not simply an individual trait or an internal personality strength. Instead, their resilience emerged in direct response to the racism they encountered in schools, in their neighborhoods, and in peer interactions. It was forged as a form of resistance to structures that sought to marginalize them, and it reflected their ability to navigate and push back against these conditions.

Cam spoke openly about how his resilience developed only later in his life, once he entered college and found supportive communities where his experiences were

validated, stating “In high school, I just kept quiet, but in college I learned to speak up. I joined groups that talked about race, and I realized I wasn’t alone. That made me stronger.” Cam’s narrative illustrated resilience as a learned and communal response, supporting CRT tenets. Initially silenced by the assimilation pressures of high school and the scrutiny of peers, he survived by withholding his voice. However, as he entered college, he discovered that resilience could also take the form of speaking out, joining with others, and transforming painful experiences into advocacy. His journey reflected the way resilience develops in stages and often emerges through exposure to communities that affirm one’s identity.

The presence of mentors proved vital to Lex’s journey toward resilience. While her family maintained silence around race, teachers and coaches became critical figures who saw her potential and reminded her of her worth. She shared, “I had teachers and coaches who told me I could do anything. Even when I doubted myself, they reminded me I was more than the labels people put on me. That kept me going.” Her story revealed how mentorship was central to her resilience. Affirming relationships provided her with confidence and helped her reject deficit-based narratives that she encountered both in school and in broader society. For Lex, resilience was relational, something built through encouragement and trust offered by those who believed in her even when she struggled to believe in herself. These adults acted as buffers against the negative messages she absorbed elsewhere, illustrating how resilience for Black-White biracial children and youth is often nurtured in relationships outside of family or immediate peer contexts.

Resilience for Maha was rooted in cultural pride and the traditions of her Black Haitian family. Though she often encountered questioning or felt out of place in school

environments, she relied on her Haitian background to sustain her sense of identity. She shared, “Even when I felt out of place, I knew where I came from. My family’s Haitian traditions reminded me I had history and culture to be proud of. That helped me keep my head up.” Her words highlighted the deep importance of cultural wealth in the process of resilience, aligning with CWM principles. For Maha, resilience was not just about persevering through challenges but about drawing strength from a cultural lineage that reminded her of her value. Even when schools failed to provide representation or affirmation, her traditions anchored her identity and offered her pride and belonging.

AK’s journey revealed the culmination of resilience in the form of identity integration. After years of struggling with the pressure to “pick a side,” she described how she eventually came to embrace both aspects of her racial identity as equally valuable, stating “For a long time, I felt like I had to pick a side. But now I know I’m both, and that’s my strength. I don’t let other people tell me who I am anymore.” AK’s statement reflects the transformative nature of resilience. After years of negotiating silence at home and external pressures at school, she reached a place of confidence where her Black-White biracial identity was no longer a source of conflict but a source of pride. Her narrative demonstrated how resilience, over time, leads not only to survival but to the empowerment that comes with full identity integration.

Participants’ experiences revealed resilience not as a single moment of triumph but as a complex, ongoing process that unfolded across time. It developed through stages that began with silence or confusion, moved through periods of doubt, and ultimately grew into clarity and strength. This trajectory was never linear; setbacks and moments of struggle resurfaced at different points in their lives, yet the larger arc reflected deepening

resilience and integration. Cam's advocacy, Lex's reliance on mentors, Maha's cultural grounding, and AK's acceptance of duality all demonstrated how resilience is layered and multifaceted. For Cam, that process came through finding his voice in collective spaces, particularly in college organizations where he could speak openly about race without fear of judgment. For Lex, resilience was nurtured by mentors who reminded her that her value extended far beyond stereotypes or labels. For Maha, it was sustained by family traditions and cultural pride that anchored her even when her identity was questioned. And for AK, resilience came through realizing that her biracial identity was not a limitation but an asset that marked her as unique and powerful. Together, their stories showed that resilience was not only about enduring hardship but about transforming it into a source of identity, strength, and possibility.

Together, these stories showed that resilience was not a single trait, but a process that was communal, relational, and deeply personal. It was communal because resilience often grew within circles of affirmation such as teams, peers, clubs, or mentors who validated their experiences, and it was relational because trusted adults, cultural practices, and meaningful relationships helped participants reinterpret and make sense of difficult moments. It was also deeply personal because, in the end, each participant had to internally choose how to integrate, claim, and live their biracial identity for themselves. Theme 5 underscores that resilience and identity integration are long-term processes that are cultivated through struggle, supported by affirming relationships, and grounded in cultural pride. Over time, participants moved from confusion and fragmentation toward wholeness and confidence, reminding us that resilience is not simply about surviving adversity, but about transforming struggle into strength and embracing identity as a

source of empowerment. For the Black-White biracial participants in this research, resilience was both personal and collective; it was an act of survival and a declaration of self-definition.

Across the four narratives, the participants' stories revealed how silence, assimilation pressures, belonging spaces, visibility, and resilience intertwined to shape their identity development. Each participant described moments of marginalization in their schools and communities, yet their accounts also highlighted the ways they drew strength from sports, peer groups, mentors and friends, and cultural traditions. Although their experiences were not identical, their narratives converged around the challenge of negotiating Black-White biracial identity within rigid racial binaries of the South. What developed was a picture of young people navigating both invisibility and hypervisibility, finding belonging in counter-spaces, and gradually moving toward a confident integration of their identities.

By examining their experiences collectively, Theme 5 shows that the participants were not only telling individual life stories but also illuminating shared patterns of resilience. Their accounts connected across the contexts of classrooms, athletic fields, family homes, and peer circles, to demonstrate how these Black-White biracial participants created meaning and agency within environments that often denied or distorted their realities. Together, AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha illustrated that resilience is cultivated through lived tensions and that identity integration is both relational and deeply personal. Their interconnected narratives highlighted how the struggle to be seen and affirmed is not simply an individual journey but part of a broader, collective story of Black-White biracial individuals growing up in the South.

Theme Conclusion

The five themes in this chapter reveal how Black-White biracial children who grew up in the South navigated race, identity, and belonging across their families, schools, and communities. Their narratives showed how early silence about race created uncertainty; how predominantly White schools often imposed subtle and overt assimilation pressures; and how sports, peer groups, and extracurricular activities became crucial counter-spaces of affirmation. Participants also described the ongoing negotiation between invisibility and hypervisibility, illustrating the complexity of being biracial in regions shaped by rigid racial binaries. Over time, they drew on cultural wealth, supportive relationships, and their own determination to move toward a stronger, more integrated sense of identity.

While the central focus of my study has been on presenting the rich context and narrative profiles of each participant, the work extended beyond storytelling to include careful analysis of the data. Using both connecting and categorizing strategies, I engaged in cycles of coding, categorizing, and mapping to illuminate the layers of meaning within and across participants' accounts. This process allowed me to identify points of overlap as well as areas of divergence, highlighting how individual experiences reflected broader patterns of race, identity, and belonging in the South. Together, these five themes that I constructed deepen understanding of the lived realities of Black-White biracial children, support existing principles from the theoretical frameworks used in this study, and underscore the need for educators to recognize the multifaceted ways students negotiate identity each day.

In the next chapter, I turn to my findings and discussion, where the themes I

constructed are explored more fully to show how the participants' lived experiences connect to the theoretical frameworks guiding this study and to the broader implications for understanding Black-White biracial identity in Southern educational contexts.

Building on this foundation, Chapter 6 ties the findings back to the conceptual framework, directly addresses research questions, and outlines implications for educators, families, and communities.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I presented the narratives of four Black-White biracial young adults who grew up in the South and shared their stories of navigating race, identity, and belonging within families, schools, and communities. Guided by Seidman's (2019) three-interview approach, these participants reflected on childhood experiences, family dynamics, and educational settings that shaped how they came to define themselves and make meaning of their biracial identity. Their accounts revealed both the silences and affirmations that surrounded them, the pressures of racial categorization in predominantly White spaces, and the resilience they developed through family, peers, and extracurricular activities. By applying their stories to the frameworks of critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model, I was able to offer data to support each theory; specifically related to how systemic inequities, personal agency, and cultural resources intersected in the lived realities of the Black-White biracial participants who grew up in the South taking part in this research.

This final chapter brings together the threads of the study by revisiting the conceptual framework and methodological choices that undergirded the inquiry, followed by thematic answers to the research questions. I also consider the study's limitations and identify areas where future research can further extend understanding of biracial identity

in educational contexts. Beyond summarizing findings, this chapter highlights the implications of participants' stories for teachers, schools, and communities, offering guidance for creating more inclusive environments that affirm the complexity of biracial lives. I close with lessons I learned throughout the research process, both as a scholar and as a mother raising children who share the identities at the heart of this study. In doing so, I hope this work not only contributes to scholarship but also provides educators and policymakers with the insights needed to ensure that biracial students are seen, supported, and valued in Southern classrooms and beyond.

Conceptual Framework

In Chapter 2, I introduced the conceptual framework that guided this study, which wove together critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), Yosso's (2005) cultural wealth model, and Poston's (1990) biracial identity development model. These perspectives helped me stay attentive to the complexities of participants growing up Black-White biracial in the South, where racial categories are rarely flexible and schools often remain rooted in binary understandings of race. The frameworks reminded me that my participants' experiences were never isolated but shaped by broader historical and structural forces, even as they each found ways to resist, redefine, and claim their identities in deeply personal ways.

The use of narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014) through Seidman's (2019) three-interview framework allowed me to hear directly from participants as they described how they came to understand who they were across different spaces: school, home, and community. The process revealed identity development as ongoing and cyclical rather than fixed. Each participant's story carried both struggle and growth like Cam finding

belonging and confidence in student organizations, Lex leaning into mentors who affirmed her worth, Maha grounding herself in family traditions, and AK reframing her Black-White biracial identity as a source of strength. Their stories echo the stages that Poston (1990) mapped but also highlight the everyday strategies that Yosso (2005) described as aspirational, navigational, and resistance capital. In these stories, resilience was not a single act of triumph but a steady, layered practice of making space for themselves in environments that often tried to narrow or erase them.

By focusing specifically on the South, my research brings attention to a region where the weight of history continues to press heavily on how race is understood. While national reports show that the number of Black-White biracial children is steadily increasing (U.S. Census Bureau, 2021), little has been written about what it means to grow up Black-White biracial in communities where racial boundaries have long been policed. My participants spoke to the challenges of being both unseen and overly scrutinized. They experienced this invisibility when teachers or peers dismissed their experiences. On the other end of the spectrum, they also experienced hypervisibility when their presence was called out or questioned. Their words remind us that Black-White biracial identity in the South cannot be separated from the deep cultural memory of segregation and the persistent social demand to fit into fixed categories.

The heart of this study lies in lifting up voices that are rarely centered in educational research. The participants' stories complicate deficit-based views of biracial identity and point toward the need for schools to embrace representation, cultural wealth, and the fluidity of identity as resources rather than problems. Teacher preparation programs, classroom practices, and school policies must begin to recognize and affirm

the layered realities of students who do not fit monoracial expectations. The insights shared here make clear that Black-White biracial students should not be asked to minimize or divide themselves in order to belong. Instead, their stories call us to reimagine schools as places where all of who they are is welcomed, validated, and celebrated. These insights are taken up in greater depth in the thematic answers to my research questions later in this chapter. The frameworks that shaped my study not only guided the ways I interpreted participants' stories but also informed the methodological choices I made in designing and carrying out the research.

Methods

Using the elements of my conceptual framework as a guide, I selected methods that aligned with my research questions and the unique focus of this study. Narrative inquiry (Daiute, 2014), combined with phenomenological components from Seidman's (2019) three-interview series, provided the most fitting design for exploring how Black-White biracial young adults in the South made meaning of their identities. Narrative inquiry, as Daiute (2014) explained, is a way of making sense of human experience through stories, and this approach allowed my participants' voices to take center stage. To gather data, I conducted three in-depth, semi-structured interviews with each participant over time, following Seidman's (2019) structure. Interviews were held in common spaces on campus where students felt comfortable or virtually, which provided participants flexibility and safety in sharing their stories.

For analysis, I relied on categorizing strategies to identify recurring patterns across the data. Using multiple cycles of coding (Saldaña, 2016), I employed *in vivo*, emotion, values, process, and concept coding to capture both participants' own language

and the deeper layers of meaning embedded in their stories. I hand-coded transcripts, wrote extensive memos, and sorted and re-sorted codes into categories that captured the complex realities of growing up Black-White biracial in the South. This iterative process, supported by visual code maps and analytic reflections, helped me recognize patterns and tensions that cut across participants' narratives. These patterns ultimately developed into themes that answered my research questions and revealed how my participants navigated visibility, silence, belonging, and resilience in contexts that often demanded racial categorization.

Alongside categorizing strategies, I employed connecting strategies to construct narrative profiles of each participant's life story. Following Seidman's (2019) recommendations, I organized participants' accounts chronologically and prioritized their language, including their direct quotes, repeated phrases, and exact wording when possible, to tell their stories in ways that reflected how they shared their stories. I added short transitions or contextual notes to ensure coherence and was careful not to dilute the meaning embedded in their words when retelling their stories. In addition, I wrote introductions and reflections for each participant, drawing from my analytic memos, to situate their narratives in the broader context of my study. This process honored the fullness of participants' experiences while providing a clear window into how their identity was shaped across family, school, and community spaces.

By blending narrative inquiry with rigorous coding and categorizing, my methods allowed me to stay true to the individuality of each participant while also drawing out the shared dimensions of their experiences. This combination reflected both the personal and intellectual commitments of my study: to honor voices too often silenced and to

illuminate the ways Black-White biracial identity is negotiated in Southern schools and families.

Answers to Research Questions

Through the combined processes of connecting and categorizing, I moved from fragmented pieces of data into cohesive understandings of my participants' experiences. Constructing narrative profiles allowed me to trace the flow of each participant's story, while cycles of coding and connecting revealed recurring patterns across their accounts. From this layered analysis, I constructed five central themes that do not directly answer my research questions but in the process of constructing the themes I was able to identify specific answers to the research questions. These themes reflected the ways Black-White biracial children in the South navigated identity, family, and schooling, ultimately showing that they each dealt with it in different ways:

1. Family silence about race forces biracial children to interpret identity through personal experiences.
2. Assimilation demands in White-dominated schools shape how biracial students navigate identity and belonging.
3. Sports, peer groups, and extracurriculars offer biracial students consistent spaces of belonging and affirmation.
4. Biracial students navigate constant shifts between visibility, invisibility, and scrutiny in predominantly White schools.
5. Resilience and identity integration develop over time as biracial students navigate silence, assimilation, belonging, and scrutiny.

Chapter 5 is devoted to unpacking and explaining each theme, which will not be repeated

here, rather a summary table (Table 4) is provided as a refresher.

Table 4

Themes Constructed from Participants' Narratives

Theme	Detailed Description (from Chapter V)	Participants Most Linked
Theme 1: Family silence about race forces biracial children to interpret identity through personal experiences.	Participants described how silence around race within families left them unprepared for the racialization they experienced in schools and communities. For some, the lack of dialogue mirrored broader Southern cultural norms of White comfort and avoidance of race, reinforcing the difficulty of developing racial self-understanding.	AK, Cam, Lex
Theme 2: Assimilation demands in White-dominated schools shape how biracial students navigate identity and belonging.	Biracial students often felt compelled to minimize difference, conform to White norms, or downplay aspects of their identity to fit in. These assimilation pressures produced tension, leading some to adopt strategies like code-switching or silence in order to survive socially and academically.	Cam, Lex
Theme 3: Sports, peer groups, and extracurriculars offer biracial students consistent spaces of belonging and affirmation.	Athletics and extracurricular activities offered protective spaces where participants felt affirmed. Sports teams, arts, and peer groups served as anchors of belonging, giving them recognition and support often missing in formal school spaces.	AK, Cam, Lex, Maha
Theme 4: Biracial students navigate constant shifts between visibility, invisibility, and scrutiny in predominantly White schools.	Participants recalled the paradox of being rendered invisible in some contexts while simultaneously hyper-scrutinized in others. Teachers and peers often marked them as different, creating a constant negotiation of identity visibility that shaped their daily school experiences.	Cam, Lex, Maha

Theme	Detailed Description (from Chapter V)	Participants Most Linked
Theme 5: Resilience and identity integration develop over time as biracial students navigate silence, assimilation, belonging, and scrutiny.	Resilience was not described as a single moment of triumph but as a gradual, nonlinear process. Through family dynamics, peer affirmation, and cultural grounding, participants learned to resist erasure, reclaim voice, and integrate their biracial identity into a source of strength.	All Participants

Note. This table presents the five themes constructed in Chapter 5, their detailed descriptions drawn from participant narratives, and the participants most strongly associated with each theme.

By situating these themes alongside my research questions and weaving in participants’ words, I was able to highlight both the individuality of their stories and the larger patterns that unite them. In doing so, I reinforced how this study contributes to the broader scholarly conversation on identity, belonging, and resilience among Black-White biracial students in Southern schools. I will first use the similarities in experiences and stories told to address the research questions then demonstrate the themes that were constructed when they were presented to support elements of the theoretical framework.

Research Question 1

Research Question 1 asked: In what ways did four Black-White biracial young adults define the construct of race?

The narratives revealed that participants defined race as both a social imposition and a deeply personal negotiation, shaped by silence at home, hypervisibility at school, and their own acts of resilience. They learned early that race was not a neutral descriptor but a contested category that determined how they were seen, valued, and treated. Each

participant's account illustrated how their lived experiences complicated binary racial frameworks, pushing them to construct definitions of race that held both constraint and possibility.

AK's reflections highlighted how familial silence shaped her earliest understandings of race. She recalled:

My mom and dad didn't really talk about race when I was growing up. They kind of just acted like it wasn't a big deal, and I think they thought that made things easier for me. But when I got to school, it was like everyone else saw me as Black, and I didn't know what to do with that because no one ever talked about it at home.

Her story underscored how silence does not erase race but often leaves Black-White biracial individuals unprepared for racialization outside the home. For AK, race was first defined by others' labels rather than her own self-concept. Cam also described early confusion when his questions about race were dismissed, reinforcing the idea that race was not to be spoken about. Yet by adolescence, race became unavoidable in his public life, especially through athletics. He explained, "I felt like if I messed up, it wasn't just me messing up, it was like I was representing every Black person I know." Here, Cam defined race through the lens of hypervisibility: he was made to stand as a proxy for an entire racial group, a weight he resented but could not escape.

How race was defined by Black bodies, particularly through skin tone, was illuminated in Lex's account. She recalled constant commentary, sharing "People always had something to say about my skin tone, like was I 'Black enough' or 'too light.' It made me question myself for a long time until I realized I didn't have to prove anything

to anyone.” For her, race was first an externally imposed measure of “enoughness,” but over time she redefined it as self-acceptance, refusing to let others determine her belonging.

Maha’s experiences further demonstrated the paradox of race as both invisibility and spectacle. She remembered peers repeatedly asking, “What are you?” and treating her identity as a puzzle rather than a person. “It made me feel like I was on display, but at the same time, they never actually saw me for me,” she said. These interactions reduced her to a curiosity, where others claimed the right to define her without ever recognizing her humanity. For Maha, race was defined through constant questioning that erased individuality and forced her to manage the tension between being hypervisible as a racialized body and invisible as a full self. While such moments could have fractured her sense of belonging, she leaned on her Black grandmother’s affirmations coupled with the acceptance she found in theater alongside her own developing voice to resist internalizing those messages. As she moved into college, Maha shifted from questioning to claiming her identity, embracing her Blackness as a source of clarity, strength, and grounding. Her trajectory illustrated how definitions of race evolve through lived negotiation, showing that identity formation is not static but a dynamic process of rejecting imposed labels and affirming self-definition.

Together, these stories showed that participants did not define race in abstract terms but through the lived realities of silence, erasure, visibility, and resilience. At times, race was defined for them through family avoidance, peer scrutiny, or institutional erasure. At other times, they defined it for themselves by claiming mentors, rejecting stereotypes, and integrating both sides of their heritage. Their narratives affirmed that for

them growing up as Black-White biracial children in the South, defining race was never static. It was an ongoing, contested process of resisting imposed categories while constructing affirming meanings of self that honor the fullness of their identity.

Research Question 2

Research Question 2 asked: How did four Black-White biracial young adults situate themselves within their defined construct of race in the school setting?

Participants consistently described school as one of the earliest and most intense sites where they were forced to “choose a side.” Classrooms, peers, and teachers often imposed categories that collapsed biracial identity into monoracial terms, leaving participants to negotiate a sense of self within rigid frameworks.

AK described how her predominantly White school erased her existence in the curriculum altogether: “In school projects, teachers never picked stories or history that looked like me. It was like I did not exist at all.” For AK, finding a sense of who she was meant looking beyond school for role models who affirmed her Black-White biracial identity, because her classrooms offered no real space for her to see herself reflected.

On the contrary, Cam’s experience was dominated by hypervisibility in sports. He shared that mistakes on the field felt amplified, explaining, “I felt like if I messed up, it wasn’t just me messing up, it was like I was representing every Black person I know.” This pressure forced him to situate himself as a representative rather than an individual, carrying the weight of stereotypes his peers did not share. Successes felt conditional, celebrated only within the confines of athletic performance, while failures carried the risk of confirming biased assumptions. The ball field, which should have been a place of belonging and routine, became a stage where his identity was constantly scrutinized.

Even as his teammates saw him as a player, Cam was aware that others outside the dugout were reading his presence through a racialized lens. His story underscored how hypervisibility in sports became both a burden and a catalyst, shaping resilience not through freedom but through the necessity of navigating and resisting stereotypes in real time.

Like Cam, for Lex the school setting made race inseparable from appearance. Classmates scrutinized her skin tone, questioning whether she was “Black enough” or “too light.” Initially, she internalized this policing, but over time she rejected the judgments: “It made me question myself for a long time until I realized I didn’t have to prove anything to anyone.” Her ability to reposition herself on her own terms illustrated agency within a system that tried to define her, and she was extremely proud that she did not succumb to the pressures to be something other than her true self once she entered high school. On numerous occasions Lex pointed to the exposure she was finally allowed to have with her Black family in late middle school as the catalyst for her solidified self-perception.

Maha echoed this paradox of hypervisibility and invisibility, as well, describing how her classmates constantly asked, “What are you?” which casted her as an object of curiosity but never truly seeing her. She relied on persistence in school, and later found affirmation in college, which helped her turn others’ questioning into internal clarity about who she was. She frequently shared how she just really did not bother with anyone else’s perception of her amongst classmates after middle school and focused instead on friends that were supportive and nonjudgemental.

Across all participants, the predominantly White schools they attended did not

provide safe or impartial ground. They were racialized spaces where Black-White biracial identity was either erased, fetishized, or reduced to stereotypes. Classrooms, hallways, and athletic fields became sites where participants were constantly read and categorized by others, leaving little room for authentic self-definition. Instead of finding affirmation, they recalled being treated as curiosities or forced to explain and defend who they were, yet within these environments, participants did not passively accept erasure or distortion. They situated themselves by drawing on what Yasso called cultural wealth as they sought out allies and mentors who validated their complexity, resisting the narrow scripts others tried to impose, and developing pride on their own terms. Their ability to lean on aspirational, resistance, and navigational forms of capital allowed them to carve out spaces of belonging and strength, even when schools failed to provide affirmation. In doing so, they demonstrated both resilience and agency, showing that identity formation was not only a reaction to school environments but also an act of ongoing self-assertion.

Research Question 3

Research Question 3 asked: How were the racial self-perceptions of four Black-White biracial young adults affected by the home environment?

Participants' narratives revealed that home life played a complex role, sometimes through silence and avoidance, other times through affirmation and cultural grounding. Family conversations, or more so the absence of them with White family members, shaped whether participants entered school prepared to navigate racialization or were left to fend for themselves as they tried to figure out where they were safe and accepted.

AK described how her parents' silence about race left her unprepared and resentful:

My mom and dad didn't really talk about race when I was growing up which hurt me and made me feel like they were avoiding part of who I was. But when I got to school, it was like everyone else saw me as Black, and I didn't know what to do with that because no one ever talked about it at home.

Here, family silence reflected broader Southern norms discussed in prior research of avoiding racial conversations, reinforcing the message that race was something to be endured rather than discussed.

Often left without answers, as well, Cam recalled asking questions about race as a child but being dismissed, denying him of support and guidance that could have helped him make sense of his experiences. Those early moments of silence did more than leave questions hanging; they reinforced a sense of confusion and solitude that shaped his self-understanding and followed him into adolescence. In school, where peers and teachers frequently read him through racialized assumptions, he carried the weight of not having a clear framework at home from his White mother and family members to counterbalance those outside messages. Without the language or advice to navigate these complexities, Cam sought affirmation in the spaces available to him, primarily through sports and peer groups. Athletics, especially baseball, offered a sense of belonging and structure, but they also exposed him to reductive stereotypes that tied his worth to physical ability or racialized expectations. At the same time, these spaces also became outlets for resilience, where he could cultivate relationships, test his voice, and carve out a sense of pride that pushed against limiting labels. Sports, then, functioned as both a site of constraint and of empowerment, underscoring the dual nature of the environments he moved through as he worked to shape his identity.

Lex's family dynamics were different from AK's and Cam's, as they were marked by direct and persistent instructions from her White mother and grandmother to actually deny her Black-White biracial identity; she was explicitly and repeatedly told to say she was "just White" if someone questioned her race. These directives were not neutral family advice but powerful messages about which parts of herself were acceptable and which parts needed to be hidden. Internalizing these messages in childhood, Lex's early self-perception was shaped by denial, causing her to minimize or suppress her Black identity in public spaces such as school, friendships, and community interactions. The pressure to perform Whiteness left her feeling fragmented, as though parts of who she was had to remain invisible in order to be accepted. Over time, however, this imposed narrative no longer fit. Through exposure to new environments, mentors, and her own growing self-awareness, Lex gradually rejected the limitations placed on her. She began to affirm the fullness of her identity, moving toward a deeper appreciation of her Black-White biracial background and learning to take pride in her heritage. This transition was neither immediate nor easy, but it reflected a significant shift in how she defined herself, no longer by the silences or denials of her family but by her own agency and voice.

By contrast to all of the other participants, Maha's family became her strongest grounding force. Whereas Lex was instructed to deny her Black-White biracial identity and Cam was met with silence when he asked questions about race, Maha encountered an entirely different reality at home. Rather than silencing or dismissing her questions, her extended Haitian Black family leaned into them, offering open dialogue, cultural traditions, and affirmations of pride that validated her sense of self. These practices created a foundation of stability she could rely on when the outside world attempted to

undermine or question her identity. Rituals such as shared meals, celebrations of heritage, and frequent conversations about race and belonging helped Maha internalize a self-worth that was not dependent on external approval. Even when peers or teachers challenged her identity or made her feel hypervisible, she drew strength from the affirming messages she consistently received from her extended Black Haitian family. Her story illustrates the profound role families can play in shaping resilience, serving as a protective buffer against the pressures of racialized environments. In Maha's case, her extended Black family offered both aspirational capital through messages of hope, pride, and possibility and familial capital, expressed through bonds of trust and affirmation, even if her parents did not discuss race head on. Together, these forms of cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) sustained her biracial identity, allowing her to navigate external scrutiny with a strong sense of self and a refusal to internalize the doubts of others.

These varied accounts confirmed that the home environment was not neutral for participants. Silence, denial, or affirmation all shaped how participants perceived themselves before stepping into classrooms. Family choices created either vulnerabilities or strengths that participants carried into their school and community interactions. For some, silence or denial meant entering those spaces without the language or confidence to challenge stereotypes, leaving them more susceptible to confusion and isolation. For others, affirmations and cultural grounding provided a protective layer that enabled them to resist outside pressures and define their identities on their own terms.

Research Question 4

Research Question 4 asked: How did parents/guardians of four Black-White biracial young adults contribute to their child's biracial identity?

The participants' narratives revealed that parents and guardians shaped their biracial identity both directly and indirectly. Their influence was visible in explicit instructions, unspoken silences, and modeled cultural pride.

Lex's account demonstrated the impact of explicit instruction in shaping racial identity. Unlike participants who faced silence or ambiguity, she received direct messages from her White mother and grandmother, who told her to deny her Black-White biracial identity and instead present herself as White. These instructions were not casual comments but repeated expectations that carried the weight of authority and family approval. Over time, this guidance contributed to years of internal conflict, as Lex struggled to reconcile the parts of herself she was told to minimize with the reality of how others perceived her. The pressure to conform created feelings of fragmentation, leading her to hide aspects of her identity in public and distance herself from her Black heritage. This suppression delayed her movement toward appreciation and integration, as she had to first undo the harm caused by her family's imposed narrative. Parents' words, in her case, did more than fail to support; they actively restricted her identity development, setting boundaries around who she could and could not be until she found the courage to resist and rewrite the narrative for herself.

AK's family, though likely well-meaning, as she mentioned, modeled avoidance as their primary strategy for dealing with race. Questions were brushed aside, and difficult conversations were left unspoken, conveying the message that silence was safer than engagement; "We just never really talked about it," she told me. While this may have been intended as protection, it also signaled to AK that her Black-White biracial identity was something too complicated, or even too dangerous, to acknowledge openly.

As a result, she entered school unprepared for the racialized assumptions and stereotypes she inevitably encountered from teachers and peers. She shared that the absence of dialogue at home left her without tools to name, question, or push back against those experiences, forcing her to seek affirmation from mentors, coaches, and role models outside of her family. Although these external sources of support eventually became vital to her growth, they could not fully substitute for the validation she longed for from her own household. In this way, parental avoidance became a shaping force, contributing not only to her early confusion but also to a pattern of self-reliance that she had to cultivate in order to navigate her identity. Over time, this independence became a strength, but it was forged out of necessity rather than nurtured through intentional guidance at home.

Cam's White mother and family members also provided limited guidance about race, which left him navigating identity largely on his own. Their absence in conversations about race amplified his feelings of solitude, particularly when peers or coaches racialized him in sports. He remembered vividly, "Fourth grade is the first time I remember my body feeling like a display; that was the day I figured out that my hair would get talked about more than my homework." Moments like these underscored the silence he encountered at home, where he longed for tools to make sense of such experiences but was instead left to shoulder them alone when his White mother brushed off any attempt to talk about issues surrounding his race. His story showed that the lack of parental engagement can push children into external contexts for definition, spaces like the ball field or friend groups, which at times reinforced stereotypes rather than dismantling them. Still, these same contexts also gave him moments of resilience, where belonging was practiced through camaraderie, friendship, and performance, reminding

him that joy itself could serve as resistance.

In contrast, Maha's extended Black Haitian family modeled cultural pride and affirmation for her. Through traditions, values, and open conversations, her grandmother nurtured her dual heritage and emphasized that her identity was something to be celebrated rather than hidden. This grounding shaped the way she approached moments of questioning or scrutiny from peers. When asked the familiar "What are you?," which was a question that unsettled many participants, Maha leaned on the steady assurance of her grandmother's support to sustain her confidence. As she explained:

Probably my family, if I have an issue, and it's like a racial issue, I could always go to my sister, and she'll like talk trash with me. And that makes me feel better to have someone to talk with. Even if I can't talk to my parents or our little brother.

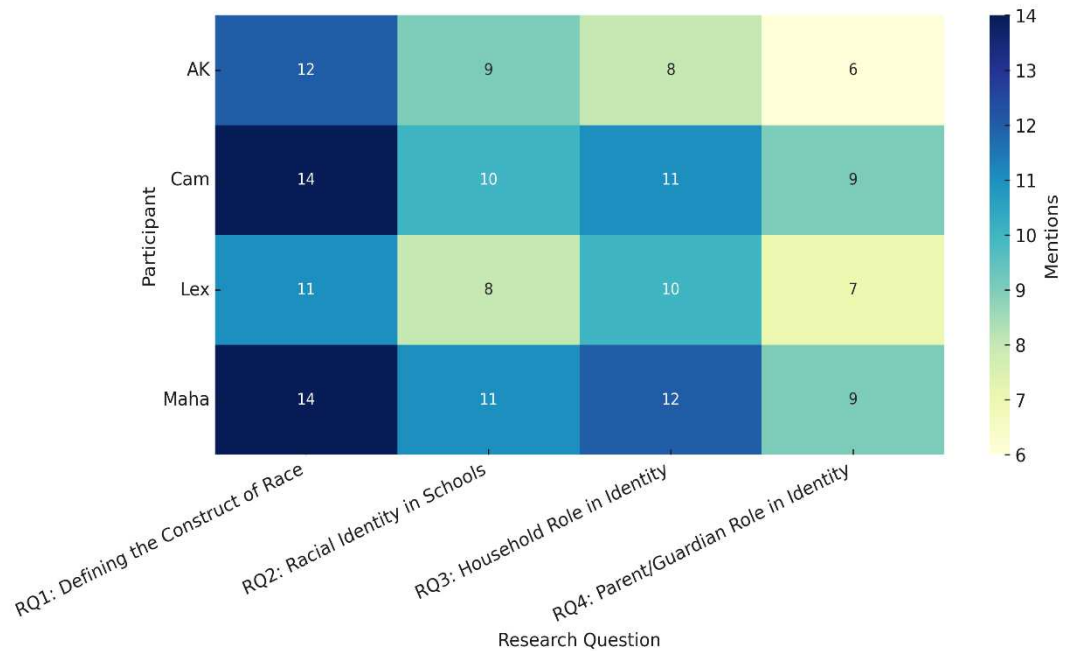
Her account highlighted how affirming extended family guidance, combined with sibling solidarity, provided not only comfort but also resilience for Maha. Unlike participants who experienced silence or denial at home, Maha's story demonstrated the protective role that affirmation can play, offering aspirational and familial capital that helped her embrace her Black-White biracial identity on her own terms. These steady messages of support created a foundation from which she could interpret difficult moments, challenge distorted perceptions, and develop a clearer sense of who she was becoming.

The narratives provided a layered set of answers to my research questions, showing how participants' experiences overlapped, diverged, and revealed new insights. Figure 3 illustrates participants' responses across the research questions, highlighting where their stories most strongly aligned. While each participant brought unique

perspectives shaped by context, certain themes, such as negotiating identity, navigating silence, and finding spaces of belonging were consistently present. This mapping shows collective patterns while respecting individual differences. Reading across rows shows how each participant engaged with all four questions, and reading down columns shows where their responses aligned. Darker shading reflects higher frequencies, highlighting the issues most consistently at the forefront of participants' experiences.

Figure 3

Participants Responses by Research Question



Findings from the study, along with insights drawn directly from the participants' narratives, led me to develop several directives for educators working with Black-White biracial students. These directives are grounded in both the thematic patterns that emerged across the data and the lived experiences that participants articulated in their stories. They are discussed next as guidance for educators seeking to create more affirming, informed, and responsive learning environments.

Implications for Educators

The stories of my four Black-White biracial participants revealed that schools were not neutral spaces for them; they were sites where race, belonging, and identity were constantly negotiated. Educators play a central role in shaping how multiracial students experience these spaces (Leonardo & Boas, 2022), and for Black-White biracial children and youth in the South, the classroom can either become a place of affirmation or yet another context of silence and scrutiny. Based on the insights of my study, I identified several practical considerations that may help educators better support Black-White biracial students in ways that foster both academic success and healthy identity development.

One of the clearest lessons from my participants is that silence about race does not protect children, in fact it actually leaves them unprepared for the realities of navigating racial identity. Educators should not avoid discussions about race but instead create age-appropriate, honest conversations that acknowledge the existence and value of multiracial identities. This involves integrating biracial and multiracial narratives into literature selections, social studies units, and classroom discussions so that students see themselves reflected in the curriculum. When children's experiences are validated as legitimate sources of knowledge, they learn that their identities are recognized and respected. Such affirmation disrupts the pressures of assimilation that my Black-White participants described, where fitting in often meant conforming to White norms of beauty, behavior, or success.

Educators must also be intentional about language. Perpetuating statements like “pick a side” or “you’re really Black” sends a strong message that Black-White biracial

identity is not valid on its own terms and should be avoided. Simple shifts in how they acknowledge students' backgrounds like asking about family heritage, inviting multiple racial categories in class surveys, or encouraging students to share cultural traditions will help create a climate where difference is not erased, but valued. These practices counteract the invisibility my participants often felt when educators ignored or dismissed their lived realities.

Due to the influence of hypervisibility the participants experienced when their appearance or identity was scrutinized, educators must be equipped to recognize and interrupt microaggressions, whether from peers or colleagues. Comments about hair texture, skin tone, or "looking different" should not be minimized as harmless curiosity as they can carry lasting impacts on a child's sense of belonging. Educators can prepare by participating in ongoing professional development around implicit bias, critical race pedagogy, and cultural competence. Self-reflection is also essential; educators must examine their own assumptions and be willing to confront how systemic inequities show up in their classrooms.

Responding to bias also requires cultivating peer cultures of respect. Educators can set the tone by modeling inclusive language, explicitly naming stereotypes when they arise, and creating classroom cultures that emphasize dignity and respect. By doing so, they help ensure that Black-White biracial students do not bear the burden of defending their identities alone. Instead, they can rely on their teachers and classmates as allies in creating safe learning environments.

Representation matters profoundly. My participants often struggled with invisibility when their histories, cultures, and identities were absent from what they

studied in school. Educators can take active steps to diversify materials across content areas. In English Language Arts, this might mean selecting novels or memoirs that highlight multiracial voices. In history, it may involve exploring the contributions of interracial families, civil rights leaders with mixed heritage, or local stories that complicate monoracial narratives. In science and math, it could include highlighting contributions from diverse scholars, helping normalize racial diversity in all fields. These choices communicate to students that identity is not peripheral but integral to learning. Educators can also invite students to bring their own stories into the classroom. Projects such as family history assignments, oral storytelling, or identity maps allow Black-White biracial children to see their lived experiences as sources of knowledge worthy of exploration. These practices foster not only individual affirmation but also broaden classmates' perspectives, cultivating empathy and reducing the isolation that Black-White biracial students may feel.

Several participants in my study found strength in mentors and role models who affirmed their worth and encouraged them to resist stereotypes. Educators can intentionally step into these roles by building trusting relationships and offering spaces where students can talk openly about identity. Mentorship can be formal through advisory programs, affinity groups, or partnerships with community organizations, or informal, through everyday conversations and gestures of care. The goal is to ensure that Black-White biracial students have consistent adult figures who recognize their struggles and remind them of their strengths. Support systems should also extend beyond the classroom. Educators can advocate for school-wide initiatives such as multicultural clubs, mentorship programs that connect students with diverse role models, and professional

learning for staff around multiracial identity. These efforts help to create ecosystems where Black-White biracial students are not left to navigate identity alone but are instead surrounded by networks of care and affirmation.

All four participants in this study frequently named extracurricular activities as spaces where they found belonging and affirmation. Teachers who coach sports, direct clubs, or sponsor activities should be mindful of how these spaces can serve as vital identity anchors. Encouraging participation, celebrating diverse talents, and ensuring inclusive practices in extracurricular settings extends the work of affirmation beyond the classroom walls. By recognizing the importance of these spaces, teachers help Black-White biracial students access opportunities for connection, confidence, and resilience.

For Black-White biracial students, particularly in the South, school is more than a place of academics; it is a primary context where identity is tested, shaped, and either affirmed or undermined. The findings of my study remind us that educators hold tremendous power in this process. By affirming identity, addressing bias, diversifying curriculum, providing mentorship, and fostering belonging, educators can ensure that Black-White biracial students are not rendered invisible or forced into narrow categories (see Appendix J). Instead, they can be seen in the fullness of who they are as students whose dual heritage is not a liability but a resource for resilience, creativity, and strength.

While this section presents advice to educators developed by me through my insights gained throughout the study, as the participants shared their stories, they also offered clear guidance for how schools, families, and communities can better support Black-White biracial students. Their insights extend beyond individual experiences, illuminating the kinds of relationships, practices, and environments that made a

meaningful difference in their lives. The following section presents their advice in their own words, highlighting the wisdom they carry and the changes they hope future generations will experience.

Advice from Participants

The final interview in Seidman's (2019) three-series structure invited participants to reflect not only on their own journeys, but also on what they would want others, such as students, educators, families, and communities, to understand about supporting Black-White biracial children and youth in the South. Their insights form a powerful set of recommendations grounded in lived experience rather than theoretical abstraction. Across narratives, the participants spoke clearly, often with striking precision, about what had helped them, what had harmed them, and what they wished they had known earlier. Their words offer an important contribution to ongoing discussions about identity, belonging, and racial understanding in educational and community spaces.

Advice to Young Black-White Biracial Students

When asked what they would tell a younger child growing up biracial in the South, each participant returned to a central idea: authenticity is essential, even when environments attempt to limit or erase that authenticity. Lex spoke with conviction drawn from years of negotiating environments that expected her to look, act, or identify a certain way. Her advice was direct and empowering: "Just be who you are, and don't let anyone take that from you. Don't let anyone tell you one is better. Be who you think you are." Her insistence on self-definition reflects the years she spent straightening her hair to blend in, dressing to fit in with White peers, fielding questions about why she did not look like her White family members, and slowly learning to reclaim pieces of herself she

had once hidden. By college, she had moved firmly into an identity defined on her own terms, and her advice to younger students reflects that journey toward claiming space.

At the same time, Lex urged young biracial children to be aware that marginalization does not come only from White peers or institutions. She described encounters with Black peers who dismissed or undermined her identity, offering the reminder that racial bias is not unidirectional: “Even a Black person can be racist so be aware of those students that were like, ‘Black people are better.’” Her point underscores the complexity of biracial identity formation: belonging must be cultivated in multiple directions, and biracial students often learn early that both sides of their heritage can carry expectations or judgments they must navigate.

Cam’s advice echoed Lex’s emphasis on self-preservation but added a focus on building a small, steady support system. For him, identity integration developed through relationships rather than isolation. He advised younger biracial children to “build your crew early. Find the two or three people who don’t ask you to choose sides.” He also encouraged them to name racialized moments instead of internalizing them, explaining that the first time he said out loud, “That joke was about my race,” he began to understand that naming harm was a way to refuse carrying it alone. Above all, Cam emphasized joy as a form of resistance: “Protect your joy. You’re not a contradiction; you’re a collage.” His advice serves as a reminder that biracial identity is expansive, creative, and full of possibility, not something to be minimized or constrained by others’ expectations.

AK, too, centered self-love in her guidance. Reflecting on her movement from silence to confidence, she urged younger biracial children to resist defining themselves

through others' opinions, telling them, "Learn to love yourself the way you are, people will always have opinions, but your identity belongs to you." Her perspective highlights the years she spent straightening her curls, remaining quiet in racialized moments, and trying to "blend" into predominantly White spaces. Over time, she learned that her difference was a source of strength rather than shame. The confidence she eventually found, symbolized powerfully in her decision to embrace her natural curls, curves, and darker skin, became the foundation of the advice she now offers to biracial children and youth.

Maha's message, shaped by her experiences of subtle bias and lowered expectations, emphasized the importance of rejecting internalized assumptions about ability or intelligence. She recalled moments when teachers and peers underestimated her based on appearance, and she stressed that younger biracial students must insist on their full academic and personal worth: "Treat biracial kids like any other kid, assume they're just a regular kid." Her advice speaks to the psychological impact of surveillance, scrutiny, and the pressure to prove oneself in environments that frequently misread or mislabel Black-White biracial students.

Together, their words construct a collective message for younger biracial children: your identity is valid, whole, and strong, regardless of who questions it. Community, naming, self-love, awareness, and joy are all crucial components of navigating biracial identity in the South.

Advice to Educators

Participants were equally clear in their advice to educators, offering guidance that directly reflects missed opportunities, harmful assumptions, and supportive practices they

experienced in their own schooling. Their recommendations underscore the need for educators to create classrooms where biracial identity is named, affirmed, and discussed rather than erased through silence.

AK's message was the most comprehensive and echoed across participants: "Make space for conversations. Don't assume that silence from Black-White students means comfort. Students need affirmation that their identities are valid, celebrated, and worth naming." Her emphasis on explicit affirmation challenges colorblind approaches that treat silence as neutrality. For AK, the absence of racial conversation in her home and school life left her unprepared for navigating a racialized world, making it clear that silence does not protect, it isolates.

Maha offered practical, immediate advice rooted in her own experiences with subtle mockery and classroom dynamics. She focused particularly on seemingly "small" behaviors that carry enormous weight for students: "Don't make fun of people's names, if you're doing it, then everyone else is gonna do it too." Maha's comment came from her own hurtful experiences with teachers who used students' names as punchlines. Her reminder is blunt but essential: educators set the tone, and their behavior determines what students perceive as acceptable.

She further encouraged educators to examine their assumptions, adding, "Put aside your own biases and treat biracial kids like any other kid." Maha's words reveal how the accumulation of microaggressions, like comments about intelligence, behavior, or appearance, shaped her perception of school as a place where she constantly had to prove herself. Her advice challenges educators to confront internalized stereotypes and disrupt patterns of unequal treatment.

Cam's insight highlighted the relational aspect of teaching. For him, the support of even one adult in school significantly affected his sense of safety: a teacher who consistently allowed him to eat lunch in her classroom offered refuge during difficult moments. He recounted that this teacher was one of the "two or three people" who grounded him, reminding educators that supportive classroom spaces can be as important as academic ones.

Taken together, the participants' advice offers a clear blueprint for educators. They urged educators to create explicit space for discussions about race and identity, interrupt microaggressions the moment they occur, and avoid colorblind practices that diminish or erase who students are. They also emphasized the importance of cultivating interpersonal safety and connection, as well as recognizing the unique pressures biracial students face as they navigate visibility, invisibility, and constant scrutiny in school spaces. Each participant emphasized that educators play a crucial role in whether biracial children and youth feel seen, respected, and supported or whether they internalize the message that their identity is something to hide.

Advice to Families

Participants also offered guidance for families raising Black-White biracial children, emphasizing the importance of intentional, affirming practices at home. Their reflections highlight the profound influence that everyday interactions, conversations, and modeled behaviors have on children's racial understanding, self-perception, and emotional readiness. They made clear that when families actively nurture pride and provide consistent support, biracial children are better equipped to navigate identity-related challenges with confidence.

Cam stated clearly what he wished families understood: “Talk about race early and often. Give your children the language and confidence to navigate a world that will question them.” His advice stems from years of navigating silence, forcing him to piece together an understanding of racial identity through experience rather than through guided conversation. His insight reinforces the literature on the importance of racial socialization within multiracial families and the harm that can arise when race is treated as too sensitive or too uncomfortable to name.

AK echoed this message as she reflected on her own upbringing: “It was just really never talked about, that silence left me unprepared for the realities of navigating a racialized world.” She did not fault her parents for attempting to create an environment where her Black-White biracial identity felt “normal,” but she now understands that silence denied her the vocabulary and confidence she needed to understand others’ reactions to her. Her experiences affirm that intentional conversations about race are essential, even in loving families.

Maha’s insight added a different dimension, highlighting the importance of emotional availability within families, especially among siblings. She explained, “If I have an issue, I could always go to my sister and that makes me feel better.” For her, having someone who understood the nuances of racialized experiences, and who could “talk trash” with her when she needed to process, served as a vital support system. Her story reminds families that emotional safety often comes not from avoiding difficult topics, but from fostering relationships where children know their experiences will be believed and affirmed.

Collectively, participants urged families to initiate conversations early rather than

waiting until harm occurs, affirm children's physical features such as curly hair, skin tone, and names, and model pride in their Black-White biracial heritage. They emphasized the importance of providing consistent emotional support and ensuring that children never have to navigate identity-related challenges on their own. Families, they argued, are the first line of support, and the absence of conversation is itself a message with consequences.

Advice to Communities

Finally, participants addressed the broader community of schools, neighborhoods, churches, sports teams, and extracurricular groups, where Black-White biracial children and youth often encounter the strongest messages about belonging or difference. Their advice centered on representation, visibility, and building inclusive spaces.

Maha's guidance was unequivocal: "Create spaces where biracial youth can see themselves reflected. Representation matters. Affirmation matters. Belonging matters." Her experiences in theater illustrated the transformative power of community spaces where individuality is embraced rather than judged. For her, theater was not simply an extracurricular activity, it was an anchor where she could exist without needing to explain or justify her identity.

Cam's reflections further highlighted the ways that community interactions shape identity and belonging. He described the layered responses he witnessed simply by moving through public spaces: "People see how teachers treat me versus my darker-skinned teammates or how a cashier looks twice at my mom then looks twice at me when I'm with my dad." His account underscores that community members' reactions, whether rooted in curiosity, bias, or confusion, are not invisible to biracial children and youth.

These moments accumulate and shape how children interpret their place in the world.

Lex reinforced the value of affirming community spaces by recalling how transformative it was to finally experience belonging among peers who understood her identity: “It’s really nice when you have that community around you. It’s very powerful.” For her, access to affirming communities helped counteract years of feeling unseen or misread in predominantly White environments.

Participants’ advice to communities can be summarized simply: belonging must be actively created. Communities must move beyond assuming that biracial children will “fit in” without intentional effort. Instead, they must provide representation, equitable treatment, and culturally affirming spaces that validate the wide range of biracial experiences.

The advice participants offered, rooted in years of navigating identity in Southern schools, families, and communities, reveals the depth of insight young biracial adults carry. Their words remind educators, caregivers, and community leaders that Black-White biracial children and youth do not need protection from conversations about race; they need preparation, affirmation, and honest dialogue. They need spaces where their identities are not questioned but celebrated, relationships where their experiences are believed rather than minimized, and environments that encourage authenticity rather than assimilation. Their advice reflects the resilience they developed over time and provides a vital roadmap for supporting future generations of biracial children growing up in the South.

Together, the findings, my analytic insights, and the participants’ own advice point to an urgent need for change in how schools, families, and communities support

Black-White biracial children and youth. Their stories make clear that identity affirmation, racial literacy, and genuine belonging cannot be optional or incidental, they must be intentionally cultivated. The next section presents a call to action grounded in both evidence and lived experience, outlining the concrete steps needed to move toward more just and responsive educational environments.

Call to Action

The stories shared by AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha illuminated far more than individual journeys; they collectively reveal a set of urgent responsibilities for the adults and institutions who shape the daily environments of Black-White biracial children in the South. Their narratives, rich, complex, and often vulnerable, make it clear that the work of supporting Black-White biracial children cannot fall solely on students themselves. Instead, it requires purposeful, sustained commitments from teachers, families, schools, and communities. The participants' insights point toward a call to action that is both deeply personal and deeply structural. Their voices, grounded in experience rather than abstraction, offer educators and caregivers a pathway forward for building more humane, equitable, and affirming spaces for biracial children and youth.

Throughout the interviews, participants repeatedly emphasized that silence, whether in classroom curriculum, family conversations, or community norms, creates harm. Silence leaves students to make sense of racialized encounters alone, without the language, grounding, or support needed to navigate them. AK's reflection on her upbringing encapsulated this reality: "It was just really never talked about and that silence left me unprepared for the realities of navigating a racialized world." Her words challenge the long-standing belief that not addressing race somehow protects children

from its weight. Instead, her story confirms what critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023) suggests: that avoiding race does not undo racism, it simply obscures its workings and places the interpretive burden on the child. A meaningful call to action, therefore, begins with a refusal of silence. Teachers, families, and community leaders must commit to talking openly and honestly about race, identity, and belonging, recognizing that these conversations are not optional for biracial children, they are necessary for their well-being.

The participants also called for intentional representation and affirmation across all spaces in which biracial children learn and grow. Maha's statement offered one of the clearest directives: "Create spaces where biracial youth can see themselves reflected. Representation matters. Affirmation matters. Belonging matters." Her experiences in theater demonstrated the transformative power of environments where individuality is valued and racial identity is neither questioned nor scrutinized. A call to action thus requires schools and communities to examine who is visible, who is centered, and whose stories are absent. Curriculum materials, classroom libraries, extracurricular offerings, and community programming must reflect the actual diversity of students' lives, not merely the dominant demographic of a region. When Black-White biracial students see themselves accurately and respectfully represented, they gain tools for understanding their identity not as an anomaly, but as a legitimate and celebrated part of the social landscape.

In the same way, Cam's reflections highlight the need for communities, and the institutions within them, to recognize and address the subtle forms of racialized treatment that biracial children and youth encounter daily. Describing the contrast between how

people treated him depending on which parent he was with, he explained: “I am looked at all the time shopping in stores with my because people wonder why is this Black kid with this White woman or they follow us around if I am with my dad.” His account reveals that belonging is shaped by constant micro-evaluations of appearance, proximity, and perceived racial alignment. A call to action for communities must therefore include cultural competence training in public-facing institutions, proactive anti-bias work in youth programs, and policies that acknowledge and challenge racial profiling in subtle as well as overt forms. Communities must move beyond passive acceptance toward active, educated engagement with the lived realities of biracial families.

Educators, in particular, are positioned to enact immediate change. Participants articulated a set of expectations that speak to both professional responsibility and human dignity. AK offered a directive with wide implications: “Make space for conversations. Don’t assume that silence means comfort. Students need affirmation that their identities are valid, celebrated, and worth naming.” Her guidance calls for meaningful shifts in curriculum, instructional practice, and educators’ overall stance toward race and identity. They must also disrupt microaggressions in the moment, avoid colorblind messaging that erases students’ lived experiences, and cultivate relationships that allow biracial children to feel seen on their own terms. This requires both deep self-reflection and ongoing professional learning, as educators must understand biracial identity development, hair politics, cultural wealth, and the intertwined dynamics of hypervisibility and invisibility that shape biracial students’ daily experiences in the classroom.

Maha’s advice further clarifies educators’ ethical obligation to treat students’ identities with respect: “Don’t make fun of people’s names, if you’re doing it, then

everyone else is gonna do it too.” Her statement, though pointed, illustrates the significant power educators hold. When they model respect, students follow; when they model bias, students magnify it. A call to action therefore includes teacher preparation programs that train educators in racial literacy, culturally responsive pedagogy, and asset-based approaches to biracial identity. Schools cannot rely on individual goodwill alone; they must institutionalize practices that uphold equity and belonging.

Families also play a vital role in this call to action. The participants’ stories demonstrated that home environments can either equip biracial children with tools to understand their experiences or leave them unprepared to interpret the racialized messages they receive. As Cam emphasized, “Talk about race early and often. Give your children the language and confidence to navigate a world that will question them.” His urging aligns with research showing that direct racial socialization fosters resilience and positive identity development in multiracial children. Families must therefore move beyond avoidance, engaging in open conversations that affirm the duality and fullness of biracial identity. This includes learning about hair care, celebrating cultural traditions from both sides of the family, confronting extended family biases, and ensuring that children never interpret silence as shame.

Finally, a call to action must include a commitment to structural change. Participants’ stories highlighted not only personal challenges but also institutional patterns that disproportionately affect biracial students: the absence of comprehensive curriculum representation, the persistence of deficit-based assumptions, and the failure to train educators in the specific needs of biracial children. As Lex noted, belonging flourishes when supportive community structures exist: “It’s really nice when you have

that community around you. It's very powerful." Her experience underscores the need for schools and communities to actively create spaces that support Black-White biracial identity development rather than waiting for students to carve those spaces out for themselves.

Taken together, the participants' words offer a compelling mandate: schools, families, and communities must commit to practices that affirm, protect, and celebrate biracial children and youth. Their narratives illustrate both the cost of inaction and the transformative potential of intentional support. This call to action is not simply a recommendation; it is an ethical imperative. The next generation of Black-White biracial children deserve environments where they are not asked to choose a side, erase a part of themselves, or navigate their identities alone. Instead, they deserve to grow in educational, familial, and community spaces that honor the fullness of who they are and the rich histories they bring with them.

As meaningful as my findings are, it is also important to recognize the limitations of the study. No research design can capture every nuance of lived experience, and this project was bound by choices I made in design, participant selection, and scope. Acknowledging these limitations does not diminish the significance of the insights gained and previously discussed; instead, it provides necessary transparency for understanding what the study can and cannot claim. In the next section, I address these limitations in detail to situate the findings within the practical realities and constraints of the research process.

Limitations of the Study

While this study offers important insights into the lived experiences of the Black-

White biracial participants who grew up in the South, it is necessary to acknowledge its limitations. As Maxwell (2013) reminded qualitative researchers, no design is without constraints, and being transparent about these boundaries strengthens the trustworthiness of the work. The following limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of my study.

My study included the narratives of four Black-White biracial participants between the ages of 18 and 22 who grew up in the South. Their stories provided rich and detailed accounts of identity development, but the small sample size limits the extent to which these findings can be generalized to all Black-White biracial children in the region or beyond. Narrative inquiry intentionally prioritizes depth over breadth, meaning that my goal was not statistical generalization but rather thick description that allows readers to determine resonance and transferability for themselves. Nevertheless, with only four participants, the study cannot capture the full diversity of experiences across different states, communities, or schooling contexts in the South.

The geographic scope of this research was limited to participants who identified as growing up in the cultural South. While this focus provided a meaningful lens into a region where racial history and binary racial systems remain deeply entrenched (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023), it also narrows the applicability of the findings. Biracial identity development in other parts of the United States, such as the Northeast, Midwest, or West Coast, may unfold differently due to varying demographics, levels of racial diversity, and cultural norms. Thus, the experiences described here should be understood as regionally situated rather than representative of all Black-White biracial individuals nationally.

The participants were all young adults reflecting back on their childhood and

adolescent experiences. While their retrospective accounts were valuable, they may also be shaped by hindsight and the interpretive lenses they have developed as they matured. Memories of early schooling or family interactions may have been influenced by subsequent experiences in college or young adulthood, which could affect how stories were told and understood. This limitation highlights the need for additional longitudinal research that follows Black-White biracial individuals across developmental stages to capture identity processes as they unfold in real time.

As a White mother of a Black-White biracial daughter and a Black son, I brought my own lived experiences, biases, and commitments to this work. My positionality enriched the study by attuning me to silences, inequities, and cultural nuances, yet it also carried the potential to shape how I interpreted data and represented participants' voices. While I practiced reflexivity through memoing, member checks, and peer feedback, my interpretations cannot be fully disentangled from my personal commitments to advocacy and justice. Readers should recognize that my position as both researcher and mother may have influenced the depth of attention I gave to certain themes, particularly those related to family silence, schooling experiences, and resilience.

This study relied exclusively on semi-structured interviews following Seidman's (2019) three-interview series. While this approach allowed participants to share in-depth reflections, it also meant that other forms of data, such as classroom observations, peer interactions, or family discussions in real time, were not included. As a result, the study captured how participants remembered and described their lives but does not provide triangulation from other sources that might confirm or complicate their accounts. Moreover, some interviews were conducted virtually, which may have affected rapport or

limited opportunities for participants to share in spontaneous ways that sometimes emerged in face-to-face settings.

Finally, although this study highlighted the experiences of Black-White biracial individuals with one Black and one White parent, it does not account for the experiences of children who identify as multiracial beyond this specific pairing. The choice to focus narrowly on Black-White biracial participants was deliberate, given their historical and cultural significance in the South (Lynn & Dixson, 2022), but this scope leaves out other multiracial identities that may face different challenges and dynamics.

In acknowledging these limitations, I do not diminish the significance of the study's findings; rather, I underscore the importance of situating them within their proper context. This work amplifies voices that are too often missing in educational research and provides insights that can inform culturally responsive teaching and policy for biracial students. At the same time, future research with larger, more diverse samples, longitudinal designs, and multiple data sources is needed to deepen and expand understanding of Black-White biracial identity development in the South. By being transparent about these boundaries, I hope readers can better appreciate both the strengths and constraints of my study, using the findings as a foundation for continued inquiry and action.

Future Research

While this study contributed to the body of research on Black-White biracial identity in the South, it also raised important questions that warrant further exploration. Because biracial identity is fluid, context-dependent, and shaped by broader social and cultural forces, additional research is necessary to expand and deepen understanding of

how these dynamics unfold across different settings and stages of life. Several directions for future scholarship emerged from the findings of this work.

One significant area for future research is the exploration of Black-White biracial identity in diverse regional contexts. This study focused specifically on the South, a region where rigid racial boundaries and historical legacies of segregation continue to shape identity formation, yet, biracial children living in other areas of the United States, such as the Midwest, Northeast, or West Coast, may experience different pressures and opportunities. Comparative studies across regions could highlight how local histories, school demographics, and community cultures influence whether Black-White biracial children feel visible, affirmed, or silenced. For example, while this study's participants often faced forced categorization within predominantly White schools, Black-White biracial children and youth in more racially diverse communities may encounter distinct challenges related to intersectionality, colorism, or shifting peer dynamics. Examining these differences would enrich the broader conversation about biracial identity development and clarify how geography and culture interact to shape lived experiences.

A second area of needed research is the longitudinal study of Black-White biracial child development. My participants, now young adults, reflected on their childhood and adolescent experiences, offering powerful insights into how their identities evolved over time. However, following Black-White biracial children across developmental stages from early childhood through adolescence and into adulthood would provide a fuller picture of how identity is negotiated at different points in life. Such research could further capture the cyclical and non-linear processes of resilience, belonging, and integration that emerged in this study. It could also illuminate how critical junctures, such as entering

middle school, participating in sports, or transitioning to college, either reinforce silencing and invisibility or provide opportunities for growth and affirmation.

Future research should also examine institutional practices and support systems within schools. My participants' stories revealed that classrooms often ignored or oversimplified race, leaving them as Black-White biracial students to make sense of identity in isolation. Investigating how schools either perpetuate these silences or actively create inclusive spaces is crucial. Studies might look at the impact of teacher training programs that address Black-White biracial identity, the role of counselors in supporting multiracial students, or how curriculum decisions either validate or erase multiracial perspectives. Research in this area could provide practical guidance for schools striving to move beyond colorblind approaches and toward affirming environments that recognize Black-White biracial students as whole, complex individuals.

In addition, further scholarship could explore the intersections of Black-White biracial identity with gender, class, and mental health. While this study highlighted the resilience of the four participants, it also pointed to the emotional costs of constant scrutiny and forced categorization. Examining how biracial children navigate anxiety, self-doubt, or identity conflicts across different social positions would deepen understanding of the supports necessary to foster well-being. For instance, research might investigate how access to mentors, peer groups, or cultural organizations buffers against the negative effects of hypervisibility or invisibility. Connecting identity development to mental health outcomes would not only extend theoretical knowledge but also provide critical insights for educators, families, and mental health practitioners.

Finally, future studies should expand the lens beyond schools to include

extracurricular and community spaces as sites of identity formation. My participants often described sports, arts, and friendships as spaces where they felt most affirmed. Exploring how these contexts function as counter-spaces that provide validation, connection, and pride would add important dimensions to the study of Black-White biracial children. In particular, investigating how participation in athletics, extracurriculars, or community organizations shape belonging could help educators and policymakers understand the broader ecosystems that support or hinder Black-White biracial identity development.

Personal Lessons Learned

Walking through this dissertation has shifted me in ways I could not have predicted. It shaped me not just as a researcher, but as a teacher and as a person. I began this project believing that my own Black-White biracial experiences with my children and teaching gave me a clear sense of what my participants might share. Instead, the stories I heard pushed me far beyond my own lens. Each interview revealed new layers of what it meant to grow up Black-White biracial in the South for participants as they discussed layers of silence, resilience, humor, and struggle that furthered my understanding and deepened my empathy. Their words reminded me that identity is never fixed, but constantly worked out in family kitchens, sports fields, and classrooms.

There were plenty of times when the process felt daunting. Sorting through tons of transcript pages left me questioning whether I had the skill to bring order to such a flood of experiences. Coding felt messy and at times defeating; I started and restarted, convinced I was not getting it quite right. What carried me forward was persistence and trust in the process. I leaned on the established researchers I have mentioned here time

and time again for direction, I filled notebooks with memos, and I taped Post-its across my office walls until patterns slowly began to form; eventually, the scattered pieces came together. These moments taught me that clarity in qualitative research does not arrive quickly or neatly, rather it develops through patience, repetition, and the courage to sit with uncertainty.

The interviews were the most powerful part of the work. Sitting with my participants, I was reminded of how much connection and meaning are built when stories are shared. We talked about everything from sports victories to painful encounters with racism, and in those conversations, we laughed, we paused, and sometimes we carried heavy truths together. I continue to feel grateful that participants trusted me with those memories. Carrying their voices into this dissertation has been an honor, and I hope my interpretations and writing reflects the care and respect their stories deserve.

What I carry forward most from this journey is a renewed commitment to listening. Stories remain the heart of how we understand ourselves and others, and this project affirmed how important it is to create space for them, especially for those whose voices have been silenced or overlooked. More than producing a dissertation, this work reminded me why I teach, why I research, and why I believe in the power of narrative to shape lives. I am forever and irrevocably changed for the better as a result of this amazing process.

Closing Thoughts

This dissertation began with a deeply personal question, *What does it mean to grow up Black-White biracial in the South?*, and it ends with a clearer, more urgent understanding shaped by the voices of AK, Cam, Lex, and Maha. Their stories

illuminated the complicated interplay of silence and scrutiny, belonging and exclusion, resilience and identity that defined their childhoods in predominantly White Southern schools. Through narrative inquiry, their lived experiences became more than data; they became testimony. Their words revealed how family silence, assimilation pressures, hypervisibility, and the search for belonging shaped how they understood themselves and their place in the world. They also revealed powerful sources of cultural wealth, including aspirational, strong familial grounding, navigational skill, and resistance capital. These strengths affirmed that they were never lacking, even when schools failed to recognize the fullness of who they were.

The findings call educators, families, policymakers, and researchers to act with intention. Biracial children should never have to choose sides to feel safe, valued, or seen. They deserve classrooms where their identities are affirmed rather than erased, homes where race is discussed with honesty and care, and communities that honor the richness of their cultural narratives. This work underscores that silence is not protection; it is harm. Representation is not optional; it is foundational. Identity is not something to be managed or simplified; it is a complex, evolving source of strength.

Ultimately, the question posed by the title, *Is Grey the New Black?*, finds its answer here. Grey is not the new Black. Biracial identity is not a midpoint, compromise, or dilution. It is a full, complex, resilient identity in its own right. The participants reminded us that Black-White biracial children do not need to choose one side of themselves to belong. They need educational, familial, and communal spaces that honor every part of who they are.

As this dissertation closes, what remains is both gratitude and responsibility.

Gratitude for the trust these four young adults placed in me, and responsibility to carry their stories forward to classrooms, teacher preparation programs, schools across the South, and broader conversations about race and belonging. Their narratives challenge us to build learning environments rooted in representation, affirmation, and truth-telling. Their courage ensures that future Black-White biracial children will find not only themselves in these pages but also pathways toward identity, confidence, and wholeness.

This work is for them and for every child whose story is still unfolding.

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Appendix A:
VSU IRB Approval Letter

Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board
Protocol Modification and/or Continuation Review Request or Final Report Form

During the protocol approval period, any proposed protocol changes must be approved by the IRB before they are implemented. Even when no protocol modifications are anticipated, Federal regulations require the IRB to conduct continuation reviews no less frequently than annually. This form may be used to request a protocol modification during the approval period, to request a continuation review to extend the protocol approval period, to request a combination of these actions, or to provide a final report.

- SECTION 1: PURPOSE OF REQUEST
- Protocol Modification Request Only (Complete Sections 3 and 5)
 - Continuation Review Request Only (Complete Sections 4, and 5)
 - Combination Protocol Modification & Continuation Review Request (Complete Sections 3-5)
 - Final Report (Complete Sections 4 and 5)

SECTION 2: PROTOCOL INFORMATION (to be completed by the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration)

Primary Investigator: Jessica Barfield
E-mail: @valdosta.edu JL BARFIELD@valdosta.edu
Department: LTUD
Telephone: #7
Project Title: Is Grey the New Black
IRB Number: 04252-2022
Original Approval Date: 4/5/22
Last Approval Date: 4/5/22
Current Expiration:
Review Type:
 Expedited
 Convened
Risk Determination:
 Minimal
 Greater than Minimal
Approved Participants:
Minimum:
Maximum:

SECTION 3: PROPOSED PROTOCOL MODIFICATION(S)

If you are requesting approval of a Protocol Modification only or a combination Protocol Modification and Continuation Review Request, please complete this section. Attach a statement (maximum 2 pages) that addresses the following as appropriate:

- A. Description of CHANGES PROPOSED (i.e., change in project title, responsible researcher, co-investigator(s), purpose of the study; duration of the study; participant population; location of the study, participant recruitment procedures; number of participants, including controls; costs and/or compensation to participants; voluntary participation; experimental procedures; alternate procedures; data to be collected; procedures for maintaining confidentiality; and/or consent procedures, including changes to the consent form)
- B. Discussion of UNANTICIPATED RISKS or NEW INFORMATION that may affect the risk/benefit assessment, if applicable
- C. Brief discussion of the IMPLICATIONS OF THE PROPOSED CHANGES on the likelihood of increased or decreased risks and/or benefits to the study participants
- D. If recruitment materials and/or consent form(s) will be modified, please attach a copy of the new consent form(s) for IRB approval

SECTION 4: PROJECT STATUS REPORT

Total number of participants enrolled in the study to date:

Do you plan to enroll additional participants in this study? No Yes If YES, how many more?

Adult Minor

Number of participants withdrawn since initiation of the study?

Number of participants excluded by the researcher since initiation:

- A. Check here if you have not yet begun enrolling participants in the study. Answer Questions 1 and 2 below only, and attach an explanation if you answer YES to either question. Attach unstamped copies of all recruitment posters and informed consent documents.
- B. Check here if the study is currently open to enrollment of new participants and/or interaction or intervention with, or collection of private information about, participants is ongoing. Answer Questions 1 through 8 below. If you answer YES to any question, attach an explanation and describe actions taken to reduce risks or discomforts to participants and/or to communicate new findings or knowledge to participants. Also, attach unstamped copies of all recruitment posters and informed consent documents.

IF THE STUDY HAS BEEN PERMANENTLY CLOSED TO ENROLLMENT OF NEW PARTICIPANTS AND ALL RESEARCH-RELATED INTERACTIONS, INTERVENTIONS, AND/OR COLLECTION OF PRIVATE INFORMATION ARE COMPLETED, CHECK ONE OF THE THREE BOXES BELOW THAT DESCRIBES THE CURRENT STATUS OF THE STUDY:

- C. All data have been de-identified (i.e., the researcher has destroyed any key or code list that links participants' identities to their private information and/or has stripped any identifiers from data collection instruments and/or the database). Answer Questions 1 through 8 below. This protocol is considered complete, regardless of whether or not data analysis is ongoing, and no further continuing review is required. This form serves as the researcher's final report. The researcher may use the data in the future for other research purposes without IRB exemption or approval.
- D. Data analysis is ongoing to answer this protocol's research question (i.e., findings have not yet been summarized and conclusions have not yet been drawn) AND participants' private information remains identifiable (i.e., the researcher still maintains a key or code list that links participants' identities to their private information or data collection instruments and/or the database still contain identifiers). Answer Questions 1 through 8 below. If you answer YES to any question, attach an explanation and, if applicable, describe actions taken to communicate new findings or knowledge to participants. This protocol remains subject to continuing review until data analysis to answer the research question is complete.
- E. Data analysis is completed (i.e., findings have been summarized and conclusions have been drawn) BUT participants' private information remains identifiable (i.e., the researcher still maintains a key or code list that links participants' identities to their private information or data collection instruments and/or the database still contain identifiers). Answer Questions 1 through 9 below. If you answer YES to any question, attach an explanation and, if applicable, describe actions taken to communicate new findings or knowledge to participants. This protocol is considered complete and no further continuing review is required. Use of the data for any future research purpose is subject to IRB oversight, and the researcher must submit an IRB application describing how the data will be used.

SINCE THE IRB' MOST RECENT REVIEW OF THIS PROTOCOL...

1. Have there been any findings, publications, or other relevant information that relate to risks associated with the research? Yes No
2. Have the risks and/or benefits to the participants changed from those anticipated? Yes No
3. Did any participants withdraw from the study? Yes No
4. Did you exclude any individuals from the study? Yes No
5. Did any participants express discomfort or concerns or complain about the research? Yes No
6. Have any unanticipated problems or adverse events occurred? (An unanticipated problem is any unexpected event related, or possibly related, to participation that suggests a great risk of harm than previously known or recognized. An adverse event is an unfavorable medical or psychological occurrence in the participant, such as a physical injury, a drug reaction, an abnormal laboratory finding, or a psychiatric episode.) Yes No
7. Were any participants enrolled who did not give consent/permission/assent as required by the approved protocol? Yes No
8. Were there any instances in which documentation of consent/permission/assent was not obtained as required by the approved protocol? Yes No
9. Please provide an explanation of why the data cannot be de-identified at this time; when you expect to de-identify the data; and what security methods you have in place to ensure confidentiality of the identifiable data as long as it is on hand.

SECTION 5: CERTIFICATION

By typing my name below, I certify that I will continue to observe the ethical guidelines and regulations regarding the protection of human participants from research risks and will continue to adhere to the policies and procedures of the VSU IRB. (Note: if applicable, the faculty advisor may also type his/her name and forward this request electronically.)

Jessica L. Barfield
Responsible Researcher

07/10/2024
Date

Richard Schmertzipp
Faculty Advisor if Researcher is a Student

12/11/24
Date

Appendix B:
VSU IRB Protocol Exemption Report



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT

Protocol Number: 04252-2022

Responsible Researcher(s): Jessica Barfield

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Richard Schmertzing

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. Lorraine Schmertzing

Project Title: *Is Grey the New Black: Growing Up Black-White Biracial in the South.*

Institutional Review Board Determination:

This research protocol is **exempt** from Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight under 45 CFR 46.101(b) of the federal regulations, **category 2**. If the nature of the research changes such that exemption criteria no longer apply, please consult with the IRB Administrator (irb@valdosta.edu) before continuing your research study.

Additional Information & Guidance:

- *Your approved expedited research study (04252-2022) is now approved as exempt under category 2. The determination was made as a result of your submitted request to modify the age of the demographic population (i.e., participants aged 18 and older).*
- *Personally Identifiable Information (PII) may be collected for participant selection. Once participants have been selected, all participant data must be permanently destroyed from devices used to collect and store the PII.*
- *According to exempt protocol guidelines, interview and focus group sessions may be recorded to create an accurate transcript. However, it's important to note that guidelines strictly prohibit collecting, storing, and sharing these recordings. Therefore, it is imperative that once a transcript is created, the recorded interview and/or focus group session must be immediately deleted from the recording and storage devices used.*
- *To comply with consent guidelines, audio/video recordings must capture the researcher reading the consent statement aloud at the start of the interview and/or focus group session, ensuring the participant's understanding and willingness to participate. Each transcript must document the researcher's reading of the consent statement and the participants' consent.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym/email lists, transcripts, etc.) must be securely maintained (e.g. locked file cabinet, password-protected computer, etc.) and accessible only by the researcher for a minimum of 3 years. At the end of the required time, collected data must be permanently destroyed.*

Proposed modifications must be submitted to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu for review and approval before implementation is permitted.

Elizabeth W. Olphie

12.16.2024

Elizabeth W. Olphie, IRB Administrator

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.

Revised: 08.02.10

Appendix C:

Tallahassee State College IRB Approval Letter



Institutional Review Board Approval Letter
Tallahassee State College
444 Appleyard Dr
Tallahassee, FL 32304

December 16, 2024

Principal Investigator: Jessica Barfield

Study Title: *Title of Study: Is Grey the New Black: Growing Up Black-White Biracial in the South*

IRB Protocol Number: 01624

Dear Mrs. Barfield,

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Tallahassee State College, I am pleased to inform you that your research study, titled: **Is Grey the New Black: Growing Up Black-White Biracial in the South**, has been reviewed and approved. The IRB has determined that the proposed study complies with federal regulations, institutional policies, and ethical standards for the protection of human subjects as outlined in 45 CFR 46.

Your study is approved under the following conditions:

1. **Approval Period:** This approval is effective from January 1, 2025 to April 30, 2025. Any research activity beyond this date requires a renewal application.
2. **Modifications:** Any changes to the study protocol, consent forms, or other materials must be submitted to the IRB for review and approval before implementation.
3. **Adverse Events:** Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to participants must be reported to the IRB immediately.
4. **Continuing Review:** A progress report must be submitted annually (or as required by the IRB) for ongoing approval.

The approved documents for your study include:

- Informed Consent Forms-pending
- Survey Instruments-Survey Monkey

Please retain this approval letter for your records and include it in your documentation for

the study. Should you have any questions or require assistance during your research, please contact the IRB office at OIE@tsc.fl.edu or 850-201-6570.

We appreciate your commitment to conducting ethical research and advancing knowledge within our community. We wish you success with your study and look forward to supporting your scholarly endeavors.

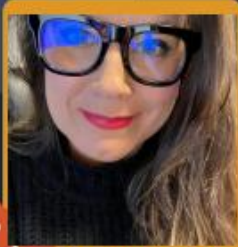
Sincerely,

Sherrí Winsett
Chair, Institutional Review Board
Tallahassee State College
850-201-6570

Appendix D:
Recruitment Flyer

GREAT OPPORTUNITY

I'M LOOKING FOR FOLKS TO SHARE STORIES



Jessica Barfield

As a mom of two bi-racial children and doctoral student at Valdosta State University, I'm looking for folks who will tell me their experiences of growing up biracial in the South.

I work here at TSC and can be reached at jlbarfield@valdosta.edu.

ARE YOU . . .

Black-White Biracial?

Between ages 18 - 22?

Did you grow up and attend school in the South?

YOUR VOICES NEED TO BE HEARD!

Your story could...

- Help other biracial children
- Inform teachers on ways to relate
- Improve my teaching of teachers
- Contribute to creating inclusive classrooms across the south
- Enhance your thinking about your identity

What's involved?

- Short, simple survey
- Schedule a time to meet for an interview
- Possibly meet in a group with other participants to talk as peers



How to get started?

- Reach out to me via email or simply complete the survey available thru QR code below



APPROVAL FOR STUDY

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Jessica Barfield at jlbarfield@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB-04552-2022) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

HAVE QUESTIONS

Contact Me:
email: jlbarfield@valdosta.edu
phone: 229.224.6654

Jessica Barfield

Appendix E:
Qualtrics Interest Survey

Is Grey the New Black: Growing Up Black-White Biracial in the South
Study Interest Survey

1. Name:
2. Age:
3. Preferred mode of communication (please provide phone or email):
4. Where do you presently attend college:
5. What is your major:
6. Have you taken any courses regarding race studies, if so please list:
7. Where did you attend school when you were younger:
8. Age where you discovered you were Black-White biracial:
9. Briefly state why you are interested in participating in a study to examine how Black-White biracial individuals experience growing up in the South:

Email completed survey to jlbarfield@valdosta.edu



Appendix F:
VSU IRB Research Statement

You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “Is Grey the New Black: Growing up Black-White Biracial in the South”, which is being conducted by Jessica Barfield, a student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to attempt to discover how best to work with Black-White biracial children taught by predominantly White female teachers, this study will explore the experiences related to growing up in the South as Black-White biracial children. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about how best to work with Black-White biracial children attending school in the South. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately 90 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded to capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the interview recording has been transcribed, the recording will be deleted from recording devices. This research study and your participation will be kept confidential. Your identifiable information will be replaced with a pseudonym in publications or presentations. No one, including the researcher, will associate your responses with your identity. Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, to stop responding, or to skip questions you do not want to answer. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your participation in the interview serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 years of age or older.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Jessica Barfield at jlbarfield@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB-04252-2022) for the Protection of Human Research Participants. The IRB, a university committee established by Federal law, is responsible for protecting the rights and welfare of research participants. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a research participant, you may contact the IRB Administrator at 229-253-2947 or irb@valdosta.edu.

Appendix G:
Participant Interview #1 Questions

Participant Interview #1:

Seidman's interviewing approach is often associated with qualitative research methods, particularly for topics related to identity. The method involves open-ended, semi-structured interviews, which allow the interviewee to speak freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. When discussing biracial identity in the first interview, the questions should focus on understanding the personal and social dimensions of the participant's experience.

State to participants: In this first interview, I am aiming to put your experience in context by asking you to tell as much as possible about yourself in light of being Black-White biracial up to the present time. I would like to reconstruct your early experiences with family, in school, with friends, and in your neighborhood and community.

Questions:

1. Personal Background

- Please state your age.
- Where did you grow up in the South?
- Can you tell me a bit about your background? Can you describe how you perceive your racial identity? How has this perception evolved over time?
- Growing up, did you feel connected to one racial or ethnic group more than the other? Why or why not?

2. Early Experiences

- How did your family or community shape the way you understand your biracial identity?
- Were there any particular moments in your childhood that made you aware of

being biracial?

- Did people treat you differently based on your biracial identity growing up? Can you describe how that felt?
- How did you

3. School and Peer Interactions:

- What were your experiences like in school regarding race and identity when you were younger? Can you recall any specific incidents or moments that impacted you?
- How did you navigate being Black-White biracial in the Deep South attending school when you were younger? Are there particular challenges or advantages you've experienced?
- How did your friendships and peer relationships shape your sense of belonging or identity as a Black-White biracial individual?

4. Social Identity and Self-Perceptions

- How do you feel society views biracial people, and do you think that affects how you see yourself?
- Do you ever feel torn between the two racial or ethnic identities you have? How do you navigate this?
- Have you ever felt pressure to choose one racial identity over the other? How do you navigate these expectations?
- When you're in different social settings (family, friends, school, work), how do you present your racial or ethnic identity?

5. Family and Relationships

- What role have your parents or family members played in helping you understand your biracial identity?
- How have your family members influenced your understanding of race and identity as a Black-White biracial individual? Are there specific memories or conversations that stand out to you?
- How have your relationships with family members who share one of your racial backgrounds compared to those who don't?
- Could you share a story about a significant experience related to your racial identity within your family or community while growing up?
- How have friendships influenced your sense of biracial identity?

6. Challenges and Complexity

- What challenges, if any, have you faced in terms of how others perceive your biracial identity?
- Have you ever experienced confusion or conflict about where you belong, especially in spaces where only one racial identity is acknowledged?
- Do you feel that there are pressures to “choose” one racial or ethnic identity over the other? How do you navigate those pressures?

7. Reflection and Evolution

- Over time, how has your understanding of your Black-White biracial identity evolved?
- Are there any experiences or moments in your life that have significantly shaped the way you view your identity today?

8. Impact on Early Life

- How did your Black-White biracial identity affect your daily interactions with others? Were there things that you had to think about that people who are not biracial might not consider?
- In what ways do you think your experiences growing up as a Black-White biracial person differ from those of people who identify as monoracial?

*** These questions are designed to encourage reflection and open dialogue about how biracial individuals experience their identity in personal and social contexts. It's also important to ensure that interviewees feel comfortable sharing their stories, acknowledging that experiences with biracial identity can vary greatly.

Appendix H:
Participant Interview #2 Questions

Participant Interview #2:

Seidman's interviewing approach is often associated with qualitative research methods, particularly for topics related to identity. The method involves open-ended, semi-structured interviews, which allow the interviewee to speak freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. When discussing biracial identity in the first interview, the questions should focus on understanding the personal and social dimensions of the participant's experience.

State to participants: In this second interview, we will focus on specific events and experiences in your life. I hope to capture detailed accounts of significant life moments or interactions relevant to growing up Black-White biracial in the South. This is where you will reflect on and elaborate your experiences in relation to the research topic.

Questions:

1. School and Peer Interactions:

- What were your experiences like in school regarding race and identity when you were younger? Can you recall any specific incidents or moments that impacted you? I know we talked about comments about your hair and feeling so out of place in the 4th grade – let's explore that more.
- Describe a few ways that you navigated being Black-White biracial in the Deep South attending school when you were younger in detail.
- Give se specific ways that your friendships and peer relationships shaped your sense of belonging or identity as a Black-White biracial individual.

2. Social Identity and Self-Perceptions

- How have you felt society viewed you as a Black-White biracial individual?
- Has that shifted how you view yourself in any way?
- Can you tell me a time when you have felt torn between the two racial or ethnic identities you have.
- Have you ever felt pressure to choose one racial identity over the other by friends or family? How did you navigate these expectations?
- In what ways has being in different social settings (family, friends, school, work) changed how you present your racial identity? Can you discuss a specific time when this has happened?

3. Social and Historical Context:

- How do you think growing up in the Deep South influenced your understanding of race and identity?
- When have you encountered stereotypes or misconceptions about Black-White biracial individuals in your community? How did you respond to these?

4. Family and Relationships

- What role have your parents or family members played in helping you understand your biracial identity?
- How have your family members influenced your understanding of race and identity as a Black-White biracial individual? Are there specific memories or conversations that stand out to you?
- How have your relationships with family members who share one of your racial backgrounds compared to those who don't?
- Could you share a story about a significant experience related to your racial

identity within your family or community while growing up?

- How have friendships influenced your sense of biracial identity?

5. Sense of Belonging:

- Do you feel a sense of belonging in both the Black and White communities in the South? Why or why not?
- How did you navigate spaces where your Black-White biracial identity may not be fully understood or accepted growing up?

6. Further Reflections:

- Are there any specific experiences you want to chat about or describe further that we have not touched on yet in this session?

Appendix I:
Participant Interview #3 Questions

Participant Interview #3:

Seidman's interviewing approach is often associated with qualitative research methods, particularly for topics related to identity. The method involves open-ended, semi-structured interviews, which allow the interviewee to speak freely about their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. When discussing biracial identity in the first interview, the questions should focus on understanding the personal and social dimensions of the participant's experience.

State to participants: This third interview is a more analytical phase, where you will reflect on how your experiences shaped your current understanding, beliefs, or behaviors around being Black-White biracial growing up in the South. We will also focus on your personal growth and any advice and insights that you would like to share to help other Black-White biracial individuals. This is where you will reflect on and elaborate your experiences in relation to the research topic.

Questions:

1. Personal Growth and Reflection:

- Can you describe a moment of realization or personal growth related to your Black-White biracial identity when you were younger? How did this experience shape your perspective of who you are as an individual?

2. Advice and Insights:

- How do you think your experiences as a Black-White biracial individual can contribute to discussions about race and identity in the Deep South?
- What advice would you give to other Black-White biracial individuals growing up in similar communities in the Deep South?

- Is there anything you wish you had known when you were younger or done differently?
 - How can individuals from different racial backgrounds better support and understand each other in the Deep South?
3. Positive Aspects
- What do you enjoy or value about being biracial?
 - Are there any unique perspectives or experiences that you think come with it?
4. Racial Justice and Activism:
- How do you feel about the current racial climate in the Deep South?
 - Do you feel it has changed from when you were younger? If so, in what ways?
5. Future Considerations:
- How do you envision your biracial identity playing a role in the future?
 - Is there anything you hope will change in how society views biracial individuals?
 - What are your hopes and concerns for the future as a Black-White biracial individual in the Deep South?
6. Support Systems and Resources:
- What support systems or resources have been most helpful to you in understanding and embracing your Black-White biracial identity?
 - Are there any additional resources or support networks you feel are needed for Black-White biracial individuals in the Deep South? Any formal schooling specific resources?
7. Further Reflections:

- Are there any specific experiences you want to chat about or describe further that we have not touched on yet in this session?

Appendix J

Practical Guide for Educators Supporting Biracial Students

Practical Guide for Educators Supporting Biracial Students

1. Affirming Identity in the Classroom

- Talk about race honestly and age-appropriately; don't avoid the topic.
- Integrate biracial and multiracial stories into curriculum (literature, history, discussions).
- Use inclusive language that validates biracial identity (avoid "pick a side").
- Allow multiple racial categories in surveys and forms.
- Encourage students to share family traditions and cultural heritage.

2. Addressing Bias and Microaggressions

- Recognize that "harmless" comments about hair, skin tone, or appearance can cause harm.
- Interrupt microaggressions when they occur; don't minimize them.
- Engage in ongoing professional development around bias and cultural competence.
- Reflect regularly on personal assumptions and classroom practices.
- Establish classroom agreements that emphasize respect and dignity.

3. Representation and Curriculum Choices

- Select books, films, and resources that include multiracial voices.
- Highlight contributions of interracial families, mixed-race leaders, and scholars in all subjects.
- Encourage students to share personal or family stories through projects.
- Normalize biracial identity as part of classroom discussions about diversity.

4. Mentorship and Support Networks

- Build trust and offer spaces for biracial students to talk about identity.
- Step into mentoring roles through both formal programs and informal relationships.
- Advocate for school-wide initiatives:
 - Multicultural clubs
 - Student affinity groups
 - Community mentorship partnerships
- Connect students to diverse role models who affirm their worth.

5. Fostering Belonging Through Extracurriculars

- Recognize the role of sports, arts, and clubs as spaces of identity and belonging.
- Encourage biracial students to participate in extracurricular activities.
- Celebrate diverse talents and leadership across student groups.
- Ensure extracurricular programs are inclusive and affirming.