

The rise of double-segregation and the fall of literacy: A critical narrative inquiry into the experiences of teachers in public schools in Georgia

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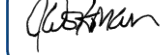
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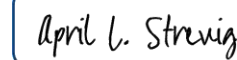


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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explored the topic of double segregation in Georgia public schools, a trend in which racial and economic divisions reinforce one another within communities and schools. This phenomenon of double segregation has impacted student literacy among traditionally marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups. My qualitative study aimed to address a significant gap in the existing literature by documenting the lived experiences of educators within these doubly segregated environments. By bringing their educators' narratives to light, this study aimed to heighten awareness and empathy among policymakers and inspire integration plans that could make education more equitable for all students.

By investigating the stories of teachers with a Critical Race Theory Lens, I aimed to highlight the systemic inequities affecting oppressed groups in Georgia public schools. I examined research questions involving educators' experiences in integrated and segregated school environments and their perceptions of literacy and school culture. As I used the narrative inquiry design to collect data via interviews with nine educators across Georgia, I ensured that each participant reflected schools that differed in racial and economic composition and represented a diversity of racial, age, and gender profiles. By diversifying my sample, I sought to offer a range of educator perspectives.

Three major themes emerged from my thematic analysis of participant narratives: economic inequality creates barriers to student literacy, holistic teaching practices improve student outcomes, and teacher burnout is a pervasive issue. My findings stressed the need for policy interventions to address double segregation and its impact on literacy.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate my dissertation to the sunshine of my life, Matt Beal.

Chapter I:

INTRODUCTION

Racial and socioeconomic divisions have long plagued United States schools, especially within its Southern region. This trend of overlapping race and socio-economic based division within schools is often termed as double segregation by experts in the education field and has been discussed in the past several years in relation to opportunity gaps endured by underprivileged groups (Reardon, 2016).

Notably, there are countless issues related to the resegregation of schools within the Southern region of the United States including: expansion of housing segregation, hyper emphasis of standardized test scores, and widening opportunity gaps. Students within the Southern United States typically go to schools that are closest to their residential area per school zoning policy regulations. This poses a significant issue to school integration when residential areas are segregated, whereas White residents cluster together and/or Black residents cluster together in distant neighborhoods, cities, or even counties. This becomes further complicated by the double segregation that comes to Black populations that also suffer from socioeconomic inequities (Boger & Orfield, 2005). Continued standardized test reporting practices have played a significant role in public opinion and their choices of residence by association. When schools are only ranked by achievement without measuring the many benefits of integration while “ignoring the inequalities built into segregation” (Boger & Orfield, 2005, p.13), this leads both parents and high-quality teachers to lean toward more affluent communities and schools. Whereas we witnessed “the most dramatic narrowing of the test score gap ever recorded for blacks and whites” during the same time period that desegregation was

rapidly progressing (Orfield, 2001, p. 10) in the 1980s, by the 1990s, the marginalized children of the United States were suffering through a widening achievement gap between Black and White students as they experienced “signs of a retrogression” (Orfield, 2001, p. 10). As a result, Black student graduation rates also declined significantly.

Sadly, instead of experiencing the fruits of *desegregation* in the past several years, Black and impoverished students living within the South have suffered the devastating repercussions of *resegregation* efforts (Houston & Henig, 2023). Parallels between reading scores and integration trends over the past several decades have shown that gaps in reading levels among Black students within the Southern regions of the United States increased in size as resegregation efforts in the area surged (Taylor et al., 2019). Furthermore, school segregation lends to heightened racial and economic divisions and creates a breeding ground for inequality that is supported through a cycle that unfairly benefits those in privileged communities and harms those in underprivileged areas (Reardon, 2016). In this damaging cycle, resegregated schools lack equitable funding and subsequently struggle to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. As a result, these schools are at higher risk for declining test scores which then negatively impacts trends in housing segregation subsequently reinforcing school resegregation (Boger & Orfield, 2005). Furthermore, one must also consider Reardon et al.’s (2011) analysis of assessments taken by students from all grade levels enrolled in schools within the United States from 1971 to 2008 in which they traced existing patterns of literacy. From these patterns, the research team determined that Black and Hispanic pupils entered high school with average literacy skills three years behind their White counterparts, and

economically disadvantaged students came in five years behind. The researchers noted that racial and ethnic gaps in literacy have decreased in size in the past four decades but have increased in size relative to socioeconomic status. Roda and Wells' (2013) work within a school district in the state of New York found an inherent contradiction among interview responses among advantaged parents as they reported that they were disconcerted by segregation but were apprehensive about their children receiving the finest education that is provided by White student-dominated schools. This research provides valuable insight into problems involving attitudes toward segregation in schools as those attitudes, especially as parent input holds a high measure of esteem among local school segregation policies.

Problem Statement

Racial and economic disparities have historically troubled schools in the United States, particularly in the Southern region. This phenomenon, often referred to as “double segregation” by education experts, highlights the intertwining of race and socio-economic status in school divisions. It has garnered attention in recent years due to the persistent opportunity gaps faced by disadvantaged groups (Reardon, 2016). Unfortunately, rather than benefiting from desegregation efforts of the past, traditionally marginalized race groups and economically disadvantaged students in the South have faced the harsh consequences of resegregation initiatives (Houston & Henig, 2023). Parallels between reading scores and integration trends over the past several decades have shown that gaps in reading levels among Black students within the Southern regions of the United States increased in size as resegregation efforts in the area surged (Taylor et al., 2019). Although there is much research to prove the crippling connection between literacy and

resegregation, especially of the quantitative and historical nature, there is less known of the experiences of those students, teachers, and other such stakeholders through the practice of qualitative approaches. Thus, there is a gap in the literature where the voices of those experiencing this phenomenon belong.

Purpose and Scope of Study

While extensive research underscores the profound link between literacy and the resurgence of segregation, particularly from a quantitative and historical perspective, there is a void of knowledge regarding teachers' encounters within schools undergoing resegregation, as explored through qualitative methodologies (Fiel & Zhang, 2019; Taylor et al., 2019; Reardon, 2016). Thus, there is a gap in literature where the voices of those experiencing this social injustice belong. My qualitative study's purpose is to fill in an existing gap and create greater awareness of and compassion toward the stories of educators working within doubly segregated school systems.

I aspire to contribute deeper insight into the literacy crisis facing Georgia students with special consideration to their teachers' experiences in public school settings with the hope that policymakers will develop and expedite integration plans. It is my belief that if policymakers were to make these changes in our educational practices that disadvantaged and minority students would then reap the notable benefits of integration including boosts in parental involvement, increased teacher retention rates, heightened resources, rises in academic literacy, decreased racial and ethnic prejudices, and improvements in overall health and wellbeing (Chiu & Khoo, 2005).

Research Questions

The following questions guided the research in this qualitative study:

1. What are the experiences of teachers who taught at segregated schools?
2. What are the experiences of teachers who taught at integrated schools?
3. How are literacy experiences similar and different between segregated and integrated schools from the perspectives of teachers?
4. What cultural variances did teachers observe and experience in segregated and integrated schools?

Theoretical Framework

Within my research with double-segregation and literacy in Georgia schools, I wove Critical Race Theory into my study by exploring the lack of equity among students of oppressed groups in both segregated and integrated schools. Critical Race Theory was developed in the 1970s and 1980s by legal scholars such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and others. This controversial theory emphasizes that racism is embedded within societal structures and institutions, shaping individuals' experiences based on their racial identities. My dissertation topic aligned with Critical Race Theory's tenets by addressing the systemic nature of racism and how it affects educational outcomes for traditionally-marginalized and low-income students. The concept of race as a social construct, a key idea in Critical Race Theory, was vital to my exploration of the impacts of double segregation on academic performance and the assumption that these practices are rooted in systemic racism. By integrating Critical Race Theory into my research, I was empowered to critically analyze how societal structures contribute to the educational disparities faced by traditionally marginalized students and utilize Critical Race Theory as a lens through which to understand and address these issues.

Critical Race Theory encompasses several core tenets that examine the intersection of race, power, and law within societal structures. Here are some of the key tenets and how they can be applied to my topic related to equity in Georgia schools:

Intersectionality

This tenet acknowledges that individuals' identities are multifaceted and that various forms of oppression including race, class, and gender intersect to shape experiences (Crenshaw, 1991). In my research, I sought to explore how the intersectionality of race and socio-economic status impacted the educational experiences of traditionally marginalized and low-income students in Georgia schools. Under the guidance of this tenet, I reflected on how these intersecting identities influenced access to resources, educational opportunities, and social support networks.

Interest Convergence

This concept suggests that racial advancements for marginalized groups are more likely to occur when they align with the interests of those in power (Bell, 1980). With this tenet in tow, I grappled with how policies and educational interventions in Georgia schools might be driven by the interests of dominant groups or institutions. Using this theoretical lens, I also evaluated whether efforts to address educational inequities aligned with the interests of the broader society or specific power structures.

Structural Racism

Critical Race Theory emphasizes that racism is not just individual prejudice but is embedded in societal structures and institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). I applied this tenet to my research by examining how systemic factors within educational systems perpetuate disparities among traditionally marginalized and low-income students. I also

used this lens as I conducted data analysis and developed potential action steps that policy makers and school leaders could take to assist in dismantling structural racism in schools. This included paying special consideration to how funding distribution, curriculum, disciplinary practices, and access to quality teachers in relationship to structural racism manifests within Georgia schools.

Voice of the Marginalized

Critical Race Theory also emphasizes the importance of centering the voices and experiences of marginalized communities (Hooks, 1991). In my research, I incorporated the perspectives of a diversity of educators as well as educators that taught within a diversity of marginalized communities. Their narratives provided crucial insights into the challenges they face and potential solutions that address their needs directly.

Counterstorytelling

Counterstorytelling involves challenging dominant narratives about race and racism by sharing alternative narratives that highlight the experiences and perspectives of marginalized groups (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). In my dissertation, I used qualitative methods to capture and amplify the counter stories of teachers from a variety of backgrounds that were affected by double-segregation in schools.

Chapter Summary

In my first chapter, I aimed to set the stage for my dissertation by addressing the persistent issues of racial and socioeconomic divisions in United States schools, particularly within the Southern region, often referred to as double segregation. I outlined the complex challenges arising from the intersection of race and socio-economic status, highlighting the consequences of resegregation efforts on educational

opportunities for underprivileged groups. The chapter also articulated my problem statement, emphasizing the detrimental effects of resegregation on students' literacy outcomes and the need for qualitative research to explore the lived experiences of teachers within Georgia public schools. I delineated the purpose and scope of my study, seeking to fill the gap in literature by amplifying the voices of those impacted by double-segregation in schools. Finally, I provided an overview of my research questions, theoretical framework grounded in Critical Race Theory, and core tenets guiding my exploration of equity in integrated and segregated schools.

Chapter II:

LITERATURE REVIEW

Racial and socioeconomic disparities have long been a challenge in American schools, particularly in the South. This pattern of intersecting divisions, known as double-segregation in educational circles, has been a topic of discussion in recent years due to its correlation with the opportunity gaps faced by disadvantaged groups (Reardon, 2016). Unfortunately, rather than witnessing the benefits of desegregation efforts, Black and economically disadvantaged students in the South have suffered from the negative impacts of resegregation initiatives. Studies have shown a concerning correlation between reading scores and integration trends over recent decades, indicating that the reading proficiency gaps among Black students in the Southern United States have widened alongside increases in resegregation efforts (Orfield et al., 1996). While extensive research exists on the relationship between literacy and resegregation, particularly from a quantitative and historical perspective, there is less understanding of the firsthand experiences of students, teachers, and other stakeholders. This literature review aims to uncover the historical and political underpinnings of the persistence of double segregation within Southern schools, the depth and breadth of the link between literacy and resegregation, in addition to research design ideas and notable evidence from the sparing examples of qualitative data available on the topic.

Historical and Political Basis of Resegregation in Schools

Top experts in educational policy, civil rights studies, and minority opportunity, including Orfield and his research team (1996) claim that a “quiet reversal of *Brown v. Board of Education*” (p.182) has brought back an unspoken return to separate, but equal

policies that continue to plague the nation's educational system with a variation of issues akin to those faced by students during the period prior to federally mandated school desegregation. Just as history has testified, school segregation led to heightened racial and economic divisions and created a breeding ground for inequality that is supported through a cycle that unfairly benefits those in privileged communities and harms those in underprivileged areas according to Reardon's (2016) study. In this damaging cycle, resegregated schools lacked equitable funding and then struggled to recruit and retain high-quality teachers. As a result, these schools experienced a higher risk of declining test scores which further negatively impacted trends in housing segregation that subsequently reinforced school resegregation as explained by Boger and Orfield's (2005) study. As a devastating consequence of this cycle, Black students' average reading scores on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have steadily declined since 1989 after previously expressing a consistent incline from 1971 to 1989 as demonstrated in the Carnegie Corporation of New York's 2014 data dig. Thus, the research suggests a historical correlation between changes in educational policy related to school resegregation efforts and this decline in reading levels.

From earlier research conducted by Epstein (1985) prior to the lifting of federal mandates to desegregate, one can see that resegregation was already starting to establish itself within the walls of integrated schools by means of student placement at the classroom level. In fact, Epstein used an even earlier study conducted by Forehand et al. in 1976 that included 5,284 fifth-grade students and 886 teachers spanning 94 elementary schools nationwide to reveal that teacher attitudes toward integration impacted their approach to student placement within the classroom and discipline and that these

elements consequently affected Black students' academic success. Although Epstein's (1985) work focused on classroom segregation rather than school or district-wide resegregation practices, the results suggested a correlative relationship between resegregation practices and Black student achievement. It should be noted that despite these ongoing battles within classrooms at that time, the years between 1971 and 1989 when integration efforts were at an all-time high were also marked as years of growth and gap closing (Boger & Orfield, 2005, Fiel & Zhang, 2019, Reardon et al., 2012). The Epstein (1985) study based on classroom-level practices inspired further research on the school and district-level scale and a more specific analysis of each geographic region's results for the purpose of interpreting regional attitudes and practices involving resegregation within the United States.

Years after the Epstein study and the end of court-ordered desegregation efforts, the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007) that race cannot serve as a decisive factor in admittance plans for K-12 public schools consequently creating new legal barriers for school districts attempting to enforce diversity measures within their school systems. To mitigate the ensuing fallout from the case's ruling including the increase of racial segregation in schools nationwide, Conneely (2008) made quick efforts to argue the case for socioeconomic integration. To assist schools in fulfilling their commitment to racial diversity and avoid legal issues, Conneely (p. 97) contended that socioeconomic-based admissions policies simultaneously decrease racial segregation and work to effectively close opportunity gaps held among children from impoverished home environments. Throughout Conneely's case notes, she used her platform to build a constructive

argument detailing relevant historical and legal background. Her argument referred to the *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), its residual effects, as well as three real-life examples of successfully socio-economically integrated school systems in geographically distinct regions within the United States. She also included an extensive compilation of legal and policy analyses. This compendium of research and recommendations provided several points to ponder, especially in terms of understanding political foundations leading up to the current situation as well as schools' response to the change.

Not even a decade later, Reardon et al. (2012) were inspired to critically examine the historical trends of resegregation within American public schools in their study, *Brown fades: The end of court-ordered school desegregation and the resegregation of American public schools*. The research team worked with over 200 schools and districts ranging from medium to large in population that were previously released from federal desegregation mandates from the years 1991 to 2009. They found that school segregation moderately expanded over time in comparison to those schools and districts that continued to abide by court orders. From their study of historical trends in desegregation and segregation among those two groups, they deduced that federal mandates were effective in de-escalating segregation but proved less effective once court orders were withdrawn. Of note, the researchers also found that schools in the South were more likely to resegregate than those schools within other regions in the country, thus supporting the heightened need for further research in that geographic location. Furthermore, the fact that this study was conducted over a decade ago reflects a demand for more current research in the field to investigate how trends in desegregation and segregation have

altered since 2009. Moreover, although this study provided valuable information regarding the trends and politics surrounding the topic, it did not provide any data regarding the narratives of those experiencing desegregation and segregation, thus reflecting a demand for more qualitative research in the field.

A few years later the Carnegie Corporation of New York (2014), developed a graph representation of the United States population of 17-year-old students from 1971 to 2012 in which they visually displayed trends in NAEP reading average score gaps among Black, Hispanic, and White groups. The graph demonstrated several points of interest including marginally high scores among White students across the period that reflected little fluctuation in growth nor regression and a decrease and then stabilization of scores among Hispanic students. Of utmost interest, the graph reflected a huge decrease in the score gap among Black students from 1971 to 1989 before a downward shift in scores from 1989 until 1992 when the gap stabilized but never again reached the score peak reached in 1989. Although this graph did not inherently show a link between reading scores and resegregation, it did provide a point of comparison to data reflective of historical trends of resegregation efforts found in other sources of interest and does beg the question: Why was there a shift in Black reading levels within the United States after 1988 when there was a strong positive slope in data prior to that time?

Later in the decade, Fiel and Zhang (2019) conducted their study, *With all deliberate speed: The reversal of court-ordered school desegregation, 1970–2013*, that sought to look at a wider expanse of historical data related to the issue of resegregation in schools. Through this study, they sought to build upon and critique other major studies related to the topic of resegregation. Of note, Fiel, and Zhang (2019) found that race-

based opposition as connected to localized race structures influences the vulnerability of federally mandated desegregation orders in situations where the Black population is above forty percent. Unlike previous studies, this one aimed to tackle the complex web of interrelated root causes associated with resegregation beyond federal and local mandates. The research team collaborated with every school district within the United States of America that was still under court order from 1970 to 2013 and employed hazard models to develop predictions of unitary status attainment. This study offered a unique and extensive quantitative approach to addressing gaps found in previous studies and as such pinpointed alternative points of consideration involved in the resegregation issue including non-race-motivated factors.

The Current Situation of Resegregation

Moving into the current situation in relation to race-based diversity in United States schools, it is important to note the continued prevalence of resegregation in schools since the aforementioned *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007). Sadly, schools are still in disarray as to how to enforce school integration legally and politically. It is worth mentioning that Conneely (2008) offered a compelling case to use socioeconomic-based integration strategies as a loophole to racial integration in schools at the onset of the now decade-old legal entanglement. Notably, such loopholes have still not been adopted nationwide. There is merit in the case even today as data from the United States Census Bureau (2023) reflects that Black and Hispanic populations are more likely to bear the burden of poverty than their White counterparts. Historical trends and current statistics speak to consistent income inequality among races in the United States with Black and Hispanic populations earning a median

household income 38% lower than the White population. This inequality is further emphasized by the disproportionate levels of poverty experienced by Black and Hispanic populations when compared with White populations in the United States with approximately 17.1% of Black citizens and 16.9% of Hispanic citizens suffering from poverty in contrast to only 8.6% of non-Hispanic White citizens.

More recent research has since been conducted that further examines the conundrum of double segregation in United States' schools including Frankenburg's (2017) study, *Assessing segregation under a new generation of controlled choice policies*, which explores United States schools' racial dynamics under the recent political umbrella of controlled school choice policies. Frankenburg (2017) posited those policies governing student assignments in K–12 schools have the potential to either perpetuate or mitigate existing disparities. His study showed that despite the 2007 Supreme Court ruling on *Parents Involved*, some districts fought to uphold voluntary integration policies with varying experiences. Frankenburg noted that while alternative policies avoiding the explicit use of race remained permissible, their ability to foster diverse school environments were still uncertain. This study explored this anomaly through an analysis of Jefferson County, Kentucky, Public Schools' implementation of a new, broad-based, race-conscious student assignment policy. The study's findings indicated a capacity to sustain integrated schools, albeit with some degree of rising racial segregation and mixed patterns of economic segregation. Furthermore, the controlled choice approach demonstrated lower levels of segregation compared to simulated policies that did not prioritize integration.

Another relevant study, *Racial segregation in the Southern schools*, school districts, and counties where districts have seceded, conducted in partnership with Taylor et al. (2019) took a quantitative examination of racial segregation within Southern schools. The study presented a comprehensive analysis of the impact of school district secession on school and residential segregation in Southern counties in the United States. Their research primarily focused on the rise of double-segregation and its implications for educational equity. The study highlighted the correlation between the establishment of new predominantly White school districts and increased racial homogeneity within schools, as well as the segregation between districts. Key findings included the erosion of the historical countywide school system, the elevated segregation between Black and White students, and the contribution of secession to residential segregation. The implications of the study suggested a dire need for further research to assess the long-term effects of secession on residential sorting and the growth of charter schools as potential segregating mechanisms. Furthermore, the study underscored the importance of monitoring and addressing the negative consequences of secession to mitigate its detrimental impact on educational and residential integration effort. In line with the efforts and implications of this study, I aim to expand upon the prominent issue of the resurgence of double segregation in Southern schools by capturing the experiences, perspectives, and challenges of navigating racially segregated educational environments among educators from both integrated and segregated school districts. This qualitative approach can provide nuanced insights into the day-to-day realities of educators amidst shifting educational landscapes. By employing a qualitative approach grounded in critical narrative inquiry, I hope to offer rich insights into the complex realities of teachers

working within segregated school systems in the Southern United States. I endeavor for my research to further illuminate the intersections of race, education, and social justice in contemporary educational contexts.

Two years later, Bierbaum and Sunderman's (2021) worked with two school systems within the state of Maryland where they analyzed the relationship between school zoning policies and school desegregation in their case study, School desegregation, school rezoning, and growth management in two Maryland counties. The researchers found that local attitudes and school capacity impacted school zoning policies and consequently desegregation practices. Although Maryland schools are far from the Southern regions mentioned in the problem defined above, this case study provided insight into the political factors involved in the study of desegregation. Additionally, their research provides a comparative research approach that may be useful to researchers observing school systems within the Southern region of the United States which also often have one school system across a single county. Furthermore, the Maryland case study highlighted the importance of understanding local attitudes and political factors in shaping school zoning policies and desegregation efforts. Moving forward, I hope that my own qualitative study might to be used to examine the similarities and differences in zoning policies, desegregation strategies, and community responses from the viewpoints of educators. I also endeavor to utilize this comparison to provide critical insights into the contextual factors driving segregation and literacy outcomes across different regions. This comparative analysis may enrich our understanding of the complex intersections between politics, education, and race in diverse geographical contexts. Overall, the Maryland study provided me with a solid framework for understanding the political

dynamics, comparative analysis, interplay of policy interventions, and the amplification of community perspectives involved in this type of research. By integrating these insights into my research design and methodology, I may contribute to efforts to dismantle segregationist practices and advance educational equity and social justice in the Southern region of the United States.

More recently, Kelly (2022) conducted a study, *How to reform without reforming: School district racial composition and Pennsylvania's "Fair" Funding Formula*. The study was primarily quantitative in nature, using a rigorous analytic approach to compare actual equalization subsidy with a formula-adjusted subsidy to identify districts impacted by the policy change. They performed their study by means of utilizing publicly-available district-level data from the Pennsylvania Department of Education for the 2016 to 2017 school year. Additionally, the study employed statistical methods such as entropy balancing to compare districts negatively impacted by the limits placed on Pennsylvania's new funding formula with control districts that had similar levels of financial need but had not been affected by the policy change. The study further utilized data from reliable sources, including historical subsidy files, annual financial report files, and district fast facts files provided by the Pennsylvania Department of Education. Through this quantitative study, Kelly (2022) revealed that a recent policy change in Pennsylvania's education funding system led to significant racial disparities. Despite controlling for numerous factors, districts with higher Black and Latinx student populations were disproportionately affected. Those districts were found to have received less state aid, and lower spending levels compared to similar districts unaffected by the policy. This suggests that policymakers can inadvertently worsen racial inequities in

education funding. The findings also underscored the importance of considering the full impact of funding formulas on racial equity and call for further research to understand similar policies' effects in other states. Moreover, the study highlighted the racialization of policy outcomes, thus challenging the notion that maintaining funding disparities is justified. Overall, the study demonstrated a strong validity in its research design, data utilization, and analytical methods. As such, the study provided credible insights into the impact of the policy change on racial disparities in education funding in Pennsylvania. Furthermore, the study offered a comprehensive analysis of how policy decisions impact educational equity, particularly in regard to racial disparities in funding. Understanding the mechanisms and consequences of funding disparities can provide a broader context for examining the challenges faced by teachers in segregated school systems such as the ones I seek to examine in my study.

A year later, McClellan and Delmont (2023) engaged in a Policy dialogue: Racial segregation in America's schools that was published in the *History of Education Quarterly*. In this Policy Dialogue, McClellan and Delmont discussed the historical roots of school segregation, current challenges, and future possibilities. McClellan, director of the Advocacy for Racial and Civil Justice Clinic at the University of Pennsylvania, and Delmont, a history professor at Dartmouth College, explored efforts to address segregation and visions of a more equitable future. The published dialogue between two individuals with scholarly credentials expressed critical reflection and analysis of historical events, legal decisions, and societal trends related to school segregation. By interrogating past practices and contemporary challenges, the contributors demonstrated a commitment to rigorous inquiry and intellectual integrity. Such measures reinforced the

validity of their discussions. Overall, while the policy dialogue may not adhere to conventional validity measures associated with empirical research studies, it maintained validity through the scholarly rigor, evidence-based arguments, critical engagement, and transparency of its contributions. As such, I found their present-day efforts to challenge segregation and promote equity in education relevant to my personal research as it provides guidance for analyzing the data collected from teachers' narratives. Furthermore, the policy dialogue may be helpful in my research as I aim to identify patterns, challenges, and potential solutions related to literacy education within segregated school systems.

Destructive Links Between Student Learning and Resegregation

Although the issue of resegregation in schools may be grounded in history and politics, the link between Black and impoverished student achievement and resegregation maintains its insufferable chokehold in the United States' education system. Significant gaps in academic assessment scores among minority and disadvantaged youth in the Southern region of the United States still exist today as does the continuation of resegregation practices. The studies synthesized below reflect the strong connection between school integration practices and academic growth among underprivileged groups.

Academic Achievement and Resegregation

One such study that reflects such a connection may be found in Chiu and Khoo's (2005) work with 15-year-old students from 41 countries. Their study found that students achieved heightened success rates in the subject areas of mathematics, science, and reading when they resided in more resource-rich countries. Moreover, the research team

determined that students learning in countries that disproportionately allotted resources or segregated students based on privilege maintained lower average scores. The quantitative research conducted by Chiu and Khoo (2005) yielded implications that are relevant to the issue of resegregation and opportunity gaps among Black youth in the Southern region of the United States in that the results validated the relationship between equal opportunity and levels of academic achievement. Notably, the study showed that equal opportunity not only improved the scores of disadvantaged groups but all groups within the country.

In the same year, Boger and Orfield (2005) conducted a more geographically specific study, *School resegregation: Must the South turn back* that examined schools within the Southern region of the United States and found significant trends of resegregation. The research team presented compelling evidence of not only upward shifts in resegregation among race groups but also across socioeconomic groups. Notably, the team emphasized that Black populations within the Southern United States were more likely to experience socioeconomic disparity and consequently the adversity that comes with double segregation. Furthermore, the researchers identified overlapping trends in resegregation and the opportunity gap experienced by Black students as well as addressed the negative impact of the high stakes testing culture upon marginalized communities. Boger and Orfield (2005) lent significant support to the issue of resegregation in Southern schools as they provided needed analysis of historical trends related to the topic, clarity on the laws related to the issue, implications for future research, and action steps required to resolve the problem.

In the next decade, Reardon et al. (2011) analyzed assessments taken by students from all grade levels enrolled in schools within the United States from 1971 to 2008 in

which they traced existing patterns of literacy. From these patterns, the research team determined that Black and Hispanic pupils entered high school with average literacy skills three years behind their White counterparts, and economically disadvantaged students came in five years behind. The researchers noted that racial and ethnic gaps in literacy have decreased in size in the past four decades but have increased in size relative to socioeconomic status. This study offered a thorough discussion of demographic differences and shed light on notable events related to the timeline of literacy scores. Additionally, the researchers illuminated the limitations of popular literacy assessments and the importance of expanding research to examine the effectiveness of literacy interventions in middle school. Each of these implications help address the widening gaps in literacy experienced by students in marginalized groups.

In response to a need for a more expansive dive into the relationship between school segregation and racial academic achievement gaps, Reardon (2016) worked with approximately 320 metropolitan schools within the United States. Through this study, he found that the strongest correlate of the achievement gap between Black and White students that were connected to the results of resegregation were the variations in school wealth. This was evidenced from the results of both bivariate and multivariate analysis done within this quantitative study. To summarize his results: schools suffering from elevated levels of poverty were less effective than schools privileged with lower levels of poverty and Black students were more likely than White students to attend the latter. From this study, one could see a more recent vision of the existing divides attributed to resegregation and examine the many damaging dimensions involved in this unethical practice. Furthermore, Reardon (2016) illuminated a more specific problem within the

United States school system, double segregation, and identified it as the root cause of the achievement gap. Fellow researchers in the field benefited from this study's evidence of correlation and used it to support their investigative purpose. As with other quantitative studies, by definition, this study lacked a qualitative view which could only further support the researcher's hypothesis and grant the human perspective needed to further support his findings. Researchers may use this as an opportunity to build on Reardon's (2016) work with segregation and achievement gaps in the future.

Another recent instance of researchers expanding on the topic of segregation and achievement gaps within the United States can be found in Blatt and Votruba-Drzal's (2021) study, District-level school choice, and racial/ethnic test scores gaps. Through their quantitative correlational study, they aimed to identify associations between the following variables, charter and magnet school enrollment, segregation, and test score gaps at the district level from 2009 to 2015 in grades three through eight. The study operationalized its variables using well-established measures and datasets, such as the Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA) and the U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data to ensure that their study accurately captured the constructs of interest. Doing so enhanced the construct validity of their study. Overall, the study demonstrated a strong methodological approach aimed at ensuring the validity and reliability of its findings. Although, the study did not find any notable direct impacts of charter school enrollment at the district level on the White-Hispanic test score gap, their findings did indicate that charter enrollment had more pronounced indirect effects compared to magnet enrollment on the White-Hispanic test score gaps. Higher levels of charter enrollment were associated with increased White-Hispanic segregation, surpassing

the effects of magnet enrollment, thereby leading to larger indirect influences on the White-Hispanic test score gaps. The team noted that there were some specific limitations to their study including challenges in drawing definitive causal conclusions regarding whether the expansion of school choice is directly contributing to the widening of racial/ethnic disparities in test scores and the overgeneralization of achievement disparities among Black-White and Hispanic-White test score gaps within the complex landscape of educational inequalities. Despite these limitations, the research team found that while specific school choice policies varied among districts and states, there were consistent nationwide patterns at the district level regarding their impact on educational inequality. Contrary to expectations, the study did not indicate that enrollment in school choice programs reduced test score disparities across districts in grades three through eight. Notably, higher charter school enrollment was linked to wider Black-White test score gaps which were influenced by levels of Black-White segregation. Thus, their research supports the need for further qualitative research at a micro-level that could deeply with the experiences of teachers in segregated school systems. By centering their narratives, future studies such as my own may provide valuable insights into the intersections of race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and literacy within these contexts, informing efforts to address educational inequities and improve outcomes for all students.

A year later, Weathers and Sosina (2022) researched longitudinal trends in school segregation in relationship with resource distribution and district income within their study: *Separate remains unequal: Contemporary segregation and racial disparities in school district revenue*. Using national data including U.S. Census Bureau's Annual Survey of School System Finances and the National Center of Education Statistics'

Common Core of Data, the research team examined contemporary patterns between school district income and racial differences. Their analysis focused on state-by-year measures of revenue disparities between districts within a state. Various controls were incorporated, including measures of racial segregation and socioeconomic segregation between districts, district size, English language learner and special education enrollment, urbanicity, state-level racial composition, and child poverty. The team utilized an empirical model that employed fixed effects for states and years to account for unobserved time-invariant state-specific factors and secular trends across states. The team further acknowledged limitations of their study regarding the inability to establish causal relationships due to potential confounding factors and simultaneity bias. Based on the results of their primary regression models, they concluded that race-neutral local funding policies displayed racial biases. They also found that such policies sustained educational inequality. Furthermore, these practices were attributed to a reliance on historically racist practices such as funding based on local property values. The research team further determined that federal and state funding formulas aimed at addressing concentrated poverty were inadequate as features like provisions and aid were not adjusted for local capacity. This, in turn, directed funds away from districts in need. Thus, their findings highlighted the deficiencies of state aid systems in addressing educational disparities. Although this study was based on a sample from 1999 to 2013, the researchers ended their publication with a discussion of the elevated relevance of their results in United States schools today. Considering recent educational policies and trends that have only increased racial and socioeconomic disparities within school districts, their study remains relevant. Therefore, their study not only serves as a call to social action but also as a confirmation

of the presence and negative impact of double segregation in schools in terms of resource allocation. Overall, their findings emphasized the systemic challenges faced by teachers in segregated school systems as they emphasized how funding disparities sustain educational inequality. Thus, this study supports the continued qualitative exploration involving how these funding disparities impact the experiences of teachers and students within doubly segregated environments. Such continued research might shed light on the broader structural inequalities embedded in the education system in the Southern United States.

External Factors and Literacy Gaps

Within the same year, Waldfogel (2011), looked outside of the schools to find the root cause of the literacy crisis impacting students within the United States of America. Waldfogel's (2011) literary research of the United States student population revealed that out-of-school factors including parenting style, socio-economic status, and home language impacted student literacy. Notably, although Waldfogel (2011) did not examine resegregation specifically, she did relay valid points of consideration for any education-based research study: external factors. Additionally, the researcher provided a thorough analysis of gaps in literacy by race and socio-economic group and found that Black students came into the school system with a literacy gap that widened over the course of their school years. Waldfogel (2011) also made special mention of the increased likelihood of Black students facing socioeconomic adversity. However, the gaps of knowledge within the article created urgency for further research as to the cause of the widening gaps experienced by Black and economically disadvantaged students during their academic careers.

Housing and Resegregation

Several years later, Johnson (2014), aimed to establish a connection between the aforementioned external factors, specifically housing, school resegregation, and Black student achievement in his study, *Still separate, still unequal: The relation of segregation in neighborhoods and schools to education inequality*. Johnson's (2014) work with the math and science test scores of third-grade students within the United States that participated in the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study revealed that students from minority-majority schools, especially those of Black race and from the Southern region, scored lower than their privileged counterparts. Additionally, the quantitative data analysis showed that socioeconomic segregation more than racial segregation created a higher impact on test scores. Johnson's study supported the need for further research and action regarding double-segregation in the United States, especially in the Southern region. Since the study focused on math and science scores, fellow researchers may consider examining social studies, reading, and writing scores in the future to accurately assess all core subject areas with special consideration to the literacy crisis pervading the nation.

Moving forward, Owens, Reardon, and Jencks (2016) further investigated the dilemma of income segregation within schools in their longitudinal quantitative study, *Income segregation between schools and school districts*. Their research delved into the evolution of income segregation within American schools and school districts from 1990 to 2010 by drawing from a diverse set of data sources. Their study revealed a notable rise in income segregation during this period. This rise reflected a negative impact in students access to educational resources and subsequently affected academic achievement among

low-income schools. The study's sample was taken from school districts across the United States, excluding Maryland and certain counties in California. The study's data spanned from 1970 to 2010. The validity measures used in the study included cross-referencing data from multiple sources, such as the School District Demographics System and the Census of Population and Housing, to ensure consistency and accuracy in the measurement of family income at the school district level. By utilizing Census data and the Common Core of Data (CCD), the study gauged segregation, primarily focusing on families qualifying for free lunch as an indicator of low-income status. However, these measurements had inherent limitations, such as overlooking segregation across the entire income spectrum and inaccurately reflecting true eligibility rates. Despite these constraints, the analysis underscored the relationship between increasing income inequality and heightened income segregation within educational settings. Nevertheless, the researchers acknowledged the necessity for more comprehensive data to gain a thorough understanding of these trends and their consequences. Between 1990 and 2010, income segregation within American schools and school districts increased significantly, with between-district segregation of public-school families rising by over 15% of the 1990 level and 25% of the 1990 standard deviation. This trend was driven by the lower middle class becoming more segregated from the upper middle class and the affluent, rather than by increasing segregation of the poorest families from others. While school segregation between Free Lunch Eligible (FLE) and non-FLE students increased during the 1990s, it plateaued during the 2000s. However, segregation between schools within the 100 largest districts increased significantly, particularly after 2008, with a 40% higher segregation level in 2012 compared to 1990. Income inequality played a key role in this

trend, aligning with past research on the association between income inequality and residential income segregation. Additionally, changes in education policies, including weak Socioeconomic Status (SES) integration policies and the proliferation of magnet and charter schools, may have contributed to growing income segregation. However, more research was needed on the impact of these policies on segregation levels. The study was limited by available data on student family income as researchers relied upon FLE status which may have become less dependable due to policy changes. Despite these limitations, the findings stressed the importance of documenting economic inequalities in education and understanding their implications for student outcomes and educational disparities.

In consideration of my own research, I have found Owen et al.'s (2016) quantitative study on income segregation within American schools and districts as a crucial backdrop. The study's revelations about the escalating income segregation and its ramifications for educational resources and academic achievement provide essential context for understanding the structural inequalities pervasive in segregated school systems. By incorporating these quantitative insights, my qualitative study could delve deeper into teachers' lived experiences. Thus, my narrative-driven study could be used to explain how income segregation influences educational practices, resource distribution, and teacher-student interactions within segregated schools. Moreover, the recognition of limitations in the quantitative study and the call for more comprehensive data further stresses the significance of qualitative research in capturing the perspectives and experiences of educators navigating these challenging contexts.

Shortly after the publication of Owen's et al.'s (2016) study, Saporito (2017) released his study, *Shaping income segregation in schools: The role of school attendance zone geography* which investigated the impact of school attendance zone on income segregation levels. Using the rank-ordered information theory index for attendance zones and a spatial variant for residential areas, Saporito found a strong correlation between income segregation across residential areas and attendance zones. Districts with irregularly shaped zones showed less income segregation compared to those with compact zones, even after adjusting for residential income segregation. The researcher employed a quantitative approach, utilizing regression analysis and mapping techniques with data from the School Attendance Boundary Information System (SABINS) for the 2009–2010 school year. Dependent variables included income segregation across attendance zones, while independent variables encompassed residential income segregation and attendance zone shapes. The study used a sample of the largest 350 school districts in the United States and focused on districts with attendance zones for first-grade students. Internal validity measures, such as regression analysis and comparisons between observed and expected income segregation levels, were employed to ensure accuracy and reliability. Saporito's findings suggested that irregularly shaped attendance zones did not exacerbate income segregation. In fact, they were found to be associated with lower levels of segregation. However, compact attendance zones increased economic segregation among American families which potentially impacted students' access to resources and perpetuated inequality. The study proposed comparing income segregation levels in residential areas to proposed attendance zones during rezoning processes as a more effective approach for decision-making by school districts, parents, and advocacy groups.

As a qualitative researcher exploring the experiences of teachers in segregated school systems in the Southern United States, I can draw upon Saporito's quantitative study on income segregation within school attendance zones for valuable context and statistical evidence. Saporito's quantitative findings may broaden my understanding of the structural dynamics and implications of segregation within schools. For example, identifying school districts with irregularly shaped and economically integrated zones prompts me to qualitatively explore how teachers in these districts navigate integration, the challenges they face, and the strategies they employ to promote inclusivity. Additionally, such quantitative findings could inform my selection of case study districts and provide context for interpreting qualitative data on segregation and its effects on literacy education in the Southern United States. Overall, I believe the empirical evidence from the quantitative study may complement my qualitative inquiry, offering a wider perspective that may ground my exploration within a larger socio-economic context.

Another example of quantitative analysis conducted on the topic of income-based segregation in schools is Carlson et al.'s (2020) quantitative study, Socioeconomic-based school assignment policy and racial segregation levels: Evidence from the Wake County Public School System. While both studies explored segregation within schools, they differed in their specific focus and scope. While Saporito's (2017) study took a broader national perspective, spanning and examining income segregation trends across American schools and school districts, Carlson et al.'s (2020) quasi-experimental research design examined the effects of socioeconomic-based school assignment policies on racial and ethnic segregation levels in a specific school district, Wake County Public School System (WCPSS) during a shorter time period, the 2000s.

The purpose of the Carlson et al.'s research was to provide empirical evidence on the relationship between socioeconomic integration efforts and segregation levels. Their sample consisted of student-level data from WCPSS, including information on student demographics, academic achievement, neighborhood characteristics, and school assignments. Measures of validity included standard measures of segregation such as the information theory index, exposure index, and isolation index. The limitations of their study included the absence of an indicator for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility in the dataset and the reliance on within-student variation rather than temporal variation for analysis. Overall, their study found that the socioeconomic-based assignment policy in WCPSS had negligible effects on overall racial/ethnic segregation levels but reduced segregation for students who would have attended majority-minority schools under a residence-based policy. It increased the proportion of White students in schools attended by Black students from 14% to 38%. Additionally, the policy altered other aspects of students' schooling contexts, including peer achievement levels and neighborhood backgrounds. Carlson et al.'s article highlighted the importance of using multiple policy levers to achieve integration goals as demonstrated by WCPSS's approach of combining voluntary choice with involuntary reassignment. However, it is important to note that the political constraints and the design of the policy also influenced its outcomes, thus identifying the tradeoffs and constraints districts face when implementing socioeconomic-based assignment policies. The researchers concluded that while such policies may decrease segregation levels for some students, further research is needed to assess their broader effects on student outcomes.

In consideration of my upcoming qualitative research, their study offered valuable insights into segregation dynamics within educational settings, particularly in the Southern United States. Their provision of empirical evidence on the relationship between socioeconomic integration efforts and segregation levels may be especially useful. By connecting their findings to teachers' experiences in segregated school systems, my qualitative inquiry could potentially uncover the lived realities and implications of segregation for educational practice and policy. Furthermore, this study prompts me to contemplate the broader structural and policy factors influencing segregation within the school system.

More recently, Mordechay and Ayscue (2024) conducted a quantitative study, *Diversifying neighborhoods, diversifying schools: The relationship between neighborhood racial change and school segregation in New York City*, which sought to examine the relationship between gentrification in neighborhoods and changes in the racial diversity of local public schools. The research team utilized Census and National Center for Educational Statistics data to descriptively analyze demographic shifts from 2000 to 2016 in neighborhoods experiencing gentrification. They defined gentrification as the influx of higher SES White residents into historically disinvested areas. Their study's findings revealed significant demographic changes, with a threefold increase in the White population in gentrifying neighborhoods. Notably, while these areas became more racially diverse, elevated levels of segregation persisted, particularly in intensely segregated and hypersegregated schools. The study further suggested that despite some progress, the pace of school integration lagged the rapidly increasing White student population, thus exacerbating segregation challenges in the region.

Beyond this, their analysis explored enrollment and segregation patterns across several types of elementary schools, including traditional public schools (TPSs) and charter schools. While both sectors witnessed an increase in White student enrollment, segregation remained pronounced, especially in charter schools where the majority remained intensely segregated or hyper segregated. Additionally, the study found that White students were more likely to attend TPSs, thus contributing to enclave-like clusters and limited integration efforts. Despite some improvements in reducing segregation, particularly in TPSs, challenges continued in both gentrifying and non-gentrifying areas. The research team acknowledged limitations in defining and tracking gentrification and highlighted the localized nature of the phenomenon and the related need for creative approaches to address segregation in urban schools.

Building upon the findings of Mordechay and Ayscue's (2024) study, it is crucial to consider how these insights may inform the framework of my future study. As such, their study presents several connections and implications for my qualitative investigation. Firstly, their findings offer invaluable perspectives regarding the dynamics of segregation within school systems which may inform the theoretical framework and research questions of my study. Additionally, examining the experiences of teachers in segregated environments can illuminate the broader impacts of segregation on educational outcomes, helping to contextualize and increase my understanding of the issues explored in the study.

The Experiences of Those Facing Resegregation in Schools

Unfortunately, much of the literature available on the topic of double-segregation and student achievement is outdated and limited to a small circle of experts. As such, the

current experiences of teachers, students, parents, administrators, living through double-segregation and its repercussions are not heavily reflected in the available research.

Additionally, researchers are restricted in their ability to conduct current research in the field due to social controversy and the lack of integrated schools available for investigation. Despite these gaps in the research, existing qualitative studies related to the topic have proven helpful in exemplifying functional research designs by providing needed qualitative context to the problem, and better defining the problem at hand.

Students' Experiences

One such source of qualitative merit can be found in Orfield et al.'s (1996) research compendium, *Dismantling desegregation: The quiet reversal of Brown v. Board of Education*. Orfield et al.'s (1996) compilation of research showed studies reflective of the participation of a variety of student populations throughout the United States. Included studies spanned across Norfolk, Virginia, Charlotte, North Carolina, and Kansas City, Missouri from the past and present. Through their comprehensive research, the team found a significant connection between resegregation and declines in Black student achievement, most notably within the Southern region of the country. Their collection of peer-reviewed articles offered extraordinary insights into the damaging cycle of school resegregation including connections with high-stakes testing, school zone policies, and housing segregation. These insights may provide future researchers with motivation to further pursue the topic due to the expansive consequences associated with the problem of resegregation. Additionally, the case studies presented are useful examples of qualitative designs that work to explore the experiences of students, teachers, and parents of those impacted by resegregation and desegregation practices.

A few years later, Orfield and Frankenberg (2011) sought to expand their research through their study, *Experiencing integration in Louisville: How parents and students see the gains and challenges*. Orfield and Frankenberg's (2011) work with the student, parent, and teacher participants of Jefferson County Public Schools in Louisville, Kentucky showed that most student survey participants expressed support of desegregation plans and interest in increasing school policies to improve school integration. Orfield and Frankenberg (2011) conducted this qualitative study on this select school system because they sought to explore the experiences of students participating in the school system's integration efforts in the form of a new student assignment plan. This source was useful as an example of qualitative research in the field of integration and the practical uses of these types of studies on a local scale as this study was used to guide future system-level decisions involving their integration plan.

Parents' Experiences

Another qualitative study conducted by Roda and Wells (2013), *School choice policies and racial segregation: Where white parents' good intentions, anxiety, and privilege collide*, took a different approach to participant selection and the examination of potential root cause of school segregation. Roda and Wells' (2013) collaborated with a school district in the state of New York that exercised their right to implement a school choice system. The research team used a qualitative design where they interviewed a random sample of 59 ethnically and racially diverse parents within the unnamed school district. From their study, they found an inherent contradiction among interview responses among advantaged parents as they reported that they were disconcerted by segregation but were apprehensive about their children receiving the finest education that

is provided by White student-dominated schools. This research provided valuable insight into problems involving attitudes toward segregation in schools as those attitudes, especially as parent input continue to hold a high measure of esteem among local school segregation policies. Moving forward, researchers could further develop their qualitative studies to assess student and teacher attitudes toward segregation in schools to further investigate this critical issue.

Almost a decade later, Wilcox (2021) presented an article, *Still separate: Black Lives Matter and the enduring legacy of school segregation in Georgia*, which was part of a broader longitudinal critical ethnography project. Her project investigated the political and cultural context of schooling in small urban and rural settings, examining harmful systemically racist practices that discriminate against students. The researcher functioned as a participant observer within the research site, Cedarsville County, and gathered data from online sources such as U.S. Census reports, Cedarsville County academic district reports for school districts, virtual informal interviews, local media reports, and conversations with participants on social media. Wilcox further used post-racialism as a discursive lens to render what her qualitative data suggested. As such, the study's results posited that Black students' academic and social success stemmed from a reconciliatory approach embraced by some Black mothers in the Cedarsville community. Wilcox found that those mothers advocated core principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, exposing how post-racial ideologies in school districts were negatively impacting Black students and their communities. Additionally, the study discovered that some Black parents and community members sought to protect their children from discriminatory practices within White-dominant schools by transferring their children to less integrated

school systems, thus “embracing forms of segregation as a “reparative compromise” to dealing with school segregation in their community” (Wilcox, 2021, p. 23-24). Thus, the study amplified the voices of the marginalized populations suffering from the presence of systemic racism within schools and brought light to the experiences of those Black parents and students faced with the choice to continue attending schools that impose discriminatory practices or self-segregate. As the study stressed the detrimental effects of post-racial ideologies and systemic racial inequalities on Black students and communities, further studies are needed to critically examine how these structural inequities manifest within segregated school systems, affecting teacher experiences, pedagogical approaches, and literacy instruction. A critical narrative inquiry may further shed light on the complex dynamics of power, privilege, and oppression within educational settings as initially cultivated within Wilcox’s ethnography.

While Wilcox (2021) conducted a critical ethnography project focused on systemic racist practices and Black mothers’ advocacy for their children within segregated schools, Houston and Henig (2023) explored the effects of disseminating academic performance data on parents’ school choices and segregation tendencies. Houston and Henig’s (2023) study was important because it provided empirical evidence on how disseminating academic performance data influenced parents’ school choices and segregation tendencies. By conducting an experimental survey, the researchers illuminated the effects of information on school choice behavior so that they could offer insights into potential interventions to mitigate segregation in education systems. Furthermore, their study addressed a pressing issue in education policy and practice, particularly in the context of school choice reforms and efforts to promote diversity in

schools. Employing an online survey experiment with a nationally representative sample of parents and caretakers of children aged 0–12, the researchers randomly assigned participants to groups receiving information on achievement status, achievement growth, both, or neither. Their study aimed to understand how diverse types of academic performance data influenced school selection and segregation tendencies. They found that while status information tended to guide participants towards higher-status schools with fewer Black, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students, growth information steered them towards schools with higher growth, albeit not necessarily more diverse. Interestingly, only the provision of growth information alone and not combined with status information, elicited choices with desegregating consequences, although notably the effects are modest.

Consequently, their research emphasized the persistent challenge of achieving diversity within United States even with seemingly widespread support for the concept. Despite expressed intentions for school diversity, the study revealed deeply rooted patterns of racial and ethnic segregation in American education. The researchers attributed this segregation to historical discrimination in housing and education, as well as parental preferences. Additionally, they discussed potential avenues for addressing segregation, including the decoupling of school assignments from residential areas through increased public school choice options and the dissemination of more accurate academic performance data. However, they also acknowledged that these strategies may face challenges in overcoming entrenched systemic barriers and may not immediately lead to significant desegregation. By understanding how information impacts school choice behavior and segregation patterns, my future qualitative study can delve deeper

into the lived experiences of teachers within segregated school systems. It may also be interesting to explore how systemic factors, such as academic performance data dissemination, contribute to the phenomenon of double-segregation and its detrimental effects on literacy education in the Southern United States. Additionally, Houston and Henig's findings may inform my study's exploration of teachers' perspectives on the challenges they face in promoting literacy within racially and economically segregated educational environments.

Educators' Experiences

Lastly, Orfield et al.'s (2016) study, "Brown" at 62: School segregation by race, poverty, and state, expanded on their previous research in the field as well as collected and analyzed information found among other important studies related to the rise of double segregation. Their work with the Civil Rights Project contributed to the larger discussion across the nation and drew from research rooted in the wider topic of school segregation. Through their research, fellow researchers gained access to a compendium of definitions present within the research community including desegregation, resegregation, and double segregation. Additionally, future researchers were inspired to analyze more recent renderings of trends in opportunity gaps as they relate to changes in desegregation mandates as established by the Supreme Court.

Implications

From this preliminary research, one may find historical and political groundings for my future research. This may be evidenced by trends in resegregation and reading scores, samples of qualitative data that spoke to the perceptions and experiences of segregated communities, and case studies that revealed the experiences of integrated

communities. Through this literature review, I gained deeper insight into the opportunity gaps facing oppressed student populations within doubly segregated schools in the Southern United States with special consideration to the literacy crisis and teacher experiences.

Chapter III:

RESEARCH DESIGN

Given my research questions centered around exploring the experiences of teachers in segregated and integrated schools, delving into literacy experiences, and uncovering cultural divergence, a narrative inquiry research design was well-suited for my qualitative study.

The narrative inquiry approach as aligned with the protocols set forth by Kim (2016), was compatible with the qualitative exploration required to deeply understand and document the lived experiences of teachers in segregated and integrated school settings. It allowed for the collection of rich, detailed narratives from teachers' perspectives, offering insights into their firsthand experiences, perceptions, and cultural shifts within these educational contexts. My choice of narrative inquiry was further justified by the design's capacity to capture nuanced and subjective experiences. Through this design, teachers' stories and experiences could be presented as cohesive narrative. Furthermore, this design granted me the ability to understand their lives more comprehensively within segregated and integrated schools. By focusing on individuals' stories, this design allowed for a more profound exploration of how teachers navigated and interpreted their working environments and the impact these settings had on their students' literacy experiences.

Moreover, narrative inquiry permitted me an in-depth examination of cultural shifts experienced by my teacher participants, thus providing a platform for teachers to articulate the changes, challenges, and adaptations they encountered in these distinct educational settings. By allowing teachers to construct and share their stories, this design facilitated a more comprehensive and refined understanding of their experiences, shedding light on the multifaceted aspects of segregated and integrated schooling environments.

My selection of narrative inquiry was primarily driven by the need to capture the subjective experiences of teachers in segregated and integrated schools, emphasizing their personal narratives and perspectives. This choice was made over other research designs for several reasons. For instance, since quantitative designs, such as correlational or experimental approaches, focus on numerical data and statistical analyses, these designs could not sufficiently capture the depth and richness of individual experiences or the cultural shifts that teachers encounter in their academic work settings. Given the qualitative nature of my research questions and my emphasis on exploring subjective experiences, a quantitative design might overlook the nuanced aspects of teachers' stories and cultural shifts. Another consideration that I bypassed upon further reflection was the mixed methods approaches. While a mixed-methods approach combines qualitative and quantitative elements, I favored narrative inquiry design for its emphasis on gathering in-depth qualitative data. A mixed-methods approach might dilute my focus on individual narratives, potentially limiting my exploration of cultural shifts and firsthand experiences within segregated and integrated schools.

As for protocols, I followed the guidelines and principles set by leading scholars in narrative inquiry research, such as Kim (2016). Their protocols and methodologies highlight the importance of listening to participants' stories, interpreting their narratives, and constructing coherent and comprehensive accounts of their experiences. My study incorporated techniques such as in-depth interviews, participant observations, and the construction of narrative accounts to capture and analyze the lived experiences of Georgia public schoolteachers in segregated and integrated school settings. This approach ensured ethical considerations, respect for my participants' voices, and a rigorous exploration of the research questions in alignment with established qualitative research practices within narrative inquiry.

Population and Sample

My sampling procedures involved using the Snowball or Chain Sampling Technique (Patton, 2014) to select a diverse group of secondary teachers from both segregated and integrated schools, capturing various backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, and academic achievements. I started this process after receiving IRB approval (see Appendix C) by defining the purpose of this method, aiming to gain a comprehensive view of my topic by capturing a wide range of experiences. Identifying key variables like age, ethnicity, gender, subject areas taught, school types, and literacy-related experiences was crucial. From there, I constructed a sampling framework where I specified criteria within each variable, such as types of schools taught in suburban, rural, or urban, segregated, or integrated. From there, I utilized a combination of email invitations (See Appendix A) and a Qualtrics Survey (See Appendix B) to further garner a diverse sample that met the parameters of my study. After this I purposefully selected

interview participants within diverse categories to ensure diversity and representativeness in my sample. Defining the population of my study with relevant demographics, characteristics, and factors, and ensuring diversity within my sample across numerous factors like age, gender, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and geographical location, aims to enhance the study's representativeness.

The accessible population for my study includes current and former teachers who have experienced both segregated and integrated school systems within the state of Georgia, evenly split across gender, ethnicity, age, and socioeconomic status. The sample aims to encompass teachers with a diversity of experiences in public school education with a target of at least 9 teachers from a variety of Georgia public schools.

Data Collection

Procedures

For Research Question 1, I aimed to understand the experiences of teachers in segregated schools, I employed in-depth interviews as my primary method of data collection. Through one-on-one interviews, I used open-ended questions to elicit detailed narratives, challenges faced, and individual perceptions from teachers who attended segregated schools. Although I contemplated employing focus group discussions to gather shared experiences and diverse perspectives from teachers from segregated school settings, I decided against this option to ensure the comfort levels of my participants. To further enhance the narrative, I encouraged participants to document their experiences through personal narratives, allowing them to write or record their stories as an additional representation of their time in segregated schools.

For Research Question 2, which allowed me to explore the experiences of teachers in integrated schools, I used a similar data collection model where I conducted in-depth interviews with my participants. These interviews delved into individual experiences, interactions, and feelings regarding teaching with integrated school environments.

For Research Question 3, which focuses on understanding similarities and differences in literacy experiences between segregated and integrated schools, I also employed in-depth interviews with teachers from both school types. The interview questions that I asked specifically sought to target their literacy experiences in both settings.

Finally, for Research Question 4, examining cultural shifts in segregated and integrated schools, I initially planned to conduct observations in both school environments. However, due to the privacy needs of my participants and the expansiveness of my participants' school areas, I decided to ask my participants to tell me oral stories of their experiences involving cultural events, interactions, and celebrations.

The interviews provided comprehensive data, allowing for a deeper understanding of the experiences, literacy, and cultural differences within segregated and integrated school settings. The interview method was chosen to fully capture individual experiences, ensuring a rich dataset that addressed the nuances of my research questions.

Role of the Researcher

For my research, I devised an interview guide as a tool to assist me in my narrative inquiry approach, concentrating on storytelling to understand teachers'

experiences in segregated and integrated schools. This instrument employed a semi-structured interview type. It offered me the flexibility to ask clarifying questions throughout the conversation and supported a more conversational interview style. I also chose to employ an active interview style to foster rapport and facilitate the co-construction of narratives. Such a style allowed me to better leverage my shared experiences with the topic. To develop the interview guide, I brainstormed open-ended questions (See Appendix D) aiming to elicit detailed responses while avoiding leading or biased inquiries. Sample questions include inquiries about day-to-day experiences in segregated schools, influences of the segregated environment on interactions with teachers and peers, descriptions of literacy experiences in both settings, and observations on cultural norms or conflicts within each school environment.

My plan included seeking expert review and feedback from peers, advisors, or field experts to refine the questions for clarity and relevance. Additionally, I conducted a pilot interview with a sample participant prior to starting my study. This step assisted me in gauging participant understanding and provided me with practice in probing more detailed responses. The pilot interview experience also helped me to identify any ambiguity or confusion in the interview questions before moving forward with my larger study.

In my quest to refine the interview approach for my study, I found Patton's (2014) relationship-focused interactive interview approach to resonate more with my relational nature and research goals. The active interview style, elucidated by Holstein & Gubrium (1995, 2003) within Patton's text (2014), complimented my intended narrative inquiry approach. I found this that this interview style facilitated the sharing of personal

narratives, aiding in the co-construction of our collective story regarding our experiences teaching in Georgia public schools.

Data Analysis Procedures

In my data analysis plan, tailored to each research question, I utilized various qualitative methodologies to explore teachers' lived experiences in segregated and integrated schools.

For the first research question concerning the experiences of in segregated schools, I employed thematic analysis and narrative analysis. My thematic analysis (Patton, 2014) involved transcribing and coding interviews to uncover recurring themes. Additionally, drawing on Saldaña's (2021) coding methods, I incorporated narrative analysis by delving into personal narratives to chronologically examine key events, emotions, and reflections shared by participants. Transitioning to the second research question about the experiences of teachers in integrated schools, I continued using thematic analysis, similarly transcribing and coding interviews. Additionally, I conducted comparative analysis between teachers' narratives set in integrated and segregated schools so I could better highlight, and contrast identified themes. Again, I opted to follow Saldaña's (2021) methodologies for qualitative coding. Moving on to the third research question regarding literacy experiences in different school settings, I used qualitative coding techniques. By coding narrative responses, I was enabled to better analyze patterns in literacy-related challenges and strategies employed by teachers in segregated and integrated schools. Finally, I explored cultural shifts experienced by teachers in segregated and integrated schools through my fourth research question by conducting thematic analysis on interview data. My analysis focused on similarities and

differences in school culture experiences among both settings, again using Saldaña's coding methodologies to deepen the analysis. Overall, my data analysis plan encompassed a blend of thematic, narrative, and qualitative coding analysis, incorporating Saldaña's coding methods to dissect and compare the multifaceted experiences of teachers in different educational settings.

In my narrative inquiry study exploring teachers experiences with double-segregation and literacy within integrated and segregated schools, I employed a blended methodology. By intertwining traditional hand-coding techniques with the systematic capabilities of MAXQDA, I was empowered to better explore teachers' stories related their lived experiences within Georgia's publics schools. The act of partially hand-coding pieces of each interview transcript allowed me to delve more deeply into teachers' stories. Simultaneously, MAXQDA assisted me in structuring and comparing the data, thus facilitating a more efficient organization and analysis process. This combined approach to data analysis, provided me with a comprehensive understanding of the intertwining dynamics between segregation, literacy, and the lived realities of teachers within these diverse educational settings.

Chapter IV:

PARTICIPANT PROFILES

Within this chapter, I investigated the lived experiences of nine teachers working in Georgia's public schools. As displayed in the chart below (see Table I), participants came from a relatively diverse set of demographics, while maintaining the parameters of my study.

Table 1

Participant Demographic Chart

Participant	Gender	Race	Age	Years of Experience	Subjects Taught	School Type(s)
Emily	F	W	25-34	4-6	MS/HS Science/ELA	Both
Micah	M	B	25-34	4-6	MS/HS Spanish/Reading	Both
Diana	F	W	35-44	10+	MS/HS Spanish	Segregated
Feeny	M	W	35-44	10+	HS Social Studies	Both
Olivia	F	B	35-44	10+	K-12 French	Both
Grace	F	W	25-34	4-6	HS Science	Both
Gabriel	M	H	35-44	10+	HS Spanish	Segregated
Sophie	F	W	18-24	1-3	MS Math/ELA	Segregated
Sharon	F	W	25-34	7-10	MS/HS ELA	Both

Out of my nine participants, three identified as male, while 6 identified as female. In terms of racial representation, I had two Black participants, one Hispanic participant, and six White participants. Years of experience ranged from 1 year in the field to twenty years. Subjects taught varied from Elementary to High School, including a range of content areas from Math to French. Although most of my participants had experiences in both integrated and segregated teaching environments, 3 participants solely had experiences in segregated teaching environments. Notably not featured, but relevant is that six out of the nine participants were still teaching in the field, whereas 3 participants

were former teachers. Notably, all identifiable information has been replaced with pseudonyms to protect participant confidentiality.

I particularly focused on how double segregation shaped these individuals' teaching environments and impacted student literacy outcomes. I examined the systemic inequalities in these segregated spaces using a critical race theory lens. The chapter reflects detailed participant narratives which have been drawn from in-depth interviews and careful transcription. These stories depict teachers' challenges in a double-segregated system and allow their unique perspectives to guide our understanding.

Emily's Story

Emily knew she wanted to be a teacher from an early age, having been inspired by personal adversities in her home and school life. She reflected on the change in her family's lifestyle after her father took ill, stating, "Suddenly, the middle-class home that I'd always known became a lower-income home." During this time of hardship, when she saw her family struggling to stay afloat and get her father the healthcare he needed, she realized "some things were wrong with the world" including education at times. She found that her difficulties at home altered her learning experiences in the classroom. Whereas she initially described herself as an "easy child," she saw herself becoming a more challenging student. Emily found that this brought out the "best and the worst" in her teachers and she came to realize the importance of good teachers in a child's life and knew right then the "kind of teacher she wanted to be."

Subsequently, when she grew old enough to make decisions about her career path, she chose to pursue an undergraduate degree in education. However, by the end of her first year of college, this pursuit was halted as Emily became increasingly anxious after

hearing a year's worth of worries related to her chosen career path from peers, family members, and even teachers in the field. As a result of what she termed as "peer pressure," she opted to switch her major to a "safer choice." Emily spoke with an air of conviction about her conflicting decision to change her undergraduate major to business, stating, "I knew I wanted to be a teacher... but people told me not to do it, so I switched to business, which I didn't want to do." After earning her business degree in 2014, she ascertained that business was not her passion and decided to throw caution to the wind by chasing her original dream of teaching instead of starting her business career. It was during this transitional period that she took the opportunity to marry her teaching ambitions with her aspirations to travel by teaching abroad.

She began her time teaching abroad in Thailand where she taught English Language Arts to middle grades students. Within the rural town of Chokchai, agriculture was king and, although teaching was considered their "most prestigious" career field, Emily found that her students did not value their education as highly at her school because "they had aspirations to follow in their parent's footsteps" and become farmers. This led to highly varied English proficiencies within Emily's classroom which prompted her to experiment with a variety of instructional strategies to help her students be as successful as possible in her subject area. She found that even more important than her instructions were the relationships that she developed with her students. Emily recollected that most of her students lived separately from their parents, stating it was "common for parents to move to Bangkok for work, leaving their children to live with the grandparents" so that they could send money back home for their families to live on. Thus, early on in Emily's teaching career, she saw the significance of going beyond to

not only teach her subject but to be the “kind of teacher that cared” by providing as much positive attention and kindness as possible to her students during the limited time that they were in her classroom. Her experiences teaching in Thailand only solidified her decision to become a teacher.

Despite her enjoyment of the students, the terrain, and the highly economical living conditions, she knew that she wanted to eventually go back to the Southern United States to teach which meant that she would need more money to afford her next long-term goal. With this financial investment in her future in mind, she decided to pursue teaching in China for a year and a half so that she could “avoid the game of loans” and pay for her Master of Arts in Teaching program tuition upon her return. Aside from the monetary gains acquired from this change of scenery, Emily also attained an even more diverse perspective of the teaching field as well as the world itself. Working in a big city in Southern China, just over the Hong Kong border, not only brought a lifestyle change but also an incredibly different school culture. Where Emily worked, the students were much more acquainted with diverse demographics as they saw people from varying nationalities frequently coming in and out of their city. Additionally, the academic motivations of the two student populations diverged immensely as school policy and career options varied from rural Thailand to inner-city China. At this particular school, Emily recollected that her students had to be hyper-competitive because “education after 9th grade was not guaranteed” as there were policies in place that would only allow the “cream of the crop” to move forward, whereas the rest of the students were placed into other tracks. Emily recalled a memory of one of her Chinese students asking her, “Do children get to play in America?” and reflected on how these interactions shaped how

she treated her students and motivated her to make her classroom a place where students not only learned but had “fun along the way” and felt “comfortable making mistakes.” Later, when she traveled back to the United States, she would not forget these lessons learned in teaching overseas.

After Emily returned to the States, she immediately began chipping away at her master’s degree while simultaneously fulfilling her student-teaching internship requirements at a local charter program that would later become her first North American teaching job. She described the school as being “much more diverse than the other options in town” which were then separated into majority-Black and economically disadvantaged public schools and majority-White and economically affluent private schools. Emily spoke of both the unique opportunities and challenges afforded to her as both a student-teacher and an official teacher of record at this small program in a rural town in central Georgia. One such opportunity included access to the local university’s facilities such as their library and science labs because of the charter program’s partnership with the university. Another opportunity Emily mentioned was the heightened presence and collaboration with college students and professors. Yet another positive to working in this school setting that Emily retold fondly was getting to work with what would become first-generation college students because the program’s goal was to prioritize putting high-risk students into an extra supportive environment to increase their likelihood of entering and succeeding in college careers. Emily emphasized how all these conditions fostered a strong culture of literacy at the program. This, however, stood in sharp contrast to the students’ home schools which she recounted was occasionally challenging to navigate as a teacher. Emily described her frustration with

trying to manage both her science content and blending in literacy supports such as reading novels, writing-based assignments, discussions, and presentations into her class, especially when students were coming from home schools with “seemingly lower expectations.” Although she believed in the heightened significance and impact of interdisciplinary literacy in her students’ lives, she recounted that it added to her “already full plate.” Even though Emily had so many positive recollections of her experience student-teaching and then teaching in this program, she also emphasized that her experiences were “bittersweet” as she evoked memories of evenings where she “broke down in tears” over the weight of lofty expectations placed on her shoulders alongside low support for teachers. In the end, she enjoyed working in an environment that helped traditionally marginalized populations, but she also spent a lot of “extra time” outside of regular working hours trying to meet the heavy workload placed on her. When she called to mind her decision to change schools, she vocalized the need for a more “sustainable workload” as her primary motivator.

After moving to a town in northeastern Georgia, Emily secured a position at a local alternative school that to all appearances was doubly segregated with a high majority of students coming from traditionally marginalized groups both racially and socioeconomically. Despite the obvious challenges, she went into her new school hoping to find a better work-life balance. As she recounted her time at this specialized school, she spoke of her success in finding this initially evasive goal, saying that she rarely ever had to take any paperwork home and was never asked to stay after working hours. However, she admitted the downside to working at the alternative school was the emotional toll the job had on her as she felt that she “could not simply leave their [her

students'] problems at the door.” While teaching at this location, she was responsible for helping students from troubled backgrounds keep up with an online course via a program called Edgenuity. She described this program as a “ready-made” curriculum that allowed students to work at their own pace. Emily spoke of this experience as a “two-sided coin” where she appreciated the side that respected her time so much that she could complete her specialist degree and the other side that made her feel high levels of anxiety as she worried over her students’ welfare and “did not feel as fulfilling as a regular teaching gig” because she did not have the autonomy to teach in a more traditional style. Emily also relayed that she felt her “expertise as an educator was undermined” by the county’s decision to replace authentic instruction with a computer program. During her time there, she prioritized building relationships and aiding students through a one-on-one tutoring style but said that she did not feel like there was “much she could do to close their literacy gaps” in that system.

Thus, after completing her specialist degree, Emily opted to pursue her current teaching position at an integrated and traditional middle school in the same county teaching high-school level and collaborative Physical science classes to 8th grade students. At her present job, she feels like she has finally struck a healthy work-life balance and is working in the “kind of diverse and supportive environment” she always imagined herself in. Emily raves about her helpful team collaborations and autonomy and feels that even the day-to-day challenges at this job are bearable by comparison. True to her nature, she continues to strengthen her bonds with students and aid them in their academic growth year after year through relationship-driven teaching models including Culturally Relevant Teaching and Universal Design strategies. She admits that although

she enjoys her current placement, “it is not all rainbows and roses,” mentioning how diversity comes with its unique challenges, especially in the form of differentiation, specialized supports, and dealing with the fallout of the conflicting interests of district stakeholders. Emily recounts the difficulties of trying to engage learners with such extreme ranges in their literacy levels, especially when her school has an exceedingly high concentration of English Language learners paired with low levels of additional support and resources to meet their specialized needs. To meet her students where they are regardless of these difficult circumstances, Emily is constantly trying out new strategies like reading aloud to her students which she recounts is surprisingly effective in garnering student attention. She believes the students “really enjoyed the presence of an adult reading to them and spending that time with them, almost like a younger child would.” Another strategy that she has found helpful is pre-teaching vocabulary. Emily tends to use graphic organizers and other printables since computers are not easily accessible at her school. Emily has found that “adaptability and relationships are key” to her continued progress in her teaching career.

Micah’s Story

Micah first fell in love with the world of academia when he realized how empowering the education system could be to underserved communities. Growing up in Big Bear Lake, a surprisingly diverse rural town in Northeast Georgia, he was “accustomed to interacting with people from various racial and socioeconomic backgrounds.” Micah nostalgically reflected upon his early years spent in a mostly integrated public school system, where exchange students and peers from different walks of life shaped his view of diversity and inclusion. Notably, this environment changed

during his 11th-grade year when a new charter school was founded near the affluent lake area, catering primarily to wealthier families. Big Bear Lake's rapid transformation "triggered rapid segregation" within the public Title I school district. Very quickly, one could see resources and students becoming significantly divided along racial and economic lines. Micah recalled that despite the public nature of the schools, this shift deepened the inequities between them.

Tinged with hurt, Micah reflected that he only "encountered a single Black male educator" throughout his K-12 education, which left an impression upon him that would only fuel his aspirations to be a positive role model for students, especially those who shared his background. As a Black male educator, Micah felt a "sort of responsibility to serve as a representative" of what students, particularly students of traditionally marginalized backgrounds, could achieve. Growing up in a community where diversity was present but only sometimes reflected in professional roles, he was acutely aware of the impact his presence in the classroom could have. In the face of Micah's limited experiences with Black male leadership within the educational field in his formative years and his ongoing observations of the educational inequities that affect students from underserved backgrounds, Micah went into the teaching field entirely motivated to use his place in the profession as a platform to defy the odds. Micah spoke ambitiously about his noble aspirations to provide access and opportunities to all students regardless of their backgrounds. With the eager tone of a visionary, he spoke about how these opportunities could be "game-changers" in children's lives and future generations. His commitment to equity became central to his teaching philosophy, driving his passion for creating inclusive educational environments.

Micah's love for languages blossomed during his undergraduate studies at Fuego State University, where he majored in Spanish Language and Culture with a minor in French Language and Culture. His first Spanish class broadened his worldview, showing him the power of multilingualism as a "tool to help bridge divides between people." Through this unique experience, he realized that language could be used to nurture understanding and communication across cultures, thus solidifying his belief that teaching languages was more than simply teaching vocabulary and grammar and more about equipping students with the tools to "become better global citizens and communicators." Micah's collegiate experiences, including his study abroad in Strasbourg, France, reinforced his point of view, allowing him to immerse himself in diverse cultures and see firsthand how language could open new opportunities in the world. Feeling utterly inspired by his life up to that point, he excitedly decided to pursue a career in teaching languages to impart linguistic skills and encourage his students to embrace the world with open minds, ready to connect across differences. Staying true to his value of diverse experiences, Micah chose to teach in both segregated and integrated school environments. Thoughtfully, Micah remarked on the distinct challenges related to the racial and economic composition of the student body. While he appreciated the increased racial diversity in integrated schools, economic disparities remained surprisingly stark, often resulting in a clear divide in academic performance. As he continued teaching far and wide, he found a disturbing unspoken pattern coming to light: wealthier students were achieving in both environments. At the same time those from lower-income households struggled to keep up. With a sympathetic tone, Micah asserted, "You can easily tell the kids whose parents had the money... and the kids who lived with

their grandma because their parents were not around.” This tragic and reoccurring pattern further motivated Micah to improve his instruction to support students facing these obstacles.

One of the most significant challenges Micah encountered was addressing literacy disparities. He could not help but notice a trend between students from low-income families and struggles in literacy. He reflected on how his students from economically disadvantaged homes often struggled with reading and writing, mainly because they “lacked the support they needed at home.” Over time, this lack of reinforcement compounded their difficulties and widened the gap between them and their peers. Micah candidly posited, “If a kid is struggling with literacy in school and needs the extra help at home, they were not getting it.” He further elaborated on this detrimental cycle, asserting, “It just compounds over the years to the point where they feel they are too far behind.” Micah viewed this ever-expanding disparity as a severe problem and worked hard to provide extra support within his classroom to help his students catch up. Sadly, his efforts to address literacy challenges were often met with administrative resistance. Micah frequently felt unsupported by the school leadership, especially when he courageously advocated for more resources to help struggling students. He encountered school leaders who blatantly favored certain staff members and were reluctant to implement changes that could improve literacy outcomes. With an air of agitation, he recounted, “I was working for the opposite type of administration,” and “their favoritism was a lot more blatant and in your face.” In the face of these administrative challenges, Micah remained committed to his students and worked tirelessly to create an equitable learning environment where every student could succeed.

In the face of limited administrative support and resource constraints, Micah made extra efforts to ensure his students received the education they deserved. For instance, he stayed after school to tutor struggling students, often purchasing his supplies to supplement the classroom environment. Another way that he went above the call of duty was when he rewrote an entire curriculum for his Spanish I course once he realized that many of his students had foundational gaps in their literacy skills, particularly in understanding basic concepts such as parts of speech. With a flicker of pride in his voice, he retold his labor of love that involved revising the school's curriculum to incorporate a comprehensive review of the parts of speech in English. Even though he was teaching a Spanish class, he thought these concepts were essential for students to understand their native and foreign languages. He meticulously recounted how he "started to meet with the English teachers to talk about ninth- and tenth-grade English courses, and collaborated with them on how their standards could match ours." All this extra effort to establish a plan for interdisciplinary literacy paid off in terms of behavioral changes and growth in Spanish and English language proficiency.

For the first month of the semester, Micah's Spanish class focused on breaking down fundamental concepts, such as what constitutes a sentence and the roles of various parts of speech. Notably, this approach was much needed because many of his students had never been explicitly taught these concepts since elementary school. When reflecting on his experiences with this challenge, he noted, "The number of kids, when I asked, 'What is a pronoun? They had never been explicitly taught what it was.'" Through this scaffolded approach, he helped his students grasp basic language mechanics and improved their performance in their English classes. Micah humbly bragged about his

student's growth across subject areas, saying, "Their essays were better, their discussion posts were better." By the end of the quarter, the reinforcement of foundational literacy skills in his class started to pay off across subjects.

Despite the students' initial resistance as many expressed doubts, saying, "I cannot do this in English; how am I going to do this in Spanish," Micah remained determined to push them toward success. By the end of Spanish Level 1, students were expected to write at least two pages in the language, a goal that seemed unattainable to many at the start but one that Micah achieved through his patient scaffolding and constant support. Over time, his method evolved. Students would begin with highly structured assignments but were expected to move toward free form writing by the end of the course. "Some kids were annoyed by it, but others were thankful they finally got what they needed," Micah said. His long-term goal was ambitious as he aimed for students to draft college-level papers by the time students reached his AP Spanish course. Through his relentless dedication, Micah helped his students exceed their expectations, proving they could achieve more than they thought possible with proper guidance and scaffolding.

After years of teaching, Micah decided to leave the profession. His choice was driven primarily by a lack of emotional support from faculty and administration and the job's emotionally draining nature. While he loved working with his students, the systemic challenges, lack of professional support, and constant emotional toll became overwhelming. "I did not feel supported by the adults around me... I was really overworked and did not understand. It got to a point where I did not have the joy I used to have," he recalled. Although he cherished his students, he was increasingly unable to

sustain the emotional energy needed to continue teaching. Micah lamented, “I love my students, but I cannot keep going home every day, knowing I am not being my most productive self.” His transition into a role within collegiate education administration, focusing on managing programs and advocating for student success in higher education, offered the fulfillment he had been seeking. “The shift to higher education was a positive change for me,” he concluded, finding renewed purpose and support in his new position.

Diana’s Story

Diana found her way into the world of teaching during her college years when she had the privilege of serving economically disadvantaged and immigrant families within the local community. While working with these traditionally marginalized groups, she found that beyond necessity, a vast majority of the families she worked with struggled with issues related to literacy. Several of the children she worked with came from homes where basic needs took precedence over schoolwork, and language barriers added an extra layer of difficulty in accessing education. She passionately recalled that she “got into teaching after volunteering in a school and seeing how much the kids needed help, especially those from low-income and immigrant families.” With freshly opened eyes, Diana could now better identify the significant problems these communities faced. She felt like she needed to take action and decided that committing her work life to teaching was how she could help. More than anything, she wanted to use her teaching role to advocate for and support students like the ones she volunteered with, sparking her passion for working in diverse environments where her efforts could make a tangible difference. Her desire to support students through their educational journey became a

driving force in her career as she sought to create inclusive, adequate learning spaces for those most at risk of being left behind.

After completing the required teaching coursework and student-teaching hours, she began her career in the deep Southern region of Georgia, where she taught Spanish I and II at a small rural high school. She found that the school's student population reflected the region's demographic shifts well, considering that the area experienced a growing number of English Language Learners (ELLs) and families facing economic hardship. Although Diana accepted the position with a genuine desire to help these high-needs students succeed, she quickly learned that wanting to help and knowing how to help were two different things. Considering the specialized challenges that came with extreme poverty rates and widespread language barriers, Diana shared that she "felt underprepared to make [her] vision a reality." Thankfully, she worked in a school that was filled with fellow difference makers who saw the needs within and beyond the classroom. Together, they worked to support and maintain "food distribution programs" within the school system and a unique "literacy initiative" to help fill the gaps in their students' bellies and literacy rates. These programs were a lifeline for many families that Diana was proud to be a part of. School programs like this not only sent the message to students and parents that "We see you; we support you," but also sent this same message of unity and support to their teachers who were in the trenches day in and day out working to give their students a better outlook. With the outpouring of emotional support from her school, Diana developed more confidence in meeting her students' needs.

Sadly, despite their best efforts to work with what they had, the reality was that her first school was significantly under-resourced as a whole, thus creating additional

hurdles for teachers like Diana. These hurdles included a need for curricular resources, instructional technology, and specialized staff. Even though Diana's school could be described as having heightened levels of need compared to other schools in the area, she found that her school lacked an equitable level of instructional resources. She noted that the "influx of new ELL students that are non-English speaking had thrown the whole county for a loop and did not pair well with a resource-poor school." Looking back, she hoped the school's lack of preparation was only temporary, believing that "once they knew better, they could do better." However, these hopes and dreams did not alter her then-current reality. She recalled how she and her colleagues were often overwhelmed by managing classrooms where language barriers prevented full participation with no supportive resources in sight. Over time, she found that even with special programs in place, the support "just was not enough" for the hurdles they needed to overcome in the classroom. This left Diana and her fellow teachers scrambling to adapt their instruction to meet the needs of a linguistically diverse and poverty-stricken population without the training or tools they truly needed. In the face of this growing need, Diana continued to put her best foot forward as she attended additional training on her own time and used her funds to provide resources for her students. Although this reflected her dedication to her students, it also evidenced the great need within her school system to make equitable changes in the district's budget to better accommodate her students' evolving needs.

As the old English proverb goes, "Necessity is the mother of all invention," Diana began inventing her own in serious need of a curriculum, among other resources. Looking back with pride, Diana reminisced about the hardships and rewards that came with her curriculum development process. She recalled her success when she started

seeing the positive outcomes of her “homemade” instructional model that made both the English and Spanish language more accessible and engaging for her students. Drawing inspiration from the teaching methods of Jalen Waltman, a well-known expert in literacy and language instruction, Diana focused on vocabulary retention and active student participation. She jokingly mentioned that she “stole” Waltman’s strategies, praising her as a “guru” in the field. In her high school classes, Diana introduced vocabulary in chunks, using pictures and motions to help students internalize the phrases. After practicing these phrases, she would animatedly tell a story in Spanish, with students acting it out, making the learning process highly interactive and memorable for all parties involved. With joy, Diana recalled how they “would practice these phrases until [they] felt good,” highlighting the value of relational and engaging teaching practices. Teaching Spanish I was especially rewarding for Diana because she could see clear progress as her students, who often started without knowledge of the language, gained confidence by the end of the course. In contrast, she found teaching Spanish II less fulfilling, as the students already had some prior knowledge, making it harder to “gauge how much of their progress was due to [her] teaching.”

After several years of collaborating with her colleagues to build up the language program and support literacy initiatives within her first school, she made the tough decision to move. Due to personal reasons, she had to pick up and start over at a new school in Northeast Georgia shortly after the COVID-19 pandemic started to ebb. Not only was she working in a new geographical region, but she was also working at a new level of schooling: middle school, to be precise. Upon starting at her new school, she encountered a blend of new problems and new advantages. Starting with the pitfalls,

Diana agonized over how Spanish was no longer a required subject but rather an elective at the middle school level, lamenting that, “In middle school, I am kind of a dumping ground class” where only “A third of the students pick Spanish, and two-thirds are just placed in there.” With the lack of policy-level accountability, she found that students needed to be more engaged and motivated to perform their best. Without the pressure of needing Spanish to graduate, many students approached the class “with a lack of seriousness” to her blatant frustration. The disruptions caused by the pandemic further complicated the situation, with most of her students missing the crucial development of foundational literacy skills in their native tongue. The students’ lack of foundational literacy skills like phonemic awareness and sight word identification made it even more challenging to teach a foreign language, Diana recounted with a deflated tone. She struggled to inspire the same level of interest and dedication that she had seen in her high school classes and commented on her students heightened “dependence on their phones and computers.” Diana had to constantly adjust her expectations and adapt her methods to meet her students where they were, often feeling frustrated by the lack of engagement and support in a school district that had not readjusted to being back in school.

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, Diana noticed a broader shift in how schools approached education, particularly regarding academic accountability. “We have moved away from accountability,” Diana noted. She further reflected on how schools had become more focused on students’ emotional and physical well-being, often at the expense of rigorous academic standards. While she understood the need for flexibility considering the pandemic’s impact, Diana also believed it was important to work on holding students accountable for their academic progress. “Just being here is not enough.

You must do something,” she shared, highlighting the difficulty of instilling a sense of responsibility in students who have grown accustomed to leniency. School policies that discouraged failing grades, even when students did not meet the standards, clashed with her personal belief in accountability. Despite this, she continued to find ways to ensure her students learned, often offering academic contracts that allowed them to improve their grades by attending tutoring and completing extra assignments. Sadly, she experienced numerous accounts of administrative, parent, and student pushbacks as she tried with little power to promote elevated expectations of her students.

Due to differing views on accountability, Diana quickly found that she needed to make a change quickly before she “burnt out.” Thus, she gave the school district next door a shot. She took a parallel position at a middle school less than 30 minutes from her old district and has found more support with her transition. She raved about her school leadership, enthusiastically saying, “I love my principal! I love all of the leadership here.” Beyond school-level administrative support, Diana has also been impressed with the district overall compared to her last one. She noted that her current district was making “power moves” when it came to accountability, which made a massive difference in both her teaching life and the academic lives of her students. One such power move she excitedly discussed was her district’s recent push for improvement in literacy. Recognizing the decline in literacy skills exacerbated by the pandemic, the district launched initiatives to improve literacy across all grade levels, including teaching phonics at the elementary level and integrating literacy strategies throughout middle school. In Diana’s Spanish classroom, she followed suit by integrating the proposed literacy techniques that best fit her students’ needs, such as writing exclusively in Spanish on the

board and incorporating vocabulary-building activities into her lessons. Beyond her own classroom, Diana spoke highly of other powerful moves the district was taking to close the literacy gap in their schools, such as launching intensive intervention programs like Read 180 to support students with the lowest reading levels. While these literacy programs represented a step in the right direction, Diana remained cautious, noting that progress would be slow, especially given the challenges many students faced outside the classroom.

In the face of these challenges, Diana’s dedication to her students has never wavered. Her experiences teaching in socioeconomically and linguistically diverse environments have only strengthened her resolve to ensure that every student has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background. Her focus on literacy, accountability, and student engagement demonstrates her commitment to educating and empowering her students. As she continues to adapt to an ever-changing educational landscape, Diana’s teaching journey is a testament to her resilience, innovation, and unwavering belief in the power of education.

Feeny’s Story

Feeny considered himself a late bloomer when it came to developing a taste for the teaching pathway. He got his start at a technical university with an initial focus on physics but soon realized it was not the right path for him. He retorted, “I hated calculus.” This realization prompted him to switch majors to history and anthropology. He eventually transferred to another university in Georgia and later earned degrees in both fields. Unsure of his next steps after graduation, one of his anthropology advisors suggested education as a potential career path. “I did not know what to do with myself,”

he exasperated, adding, “One of my anthropology advisors suggested that education would be a beneficial thing to go into.” Taking heed of their advice, Feeny opted to pursue a master’s degree in social science education. It was during his time in this degree program that he completed the coursework and student-teaching hours necessary to enter the teaching profession. Soon afterward, he accepted his first teaching job at a rural Title I high school in Big Bear Lake, Georgia, where he was tasked with teaching various social studies classes.

Teaching at Big Bear Lake High School was an eye-opening experience for Feeny. Entering the field as a white male from a middle-class background, he expressed how underprepared he felt to take on his new and unfamiliar environment. “I had never really experienced poverty or people who lived in poverty,” he thoughtfully acknowledged as he narrated how teaching in Big Bear Lake altered his perspective. As Feeny looked back on his first day of teaching geography at Big Bear Lake High School, he spoke to the culture shock he experienced when he saw firsthand the severity of the students’ unfamiliarity with basic local geography. “I asked them to list geographical features of the county, and I got oceans and mountains,” he recalled in a flabbergasted tone. The differing life experiences of his students, many of whom had never been outside the county, stood in sharp contrast to Feeny’s upbringing.

Throughout Feeny’s time teaching at Big Bear Lake High School, he confronted serious challenges with literacy among his students. Many of the students he worked with came from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and struggled with reading comprehension and basic literacy skills. As a teacher in a rural Title I school, Feeny found that his students needed more exposure to literature and often needed help grasping

complex texts due to their need for more access to resources such as books and reading support. He also observed that the struggles with literacy were connected to broader educational inequities, as many of his students had yet to receive the foundational support they needed in earlier grades to become proficient readers.

Feeny also contended with an ongoing culture of racial and socioeconomic division within the school district. At the time, Big Bear Lake High School served a predominantly Black student population, mostly from low-income families. At the same time, a newly established charter school in the area, Macomb Academy, catered primarily to wealthier White students. “There was much anger at board meetings about funding and who got to go to the school and who didn’t,” Feeny recalled, stressing the growing division between the two schools and the community. The ever-growing system of double segregation limited his students’ access to educational opportunities and resources and created an environment where literacy and academic success were more challenging. Feeny noticed that the few White students in Big Bear Lake schools often came from private schools like Lockhart Academy and were themselves facing economic struggles in the aftermath of the 2008 fiscal crisis. He recounted how this situation only reinforced the existing socioeconomic divide in the area, thus further complicating efforts to improve literacy and educational outcomes across the county.

In the early years of his teaching career, behavior management was yet another challenge for Feeny. He recounted how one of his students spent most of the school year in the in-school suspension room due to behavioral issues that could not be managed within the traditional classroom environment. “By the end of the year, he spent every day in ISS because he was just off the chain, could not control himself,” Feeny recalled. As

he retold this memory, he chuckled in disbelief as he considered how much discipline issues added to the emotional and physical toll of teaching at that point in his teaching journey. Despite these challenges, Feeny learned a valuable lesson that he had initially dismissed during his graduate training: building student relationships is essential to classroom success. He sheepishly admitted, “I always thought that was stupid,” as he referred to his preliminary thoughts on relational teaching as a student-teacher. However, he nostalgically orated that he eventually realized that fostering these student connections was vital, especially in a community like Big Bear Lake, “where students saw teachers cycle in and out every year.” Feeny found that his commitment to staying year after year helped build trust with his students.

Feeny also took on additional responsibilities, such as coaching the school’s soccer team. Though he half-jokingly spoke of his lack of confidence when it came to his coaching abilities, the experience proved to be an unexpected avenue for molding stronger relationships with his students. He noted that, “The core of the soccer team was Hispanic kids.” Moreover, he related how the rapport he developed through coaching led to better classroom behavior and performance. He shared that his soccer kids were “likely to act up in class because they knew it would have consequences once we got on the soccer field.” Driving students home after practice also gave him a better understanding of the harsh living conditions some of his students faced. This experience further fostered his compassion and dedication to the teaching craft.

Regardless of these extra efforts, the challenges of teaching in a high-poverty school district began to take their toll on him. As it so happens, the school underwent multiple leadership changes, with four different principals and three superintendents

during his six-year tenure. Feeny spoke of this instability as he lamented how, “Every time a new guy came in, it was like we had to throw everything away and start over.” Expressing exhaustion from this constant upheaval, Feeny orally unraveled the red tape surrounding the school politics of the time. He went on to candidly characterize a principal whose leadership style he found incredibly frustrating, likening his approach to a military drill instructor who “liked to hold faculty meetings where he just yelled at us.”

By his sixth year, Feeny felt burnt out from the long hours, the heavy emotional load, and the lack of consistent progress. He vehemently vocalized his frustrations, stating, “I was using tons of sick days because I was always sick.” The toll teaching took on his health, and personal life was getting out of hand. Commuting for 45 minutes each way and balancing early morning duties with after-school programs left him little time for himself, let alone time for meaningful relationships in his personal life. Feeny realized he needed more balance in his life as he began a relationship with his now-wife, firmly deciding that at that point, he was no longer only sacrificing his time, but his current and future relationships. Around that time, he “decided [he] wanted to have a family of [his] own.” He spoke emphatically as he reflected on his long-ago internal struggle, “It is not that I did not love these kids, but I also knew that these are not my kids, and I would like to have my own.” This metacognitive thinking eventually led him to his final decision to move on from Big Bear Lake.

Transitioning from Big Bear Lake to his current teaching position was a massive change for Feeny regarding the student population and the overall educational environment. As previously expressed, Feeny often worked around the clock to bridge the literacy gap for students who were reading several grade levels behind while serving

in Big Bear Lake. He recalled spending hours after school with a small group of AP U.S. History students, meticulously reviewing essays to improve their writing skills. “I would assign an essay to each unit, they would write the essay, and then there were three or four kids who were in my room every day for two hours after school,” he explained. At Big Bear Lake, the students struggled with understanding complex historical texts, often because their reading levels were far below the Lexile of the challenging materials they were expected to analyze. “These kids could not even read the test because the test was written at a collegiate level,” he reflected, highlighting the extent of his literacy challenges. Now, in a more affluent and academically rigorous environment, Feeny finds that his students arrive with a much stronger foundation in literacy. He jested about his current students, saying, “I do not even know if I need to be in the room.” He continued to speak about how much less direct intervention and scaffolding was needed among his current students with slight disbelief. This obvious disparity came as a bit of a culture shock to him. “The first few weeks, I told my colleague, ‘Man, what’s wrong with these kids? I tell them to do something, and they just do it,’” he lightheartedly quipped. For one, the students in his AP Seminar course typically start at a higher level of writing proficiency. As he recalled more recent tales with his current class, he shared that he told his students: “All of you guys come into the room already in the middle of the rubric, so we will be focusing our efforts on refining your skills rather than building them from the ground up.”

Despite these differences, Feeny has noticed some surprising similarities between the two environments, particularly in students’ attitudes toward reading for pleasure. He found that very few students engaged in recreational reading for its pure joy in both

schools. Feeny lamented, “In a given class of 25 kids, I will have maybe four or five kids raise their hand that reading is something they enjoy doing.” A reluctance to read outside assigned work appears consistent, regardless of his students’ socioeconomic backgrounds. Feeny attributes part of this to the pressure that students, especially those in his current school, face from their families to excel academically, often at the expense of other activities. Many of his students are first-generation Americans with parents who push them relentlessly to succeed. Emphasizing the cultural differences impacting student educational experiences, Feeny noted that, “Their parents are pushing them a little harder than theirs [multi-generation Americans] are, and they have different motivations.” Adapting his teaching methods to these different environments has also been a learning process for Feeny. In Big Bear Lake, he often had to specially modify historical documents to make them accessible to his students by paraphrasing complex language and providing vocabulary support. “I ended up going through many historical documents and simplifying them,” he recalled. While he still provides some scaffolding, he finds that his students are more capable of managing the original texts. He has also learned to utilize resources more efficiently, drawing on a wealth of pre-made materials and rubrics to guide his instruction. “I have gotten rid of that attitude as I have gone on, and now I am happy to just borrow whatever I can from other people,” he said, reflecting on how his early teaching experiences taught him to balance his workload more effectively.

Through his wealth of teaching experience, Feeny gained a heightened understanding of the challenges and strengths that students bring into the classroom. His time in Big Bear Lake gave him invaluable insights into the impact of poverty and systemic inequities on education. At the same time, his current position has shown him

the pressures faced by students in high-achieving environments. By navigating these different settings, Feeny has refined his teaching methods to support a wide range of learners, always with the goal of helping each student achieve their full potential.

Olivia's Story

Since she was small, Olivia felt drawn to the teaching profession. With a sense of certainty, she reminisced about how she “always enjoyed being a student and being at school,” so it was “just like something [she] could continue to do as a career.” As she transitioned into her college years, she stayed on a clear path to teaching a subject area that she was enthusiastic about: French. By combining her love of the French language with education, she moved confidently into her role as a French instructor. Throughout her 19-year career, Olivia taught at every grade level, gaining experience in elementary, middle, high school, and even college settings. However, despite completing her master's degree in leadership and administration, Olivia quickly realized that administration was not the right path for her. Her tone shifted as she described her disillusionment: “It was a lot of paper pushing, many politics, and they weren't really affecting the children the way that I wanted to move.” There was frustration in her voice when she reflected on how distant working in administration felt from her original passion to impact students directly in the classroom. This internal struggle eventually led her return to teaching, where she could focus on what mattered most to her: student growth and engagement. Her voice was charged with determination as she vocalized, “I just want to teach some kids. I want to grow some kids. I want to send some kids to college. I want to, you know, close some wealth gaps.” With her reinvigorated passion for teaching, she earned her specialist degree in Foreign Language Education to stay fresh in the field.

Beyond investing her time and money in additional educational training, Olivia also sought to invest emotionally in her students and community. Such investment is unmistakable as she speaks to the rewards and challenges of teaching in her urban Title One school on the south side of Dogwood City, a district shaped by segregation and gentrification. Her voice reflected a mixture of concern and frustration as she discussed the prevalent social and racial divides in the city, noting, “[Dogwood City] is very segregated...on the south side, it is like 99% Black, a sprinkling of Hispanic.” Although her school’s reputation has attracted some wealthier families due to gentrification, Olivia’s empathy is perceptible as she describes the reality for most of her students who face significant financial struggles. She noted with a hint of resignation that her school “currently meets the federal guidelines for free and reduced lunch.” These economic disparities weighed heavily on Olivia as she reflected on the academic performance of her students, many of whom face overwhelming barriers outside the classroom. There is a mix of frustration and compassion in her tone when she describes the lack of academic support at home, lamenting, “For many of my children, school turns off at 3:30, like, completely.” Sadly, the harsh reality for many of her students is that learning ends when they leave the classroom. With parents often working multiple jobs or the night shift, there is little time or energy left for homework or additional learning. Olivia spoke firsthand about her observations of the negative impacts of this lack of reinforcement on her students’ literacy skill development. The disparity is quite jarring when she compares her lower-income students to their more affluent peers. When speaking of her more affluent students, she recounts, “The expectation has been impressed upon them from the beginning,” as evidenced by her experiences with their highly involved parents. While

she empathetically says that her less privileged students are going home to situations where “Nobody is reading a book to you at nighttime, because your mama works the night shift.” Her reflections demonstrated how some of her students were left to navigate academic life on their own.

Regardless of where students’ literacy gaps originated, Olivia recognizes that while her students are in her classroom, it is up to her to control what is within her power to control. Thus, when she speaks of the literacy gaps that she sees daily, a great deal of urgency and frustration are apparent. She recounts many instances where she witnessed the fear that students experience as they struggle to read, write, and even speak, saying, “They are terrified to try to sound out a word they don’t know because they’ve never had to do it.” Olivia expressed compassion and sadness when she further reflected on how students’ gaps coming into her classroom limited her students’ confidence off the back, saying, “Phonemic awareness, not there. Not there.” However, rather than feeling defeated, Olivia’s tone shifted to determination as she discussed tackling these challenges head-on. As she tells her students: “A skill is a skill. Use it anywhere you need to use it.” Her well-rehearsed advice only further reflects her efforts to teach her students foundational reading skills in both French and English and empower them with the skills needed to succeed inside and outside the classroom.

Despite the challenges of teaching in a school district plagued by double segregation, Olivia’s determination to bridge the gap for her students is evident in her voice. She speaks with resolve as she describes the literacy strategies she employs to make the most of her time with her students. Knowing that she cannot necessarily count on her students receiving support outside of school, Olivia fills her classroom with

engaging, repetitive activities to reinforce literacy and language skills. There is a sense of pride when she talks about her creative approach and students' reciprocal positive responses when she integrates a blend of games, storytelling, and hands-on projects to keep her students engaged. One of her favorite strategies involved having her students draft stories with partners, which they then used to create raps. The joy in Olivia's voice is apparent as she recounts how this activity made the content relatable and fun and helped her students build confidence through teamwork. She notes that intentionally making space for students to collaborate with their peers instilled a higher level of comfort and encouragement than expected under an independent learning approach.

Another way that Olivia commits to serving her students is through differentiation. Olivia is committed to meeting her students where they are and ensuring that each child gets the individualized instruction they need to succeed, as indicated by her elevated levels of scaffolding. She animatedly recounts how she uses qualitative and quantitative data to determine the next steps in her instruction so that each student is appropriately challenged. One such way she does this is by providing "differentiated French novels." Instead of requiring all students to read the same novel or novels of the same level, Olivia makes an extra effort to align novels to her students' specific learning needs. For some, that means reading simpler, repetitive texts to reinforce basic literacy skills. For others, it means tackling more advanced material. Olivia's tone shifts to quiet determination as she reflects on the importance of differentiation in her classroom. She knows that with these tailored approaches, her struggling students might stay caught up, while her accelerated learners would take the chance to be challenged. Beyond differentiating her reading material, she also intentionally integrates other choice and student-interest-based

differentiation strategies like games, storytelling, and creative classroom activities to aid them in developing literacy and language skills in fun and accessible ways. Her voice was animated as she recounted, “We do charades, we do Pictionary... we’re just now doing letters of the alphabet, and this week we’re working on spelling, which should help their pronunciation.” Olivia’s energy is contagious, and she clearly takes pride in fostering a classroom environment where her students feel supported and encouraged. Her laughter came through as she shared anecdotes of students acting out verbs and creating their own bingo cards based on vocabulary words. She truly reveled in turning language learning into an engaging and competitive activity for her students. “It’s not just, I’m doing this because my teacher told me to,” she said, expressing her belief in giving students meaningful goals that motivate them. Through her mirage of differentiation methods, Olivia creates a learning environment that supports all her students. She provides the scaffolding necessary to help them close literacy gaps while encouraging those ready to excel.

An additional tool in Olivia’s teacher toolbox is her consistent incorporation of Culturally Relevant Teaching strategies to make her French lessons meaningful and accessible to her students. Recognizing that many of her students have yet to have experiences with topics that are often assumed to be common knowledge in textbooks, she adapts her curriculum to connect with their lived realities. For example, when faced with a textbook chapter on camping, she observed that her students were disengaged because they could not relate. “I was like, have any of y’all been camping? And they were like, no. And I was like, okay, we’re gonna skip this,” she recalled. Instead, Olivia focuses on experiences her students have had, such as packing for a trip or going on a

field trip. “We always start with them kind of brainstorming, what do you experience when you travel? What’s the first thing we have to do?” she explained. To further connect with her students’ cultural backgrounds, Olivia incorporates assignments that allow them to explore and envision possibilities relevant to their lives. She has her students plan imaginary vacations, research Francophone countries, and even design their dream homes. When working on the dream house project, she noticed how it expanded her students’ perspectives. “They were able to see like, Oh my God. People have laundry rooms. Yes, people have whole rooms dedicated to just laundry,” she shared, highlighting how the assignment opened their eyes to different lifestyles. By aligning her teaching with her students’ experiences and aspirations, Olivia enhances their engagement and empowers them to dream bigger. “We’re like walking them through the vision of it all... they’re dreaming, but they’re dreaming in French,” she said with pure joy. Through these Culturally Relevant Teaching strategies, Olivia creates an inclusive and inspiring classroom environment that resonates with her students’ identities and experiences.

One of the most poignant moments Olivia shared was about a student who struggled with focus and staying seated in class but still excelled academically. “I have one that can’t sit in a chair if I paid him to,” she said with a laugh as she fondly acknowledged the student’s restless nature. Olivia described how this student stood out, not only for his inability to sit still but for how his classmates rallied around him, encouraging him to stay engaged during lessons. “My class is set up in a circle, so it’s kind of set up to be interactive. So when he’s standing, he’s not standing out, so it’s not bothering anybody,” she explained. This arrangement allowed the student to move freely without distracting his peers, creating an inclusive atmosphere where everyone could

thrive. Despite his challenges with focus, Olivia was incredibly proud of his academic success. Olivia credited his success not only to the structure she provided but also to the supportive classroom community she has fostered. This example highlighted Olivia's belief in the power of community in learning, showing that when students feel supported and understood by both their teacher and their peers, they are more likely to succeed, no matter what their challenges.

Olivia's emotional connection to teaching and, more pointedly, to her students is undeniable. Whether she feels frustration at the systemic barriers her students face or joy when they succeed despite those barriers, Olivia's passion drives her to find creative and effective solutions. As Olivia continues to navigate the complex realities of teaching in a gentrifying, segregated district, her emotional resilience, and dedication to her students' success remain at the heart of everything she does.

Grace's Story

Grace unexpectedly found her way into teaching. Although teaching was not her first choice, she went into the profession with an open heart and a good deal of support from her parents, who were also educators. After getting her degree in anthropology in 2014 and not knowing where to turn professionally from there, her parents steered her toward moving back to her home state of Georgia and enrolling in a teacher preparation program. Through the teacher preparation program, Grace was empowered to earn her teaching certification while teaching full-time in her hometown in the Middle region of Georgia. Her first teaching experience at East Derry High School would mark the beginning of a career that would span various educational settings, expose her to the

unique challenges of teaching in economically disadvantaged communities, and shape her holistic approach to education.

Teaching science courses at East Derry High School was not a smooth road to teaching by any means, but Grace was optimistic about using her position to empower her students as she had always had a heart for social justice and wanted so much to do some good in the world. Within the small, rural town of Derry, Georgia, Grace's school stood as a symbol of integration and unity. She described her school's population as an even split between Black and White students with a small mix of Hispanic students, "truly representative of the town's demographics." However, what stood out and came to trouble Grace was the heightened levels of poverty felt by most of the students attending her school. Grace empathetically exasperated, "There was so much poverty, and it didn't discriminate along racial lines." She talked of how many of her students came from families who struggled to make ends meet, with a substantial portion qualifying for free or reduced lunch. Although Grace had already heard of the high correlations between literacy and poverty through her teaching program, it did not make seeing the reality of this injustice any easier for her. As Grace saw literacy as a steppingstone for teaching her course's content and a necessity for her student's success in life, she made it her mission to support her students' literacy as much as she could. Grace spoke with conviction, saying, "I wanted them to understand that reading was not just something you did in English class." Subsequently, she began incorporating more reading, writing, speaking, and presenting into her self-made science curriculum, and little by little, she started seeing a difference in her students' engagement and understanding. One of her most memorable experiences was introducing *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* to her

science students. This book allowed them to explore ethical and scientific issues while connecting to their racial and social realities. Holding back tears, she recounted, “I had pushback from colleagues who didn’t think it was appropriate for a science class, but my students loved it. They saw themselves in the story,” She remembered how profoundly the book resonated with her students, many of whom had never seen their lives reflected in the literature they were given in school.

After earning her teaching certification a year later, Grace tried teaching virtually, believing it would reduce the stress that in-person teaching brought to her life. Sadly, Grace soon discovered that the online teaching community left much to be desired. She found that, although she was not working the long hours she once did, she was now struggling to feel as purposeful in her position. At the time, the cyber school was open to students throughout Georgia. It catered to an indescribably diverse student population with significantly decreased opportunities to engage and build relationships with students. Looking back, Grace commented, “It was so different from a traditional classroom,” further explaining the challenges the online format presented when making connections on the same personal level as in her previous school. She further shared, “You just don’t get the same face-to-face interactions, and many of the kids were logging in from homes where they didn’t have much support.” When Grace was teaching in a physical school building, she could at least have a modicum of control over her students’ experiences and keep a protective eye out for them, but she lamented that this was not the case pre-COVID-19. She went on to detail how, at the time, the virtual school system did not have the same features and requirements they have today. For instance, the virtual program did not show students’ faces, and a student was to be considered “present” if

they pressed a particular icon each day regardless of whether they ever chatted in the chat box with their teacher or did any of their assignments. Unfortunately, she saw that many of her students came from economically disadvantaged families using the virtual option to “escape truancy issues at brick-and-mortar schools.” This isolation from a traditional classroom environment posed a significant hurdle for her literacy efforts. Furthermore, since the curriculum was pre-packaged, Grace had little autonomy over the materials she could use. Speaking about the lack of flexibility in her curriculum, she said with frustration: “Everything was already set, and there wasn’t a lot of room for creativity.”

However, teaching at the virtual school gave Grace a broader perspective on the diverse challenges students across Georgia faced. She reflected that she “had students from all walks of life,” describing how she taught Olympic athletes who needed flexible schedules alongside students dealing with severe family issues. One particularly haunting memory involved a student who was tragically murdered by his parents while he was enrolled in her virtual school. “It was shocking to learn that some students were being homeschooled in ways that allowed parents to escape scrutiny,” she said, her voice shaking as she recalled the trauma surrounding this event. For her, the experience underscored the importance of advocating for social justice in all school settings and reflected how integral schools are to protecting and empowering the most vulnerable. Despite the challenges of teaching virtually, Grace remained committed to finding ways to engage her students and ensure they had opportunities to succeed, even if it meant adapting her approach to fit the limitations of the online format. “It was hard, but I still tried to build relationships, even through a computer screen,” she said, recognizing that

those connections, however limited, were often the key to keeping students engaged and personally invested in their education.

This emotional labor took on even more profound significance during her time at her new school in a small college town in Northeast Georgia, where she worked with a predominantly Black and economically disadvantaged student population. At this school, she was delighted that her literacy-centered curricular design was not simply tolerated but celebrated. It was at this school where she was encouraged to challenge herself to not only pursue interdisciplinary literacy but also Culturally Relevant Teaching approaches. Grace relished using her science classroom as a platform to offer her students a voice in a world that often silenced them. She fondly recalled how reading Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* became a powerful experience for her students. "I had them read books, and some of them had never had that opportunity," she recounted, her voice trembling. She began to tear up as she shared one story about one of her students, a young Black girl who, after class one day, told her, "No one's ever read a book out loud to me like this before. I really enjoy it." This moment was one of many that highlighted for Grace the importance of Culturally Relevant Teaching, providing her students not only with knowledge but with stories and characters that reflected their own lives and histories. As she wiped away tears, she said, "I didn't always realize at the time how much it mattered, but those moments really stuck with me."

Despite these connections, Grace faced significant challenges during her tenure at Peacock High School. The emotional toll of teaching in such environments, where poverty and systemic inequities weighed heavily on her students, was "intense." At times, Grace felt like the pressures were unbearable. She admitted with tears welling up again,

“I loved teaching, but being a teacher became too much.” She expanded on how seemingly constant demands wore her down. At Peacock High School, the high-needs student population, combined with the rigorous expectations of the school leaders, began to take a toll on her mental health. The emotional intensity of investing in her students, many of whom had little support outside of school, was overwhelming. With a melancholy voice, she said, “I was giving so much, and I realized it wasn’t sustainable.” Even though her students made incredible strides, she found work exhausting. After 2 years of working at the school, she started to experience a severe bout of burnout. Grace’s burnout became too much to bear despite her genuine love and care for her students. “I loved my students with all my heart, but I couldn’t keep going,” she said through tears, recalling the emotional weight that had built up over years of teaching in high-needs environments. The constant pressure of trying to be everything her students needed left her emotionally drained. She said, “I realized I was breaking and had to step away.” As a result of this epiphany, Grace made the tough decision to leave K-12 public teaching and pursue a new path in law.

After earning her Juris Doctorate from a major law school in Ohio, Grace found a new way to use her passion for teaching. In her current role in legal tech, where she teaches legal research to law students, she has rediscovered her love for education in a way that feels more sustainable. “I still get to teach, just in a different way,” she said, a hint of relief in her voice. Despite the career change, her passion for literacy and the relationships she built with her students remain central to her identity. She reflected, “You don’t leave teaching because you don’t love it; you leave because of everything else.” Even though the emotional toll of her time in the classroom still lingers, Grace

knows that the connections she made with her students, the stories she read with them, and the literacy skills she helped them develop will have a lasting impact beyond her time as their teacher.

Gabriel's Story

Gabriel's teaching career started in the vibrant classrooms of his home country, Nicaragua, where he taught his first loves, dance and drama, at the collegiate level after earning his bachelor's degree in performing arts. With excitement and nostalgia, Gabriel recollected how his students would eagerly come into his classes, ready to pour themselves into rehearsals and performances. Gabriel's classroom was buzzing with energy day after day, filled with students who, in his words, "truly wanted to be there." This marked a time in Gabriel's story when teaching felt joyful and easy. Gabriel recounted how this mutual enthusiasm created an atmosphere where students were willing to go the extra mile.

When Gabriel moved to the Southern United States, he found that his teaching career took a turn for the worse. While he came into the teaching profession with high hopes to make a positive difference in the lives of language learners like himself, he found that his path came with unexpected challenges. Initially, Gabriel started working in education through the ESOL (English to Speakers of Other Languages) program. Beginning the next phase of his teaching career as an assistant, he gradually transitioned into the role of a certified Spanish teacher in high school. This change came with a whole new set of challenges. The contrast between teaching students who voluntarily chose his class and those who attended out of obligation was vast. Comparing his experiences teaching in his native country to Georgia public schools, he reflected, "The commitment

was totally different because they wanted to do it, and they did it.” Gabriel worked hard to quickly adapt to an environment where many students saw learning a second language as a burden rather than an opportunity. With a sigh, he recounted, “In Nicaragua, my students were eager to learn, but here, many see it as just something they have to get through. I had to learn how to inspire students who did not always want to be in the classroom.” This statement underscored Gabriel’s heightened emotional and cultural challenges as he adjusted to a new educational system, where student motivation often depended on external requirements rather than a natural desire to learn.

For the past six years, Gabriel has navigated the challenges of teaching Spanish to high school students, many of whom take his class not out of passion but because it is a binding requirement from the state for students to graduate. This policy has made student motivation a significant hurdle to jump over from a teacher’s perspective. Gabriel noted that even his “brightest students” sometimes struggled with motivation because they lacked the choice of which language to study, which he said, “decreased their intrinsic motivation off the bat.” One student even told him she wanted to drop his class to learn Japanese instead. With a mix of patience and encouragement, he gently explained why learning Spanish would benefit her eventually. He recalled telling the student in a calm yet persuasive voice, “I told her, ‘Learning Spanish first will make it easier for you to learn another language.’” He shared that the student eventually decided to stay. This exchange further highlighted the motivational hurdles he faces daily with many of his students. These interactions reveal a common struggle in his teaching life in the Southern United States: convincing students of the long-term benefits of language learning when they are often focused on more immediate, surface-level concerns.

Another layer of difficulty that Gabriel encountered in his teaching experiences involved student literacy. He quickly found that most of his students struggled with basic literacy in their native language, which created significant barriers to learning a secondary language. This realization weighed heavily on him. Over time, he recognized that addressing these foundational issues was necessary for their success in his classroom. With a tinge of frustration, he recalled, “When I try to explain Spanish grammar, they do not even know the grammar in their language. So, it is tough to teach when students do not know the basics in their native language.” Despite these significant gaps in student literacy, Gabriel has worked strenuously to develop strategies to engage his students in meaningful and novel ways. For instance, he intentionally integrated interactive games such as Boom, Boom Balloon, and Kahoot, which infused the classroom with energy and excitement. Gabriel enthusiastically told of his positive experiences with academic gamification strategies, saying, “I find that games really work for them... they enjoy the challenge, and they like the competition,” reflecting his joy when his students fully engage in learning. These methods have become essential tools in his teaching toolbox, creating a much more relational and comfortable classroom culture where students learn vocabulary and language structure in fun and effective ways.

While adapting to student literacy and motivational needs is one challenge, the demographic makeup of Gabriel’s classrooms presents another. Since immigrating to the United States, Gabriel has worked in two neighboring school districts in the Northeastern Georgia region. In his last district, he recounted that the school where he taught consisted of many more students from traditionally marginalized groups than his current school. Gabriel spoke compassionately about these students’ difficulties, his voice soft with

concern: “In my last school, 70% of the students were Black, 20% White, and 10% Hispanic. Most of the students were economically disadvantaged, which made it tough because they came in with literacy issues.” These demographic differences, blended with unimaginable external pressures such as poverty and gang involvement, made it beyond challenging for students to keep their focus on academics. Nevertheless, Gabriel remained steadfast in his commitment to his student’s success within the four walls of his classroom by using Culturally Responsive Teaching methods to connect with students. He understood that many students came from backgrounds riddled with obstacles to learning, and he took pride in creating a classroom environment that acknowledged and respected their unique circumstances.

As Gabriel worked to support his students, he faced yet another challenge: limited resources. Sadly, this issue was much more pervasive when serving his students with special needs. He talked with visible frustration about the lack of support for these students, who often require accommodation that is difficult to provide in a classroom of 20-plus students. “They just give me the paper and say, ‘Here, this is what you need to do for this student,’ but I have twenty-two students. How can I give extended time or make small groups in a class that size?” His tone was resigned as he expressed the unattainable demands placed on him. In his previous school, Gabriel was frequently called out of his classroom to serve as a translator for meetings, further disrupting his ability to teach and connect with students. “In my last school, they would call me during class to translate meetings. When I came back, it was hard to catch up because I had lost that moment with the students,” he recalled with a tinge of exasperation. These interruptions and a lack of consistent support staff made it impossible for him to adequately serve his students’

varied needs. Another extension of this issue is the need for physical resources like textbooks and pre-made curricular resources. He recalls how this specific limitation has been present in both of his schools, recounting how he has spent an exorbitant amount of his time finding and creating his own Spanish language curriculum. “There was not much of a curriculum when I arrived. The other teacher had been doing her own thing for years, so I had to create my lesson plans and units from scratch,” he said in a dispirited voice. Gabriel’s highly organized nature made this lack of structure particularly difficult to manage, yet as with many challenges he has faced in his career, he found a way to make it work. As Gabriel built thematic units aligned with his school’s goals, he once again demonstrated his resilience as a teacher.

Considering the unique challenges of teaching in segregated school environments in the South, Gabriel’s teaching style hinged on his relationships with students and his ability to adapt in the face of the ever-evolving educational landscape. Over the years, he noticed a troubling shift in how literacy was approached regarding student engagement and institutional support. With quiet concern, he reflected on how students today are often less inclined to read or engage with written material, stating, “They do not want to read. Even in their language, they struggle with basic literacy. That makes it harder when it comes to learning Spanish.” His voice carries volumes of frustration, not just with his students but with a system that he feels has failed to prioritize foundational literacy skills. Despite these concerns, Gabriel respects the efforts being made at his current school to tackle these challenging issues. In his perspective, policies such as removing distractions like cell phones and strict behavioral guidelines have catalyzed a positive foundation for a more focused learning environment. Speaking with cautious optimism, Gabriel said,

“The administration is doing a good job. They enforce the no-cell-phone rule, and the students are more focused. They want the students to succeed, which is the positive part.” This supportive motion gives Gabriel hope that positive change is possible with the right strategies in place, and this nugget of optimism pushes him to continue in the teaching profession.

Gabriel’s resilience extends beyond the classroom. He often finds himself in roles beyond teaching, whether coaching the boys’ volleyball team or mentoring students who need extra guidance. One of his most touching teaching memories involves a senior who was caught with a vaping device and sent to an alternative school as a consequence. Although the situation was complicated, Gabriel stood by the student, supporting him despite the disciplinary action. “During graduation, his mom came up to me and thanked me. She understood I had to report him, but she was grateful for the support I gave him afterward,” he said with misty eyes. His voice was filled with compassion, reflecting the delicate balance he maintained between enforcing rules and showing care to his students. This experience illustrates Gabriel’s belief that discipline, and genuine concern can lead to growth and success. His role as a mentor often goes beyond academic guidance as Gabriel seeks to meet the emotional needs of his students, especially those facing challenges outside of school that often impact their experiences inside the school.

Another example of this relational approach came to Gabriel’s mind as he reminisced on a memory involving a student dealing with a depressive episode. His empathetic approach is evident when he spoke softly about a student who came into class unusually quiet and downcast one day. He recalled, “I could see something was wrong. I asked him if everything was okay, and he just cried.” From there, he went on to detail the

socio-emotional strategies like de-escalation and affirmations that he provided to the student in combination with parental partnership and continued check-ins to ensure that the student was improving emotionally. This kind of emotional support is central to Gabriel’s teaching philosophy. His ability to create a safe and supportive classroom environment where students feel comfortable sharing their struggles is a testament to his commitment to their well-being. These small yet significant moments reaffirm his belief that his role extends beyond academics and inspire him to continue being a source of stability and kindness in his students’ lives.

Sophie’s Story

For Sophie, her choice to dive into teaching was personal. As a child, she struggled both in school and home life. She admitted that she was not initially invested in academics because dealing with an unhappy household left her with little motivation to tackle schoolwork. Looking back, Sophie described herself as “basically a straight C student.” However, when she got accepted into a unique school for underserved students in her hometown in Middle Georgia, her outlook on life and school turned a corner due to no small part of the caring teachers she encountered. Mr. Phillips, Dr. Crouton, and Mr. Humpry “saw that [she] had potential, and they wanted to feed into that for [her].” This support, which she hadn’t found at home, inspired Sophie to become a teacher herself. She wanted to help students who, like her, did not care about education but had potential that needed to be nurtured. As she transitioned into high school, she became both a star student and a huge help in the middle-grade classrooms she once sat in. Teenage Sophie quickly realized that her passion was not tied to any specific subject but to helping students. “I liked being liked by students,” she said with a smile, “I just wanted to guide

them in the right direction.” As an extremely ambitious student, she earned her high school diploma and associate’s degree a year early and started her major coursework as soon as she entered her bachelor’s program. After getting her 4-year degree at 19, she entered the college’s Master of Arts in Teaching program. She was offered the unique opportunity to become a full-time teacher at her alma mater while she worked on getting her degree and certifications.

Although she took on the challenge with high hopes and a passion for teaching, she quickly began floundering under heavy demands paired with light support. She said with a slightly distressed tone, “I didn’t feel supported by the adults around me—not just parents, but faculty as well.” The isolation she felt as a young, inexperienced teacher was only further inflated by her exclusion from meetings and the harsh criticism she received for minor mistakes. Such ostracizing practices left her feeling insecure. In a hurt voice, she explained, “If I made one mistake, it was blown out of proportion.” Even though her students excelled with a “90% pass rate,” she admitted that she struggled to feel confident and validated in her teaching environment. The disconnect between her efforts and the support she needed contributed to an already difficult first year, making the experience unmanageable.

In addition to the challenges of being a young teacher, Sophie’s interactions with her students’ parents often added stress to her already overfilled plate. Parents were quick to criticize and slow to praise her classroom decisions. She found this especially true when it came to their children’s academic performance. “I had parents who didn’t agree with me giving their student a failing grade because they didn’t do an assignment,” she noted, explaining how difficult it was to enforce accountability. One instance left a

particularly lasting impact on Sophie. She recounted how she received a call from an angry parent during class who cussed her out over a failing grade. “No one did anything about that,” she said, expressing frustration over the lack of administrative support. These confrontations left Sophie feeling vulnerable and unsupported. Repeatedly, her efforts to maintain positive communication with parents were often resisted, making an already emotionally taxing job even more exhausting for this young educator.

Further compounding her difficulties, Sophie’s role as a seventh-grade math teacher included an additional responsibility: teaching English. The lack of clear guidance on integrating English into her math lessons created disorder and frustration. “It was very disorganized the entire year,” she recalled after explaining how the original plan to have a dedicated English teacher fell apart within weeks. Sophie and her colleagues had to scramble to create lesson plans and teach English despite lacking expertise. She confessed, “I don’t even feel like I taught English that year,” which revealed how chaotic the situation became. Although Sophie tried to incorporate literacy into her math lessons, asking students to write out their problem-solving processes, her constant uncertainty around English instruction left her feeling ineffective.

Beyond her struggles juggling math and English Language Arts at the time, Sophie also had her hands full with meeting the diverse needs of her students. Notably, Sophie’s classroom was what she would term a true “reflection of the socioeconomic diversity within the district” and stood as a testament to how deeply poverty influenced her students’ academic engagement. While teaching at the specialized program, Sophie witnessed significant differences in how students responded to her classroom environment and external environments via field trips. She recalled how one student from

a low-income, single-parent household, struggled to focus and often misbehaved on these trips. She recollected, “If you weren’t directly supervising him, he would run off.” In contrast, another child in her care, also from a disadvantaged background but with arguably more stability, approached these experiences with curiosity. “He was quiet the whole time, but he was looking and absorbing everything,” Sophie remembered. These moments highlighted how a student’s home life and access to resources shaped their ability to engage with and benefit from educational experiences.

To address her students’ diverse needs and experiences, Sophie tried her best to incorporate Culturally Relevant Teaching strategies. She encouraged her students to explore topics that interested them, but this approach sometimes created its own set of challenges. Sophie recalled a time when one of her students asked if she could write about abortion rights, and Sophie was put into a problematic situation where she had to navigate the invisible red tape surrounding such topics in the rural town of Maplewood. Despite Sophie’s personal convictions on the matter, she was reprimanded and told to disallow research on any controversial issues. In the end, she agitatedly said, “I had to tell them no,” not because the topic was not important but because of the restrictions and potential backlash from the school. Sadly, this would not be the last time Sophie found herself caught in a tricky situation. She recounted how tough it was to navigate her internal conflicts of wanting to satisfy her students’ interest and nurture their creativity and adhere to the limitations imposed by the administration. She recalled, “It was a challenge to explain why they couldn’t write about these topics.” Sophie’s attempts to balance fostering critical thinking with the boundaries of the classroom only further complicated her feelings toward her new job.

These pressures were further intensified by Sophie's efforts to balance full-time teaching with a master's degree program. "I was working full time as a teacher, and then I was also doing my master's degree," she explained. The constant cycle of responsibilities wore her down very quickly. She often stayed up late into the night grading papers and preparing lesson plans, only to wake up early to complete her coursework and deadlines. "There were times when I'd get maybe three or four hours of sleep," she admitted in a defeated tone. Sophie described how her weekends, which should have been a time for rest, were usually consumed with catching up on grading, replying to parents, and preparing for the next week's lessons. The lack of downtime in her life left her emotionally exhausted, and she began to feel like she was "running on fumes."

Burnout for Sophie didn't simply manifest as fatigue; it affected her mental and emotional well-being as well. After a never-ending year of feeling constantly overwhelmed, she admitted that she was struggling to maintain the same level of enthusiasm she once had for the teaching profession. Sophie tearfully admitted, "I loved my students, but I didn't have the joy anymore," reflecting how difficult it had become to walk into the classroom day after day with the positive energy she knew her students needed from her. The emotional weight of trying to meet the demands of her job and degree meant that Sophie often felt she was failing in both areas. She was always rushing, never feeling fully prepared, and constantly being behind, which affected her ability to engage with her students however she wanted. "I would go home and just feel like I wasn't being the best version of myself," she sorrowfully expressed. Without any support

system, burnout crept in quickly, leaving Sophie feeling drained, emotionally detached, and unable to find a balance between her personal and professional life.

At the end of her first teaching year, Sophie made the difficult decision to leave K-12 teaching. The emotional toll and lack of support were too much to bear, and she realized she could no longer thrive in a system that did not support her well-being. She candidly shared, “I got to a really bad place of mental health.” Although she loved her students, Sophie knew she could not continue to give her best under such conditions. Today, she works as an admissions counselor at a public college, a role that allows her to continue working with students but in a healthier, more supportive environment. “It’s literally the best job ever,” she said with relief. Now, Sophie feels more fulfilled and connected to education in a way that aligns with her passion, without the emotional strain she faced in her time as a public-school teacher.

As an admissions counselor, Sophie has found a renewed sense of purpose and balance in her career. In this role, she still engages with students, but can now focus on helping them achieve their higher education goals. This shift has granted her a long-needed sense of fulfillment and relief. “I get to help students reach their career goals, which is really cool,” she shared, noting how much she enjoys guiding students through the college admissions process. The emotional strain she felt in K-12 teaching is no longer present, as the professional environment at Tecumseh College offers the support and validation that were missing in her previous role. Sophie finds joy in working with motivated students excited about the future, and the positive work culture has significantly improved her mental health. “I feel more fulfilled because I’m helping them get to a place where they really want to be,” she happily piped in. The stability and

encouragement she receives from her colleagues have also made a dramatic difference, allowing her to thrive in a job that aligns with her passion for education without the overwhelming pressure she once faced.

Sharon's Story

Sharon's decision to join the teaching profession was heavily influenced by her love for reading and the sense of fulfillment she found during her college volunteer work experiences. While pursuing her degree in English Literature at a public university in the heart of Georgia, she volunteered in a creative writing mentorship program that paired her with at-risk middle schoolers at a local school. Looking back, Sharon credited this service experience with inspiring her to seriously consider teaching as a career option. Her interest in the teaching craft blossomed through her firsthand experience nurturing students' writing skills and witnessing how writing could be a positive outlet in their lives. When describing her experiences in the program, she said, "It was such a rewarding experience to work with these students and see how creative expression could help them navigate their challenges." The mentorship opportunity also sparked her interest to take her education to the next level by remaining at her college for an additional year to earn her Master of Arts in Teaching degree in Secondary English Education, where she could continue her work with her mentees as a student-teacher. Sharon joyfully reminisced, "I loved my student teaching experiences; it was so fulfilling to see students engage with literature and to help them develop their voices!" These early experiences laid the foundation for her teaching career, giving her the confidence and security she needed to move into full-time teaching.

Sharon began her teaching career at Plum Creek Academy, a highly prestigious charter school with a predominantly White, affluent student body that excelled in reading and writing in a rural county in Northeast Georgia. While she admired their impressive literacy skills, with some students “writing better than [her] at times,” she often found the hyper-competitive environment unfulfilling. The students required little scaffolding, and Sharon relied on project-based learning to engage them, as they could quickly grasp and work on assignments independently. “I didn’t even use graphic organizers,” she recalled, “because they didn’t need them. They just needed me to give them the assignment and let them run with it.” However, this also came with its own set of challenges. “It was frustrating when I had in my mind what I wanted it to be, and they came up with something totally different,” Sharon said, acknowledging that her students’ advanced literacy skills sometimes led them in directions she had not anticipated. Despite this, Sharon felt frustrated by the challenge of pushing students beyond their existing mastery, primarily when the school focused on maintaining extremely high academic standards. Her efforts to introduce more socially conscious literature, which she believed could foster critical thinking, often faced resistance from parents and administrators. Sadly, she found that they were more concerned with test scores and college admissions than exploring more challenging ideas. Although Sharon appreciated the opportunity to work with such high-achieving students, she yearned for more meaningful teaching moments. She desired to find a school where students could engage with literature personally and think critically about the world beyond their front door.

The competitive atmosphere at Plum Creek Academy reached beyond the students to the faculty, where collaboration was a rarity, and the pressure to outperform others

presented an ongoing difficulty. Sharon recalled how this culture created a sense of isolation, explaining that “it wasn’t just about doing your job well; it was about proving that you were the best.” This relentless drive for excellence affected her teaching and the school’s approach to literacy. Despite their advanced skills, the students often needed more opportunities to engage creatively with the material, as the school’s reputation demanded high test scores and traditional markers of success. While it was easier in some ways to instruct students who were already proficient in reading and writing, Sharon felt limited by the rigid expectations and lack of focus on critical thinking and personal growth. The pressure of the competitive environment and the narrow definition of success contributed to her decision to leave her first teaching position, as she sought an educational setting where she could help students develop not just academically but as thinkers and individuals.

When Sharon moved to Park Place High School, she stumbled upon a setting like her previous school in terms of demographics and literacy levels, with a predominantly White and affluent student population that excelled academically. The students were strong readers and writers, and much like at Plum Creek Academy, Sharon did not need to provide much scaffolding or support for their literacy development. However, to Sharon’s pleasure, Park Place High School offered a more relaxed environment than Plum Creek’s highly competitive culture. The pressure to consistently prove oneself, which had been overwhelming Plum Creek, was less intense at Park Place, and Sharon found her colleagues more approachable and collaborative. Still, she faced the familiar challenge of engaging students already flourishing. Sharon focused on incorporating choice and project-based learning to keep them interested, but she recognized that

fostering significant growth was difficult when students were already performing above grade level. Acknowledging the challenge of helping students already far ahead, Sharon admitted, “It’s very difficult to show growth with a gifted kid.” While the school’s atmosphere allowed for more flexibility in her teaching, the emphasis remained on academic achievement rather than deep, critical engagement with the material.

Everything changed for Sharon when she transitioned to Cedarbrook County High School in North Georgia. She found that her student came from diverse backgrounds and that many were first-generation immigrants or coming from working-class families, which sharply contrasted her experiences in her previous teaching environments. Sharon quickly noticed that literacy at her new school was not just about academics anymore but survival and opportunity. When reflecting on the heightened needs of her current student population, she said, “I feel like we spend a lot of time talking about metacognition, but kids who can’t read... they have no chance of developing metacognitive thinking because they’re so focused on understanding what a word says.” Many of her students at Cedarbrook struggled to grasp the basics of the English language, thus making the advanced reading and writing required in her high school English course “seemingly impossible” for them. Sharon recalled implementing a range of literacy interventions, from scaffolding reading materials to using visual aids and small group instruction. She spent hours after school tutoring students who needed additional help. Still, she found solace and hope in her students’ faces as she saw them grow and begin to “connect with literature that reflected their struggles and dreams” through the culturally relevant literature she weaved into her curriculum. For the first time, Sharon felt she was making a

“real difference” in her students’ lives by helping them build essential skills they could carry beyond the classroom that they may otherwise not receive.

Sharon’s desire to address literacy issues earlier in students’ academic careers drove her to transition to Cedarbrook County Elementary. By this point, she had realized that gaps in literacy skills often began in early childhood, long before students reached high school. She spoke of the challenge of teaching students who moved frequently, primarily due to their families’ unstable economic situations. With compassion, Sharon said, “I’ve seen more kids who have come from homes where their parents have an extremely low literacy rate.” Many students had no literacy support at home, leaving Sharon to fill a vital role. She recalled adapting her teaching methods to meet students’ needs by focusing on phonics, sight words, and basic comprehension skills. Full of empathy, Sharon reflected, “It’s really sad when you see parents struggle with the activities.” To help alleviate the gap both students and parents felt, Sharon even organized engaging literacy nights open to students’ entire families. As Sharon settled into her role in elementary education, her long-term goal became clearer: she aspired to become a literacy coach. Her passion for literacy had always driven her, but now she wanted to extend that passion beyond her own classroom. She expressed her dream: “I want to manage everything I can so that [teachers] can do what they need to do, which is teach.” Sharon continued to share her vision of herself as a mentor and guide for other educators as they navigate how to overcome the challenges of literacy instruction. Her experience across different grade levels gave her a unique perspective that she hoped to leverage as a future instructional leader. “I need you to see me for what I do,” she told her new principal, highlighting her desire to be acknowledged as a teacher and as a key

player in shaping literacy education. Sharon's work in Cedarbrook County, particularly with diverse and transient populations, solidified her belief that early literacy intervention was the key to closing the opportunity gap.

Reflecting on her teaching journey, Sharon's experiences highlight the complexities of working in schools with vastly different demographics and educational approaches, from the highly competitive, affluent environment at Plum Creek Academy, where students were already highly proficient but lacked deeper engagement, to the more relaxed yet still privileged atmosphere at Park Place High School where she continuously grappled with how to foster meaningful growth in literacy. It was only after moving to the more diverse and economically challenged Cedarbrook County schools that she found her true calling: helping students who needed literacy intervention. Sharon's work with immigrant and working-class students, coupled with her eventual transition to elementary education, underscored her desire to make a lasting impact on students who struggle with literacy from an early age. Her goal of becoming a literacy coach reflects her belief that effective literacy instruction can be transformative, especially for students from marginalized backgrounds.

Conclusion

In Chapter 4, I shared the narratives of nine Georgia public schoolteachers. I sought to capture the reality of what they faced in environments of double segregation, economic disparity, and their related systemic barriers. Additionally, these teachers' tales reflect their positive experience of teaching holistically in the face of these adversities. By using Culturally Relevant Pedagogy, relationship building and interdisciplinary literacy, they were able to support student engagement and literacy. Their stories show

these practices to be especially beneficial for traditionally marginalized and economically disadvantaged students. However, many teachers also shone a light on how these efforts are often limited by systemic inequities. Their stories gave me a glimpse into the personal costs of teaching including teacher burnout and overwork. In the next chapter, I seek to connect these findings to the existing research and pose implications for future teachers and researchers.

Chapter V:

THEMES

In Chapter 5, I discuss the key findings of my study, including three central themes that emerged from the lived experiences of nine Georgia educators:

1. Economic Inequality Creates Barriers to Student Literacy
2. Holistic Teaching Practices Improve Student Outcomes
3. Teacher Burnout and Overwork are Pervasive Issues

Their stories demonstrate economic disparities as consistent limitations to access to educational resources, thus impeding student literacy and overall academic success for students from marginalized backgrounds. In the same breath, these educators shared experiences of successful holistic teaching practices, including culturally relevant pedagogy, relationship-building, and interdisciplinary literacy. However, as discussed below, their commitment to utilizing such practices under resource-strained conditions not only spoke to their resilience but also to the widespread plague of burnout and overwork among teachers.

Economic Inequality Creates Barriers to Student Literacy

Economic inequality in Georgia's public schools has created substantial barriers to literacy for traditionally marginalized students, as seen through the eyes of my participants' teaching journeys. These educators revealed how school double-segregation limited their access to precious resources and necessary support. In turn, this impacted their students' opportunities to develop literacy skills. For example, Emily, who taught in an underfunded school, found that her science students struggled with literacy so much that it negatively impacted their science comprehension. To remedy the situation, she

decided to embed literacy strategies into her curriculum as much as possible. To do this, she frequently had to use her time and money to fund the endeavor. Emily recalled how she “truly wanted to give the students what they needed,” but it came at a steep sacrifice as doing so “put more on [her] already full plate.” Thus, Emily’s story reflected the added burden teachers face as they try to make up for the systemic lack of resources. Another example can be seen in Sharon’s experience teaching in a school serving a high percentage of economically disadvantaged and immigrant families. Since she spent a good deal of time working with these families, she was keenly aware of the parents’ struggles to read and write. She said, “I’ve seen more kids come from homes where their parents are illiterate than I can count.” Sharon would later spend countless hours trying to stand in the gap for her students and their families alike by hosting family literacy nights after hours. Like so many educators, Sharon recognized how economic inequality had a cyclical effect but also believed in the power to break those cycles by extending education to the entire family. Sharon’s story illustrates the harsh reality of how poverty affects both students’ lives in and outside of the classroom, having a pervasive impact on their literacy.

Many teachers who contributed their stories noted that lacking access to necessary academic resources impeded their students’ literacy development. Missing tangible resources like books, technology, and even basic supplies like pencils and paper impacted students’ educational experiences. Feeny, a former Title I schoolteacher at a rural town in Northeast Georgia, described his students’ struggles, saying, “Many of the students had never been outside the county and struggled with basic literacy because they didn’t have access to books or reading support at home.” Even more troubling, Feeny later went on to

describe how the resource gap did not end in their homes. Despite the Title I funding the school received, he found that the school was still in high need of updated textbooks, technology, and project supplies. Unlike more affluent schools, Feeny quickly found out that he “couldn’t simply send a letter home” requesting them to bring supplies or donate items to the classroom because “they couldn’t afford to contribute in that way.” He found that this economic divide impacted his students’ classroom experiences. Unlike the schools he grew up in, his students did not benefit from brand-new workbooks every year and classroom computers. Due to the lack of such resources, Feeny was often put in a difficult position to personally purchase project supplies and create his materials instead of relying on the outdated materials provided. Another teacher who spoke about this issue was Diana, a Spanish language teacher, who heavily related to the tragic domino effect of inadequate resources on her teaching experiences. She lamented, “The influx of new ELL students threw the whole county for a loop, and we didn’t have the resources to meet their needs.” Her school’s lack of preparation and resource inadequacy made teaching much harder, especially as she tried to differentiate her curriculum to better assist the county’s newcomers. She admitted that she had it “easier than most,” already knowing the language, but it would have been helpful to have translation devices and the like to expedite their efforts. These shared teachers’ experiences demonstrate how economic inequality in schools limits students’ access to essential literacy tools. Furthermore, this lack of resources leaves teachers with the additional burden of compensating for these deficiencies.

Study participants also shared stories that revealed how economic disparities often widened the opportunity gap between students from wealthier backgrounds and those

from traditionally marginalized communities in the form of literacy. Micah, a former Spanish teacher, spoke of several instances in his teaching career where he saw a strong correlation between students' family income and their reading levels. Although he admitted that there were some outliers, there was no denying the connection between poverty and literacy. Micah noted that he could "easily tell the kids whose parents had the money... and the kids who lived with their grandma because their parents were not around." From there, he went on to clarify how the more affluent school communities that he worked in "always had a large PTA [Parent-Teacher Association]" while the poverty-stricken schools had "little to no PTA." These observations demonstrate how poverty can obstruct parents' and guardians' presence in schools. This observation was supported by Olivia's narrative as well. She compassionately described the struggles of her economically disadvantaged students, saying, "For many of my children, school turns off at 3:30... there's no one at home reading a book to them at night." She found that she was less able to provide enrichment and practice through homework than she had at more affluent schools because there was less home support to back up the expectation. In Olivia's years of experience, she also found that when students were not being read to from an early age, that they would often "be behind from the get-go." Thankfully, as shown in her earlier participant narrative, Olivia did not allow such disadvantages to prevent her from making the most of her time with her students while they were in her classroom. She put in many extra hours to make a literacy-rich and engaging experience for her students. Although both teachers taught within completely different school systems, they shared a common insight. They both witnessed how students from wealthier families often received additional support outside of school. In contrast,

economically disadvantaged students usually miss these opportunities, thus negatively impacting student literacy and, in association, placing extra weight on teachers to stand in the gap for their students.

A systemic lack of administrative support was another common trend in schools dealing with the perils of economic inequality. Across narratives, it was clear that this trend left teachers feeling unsupported in their efforts to address literacy gaps. Grace, a former science teacher at an economically disadvantaged school, noted how her efforts to improve literacy outcomes were often met with resistance from administrators and coworkers alike, explaining, “I asked for more resources to help struggling readers, but the administration didn’t see it as a priority.” Grace later went on to share how she ended up purchasing materials out of her own pocket rather than leaving her students to bear the burden. Sadly, Grace’s story also reveals how, over time, missing support can lead to a bigger issue: teacher attrition, as evidenced by her participant profile. She was simply tired of “giving her all and receiving no support.” Gabriel, an immigrant Spanish teacher, expressed a mutual frustration with the lack of administrative support. Gabriel’s struggle came in the form of trying to adequately differentiate for his students with special needs. He said, “They would just hand me the accommodations and say, ‘Here, figure it out,’ but there wasn’t enough support to help my students succeed.” Again, although Gabriel wanted to provide all necessary accommodations, he shared how he felt it was impossible to meet every student’s need without additional support. He clarified that he was not afforded invaluable support like a co-teacher, paraprofessional, or software to help him better accommodate his students’ instructional and assessment needs. These teachers’ experiences highlight the lack of institutional support for addressing the deep-rooted

literacy issues caused by economic inequality, leaving educators powerless to enact meaningful change.

The impact of economic inequality in schools also negatively impacted teachers' socioemotional health. Feeny, a social studies teacher, described the weight of trying to bridge the literacy gap with limited resources, saying, "It's hard when your kids don't have the basic literacy skills" because "you end up having to do so much more to make your lesson work." He went on to describe this as a recurring scenario that put him in a conflicting position to either use time after hours to differentiate his lessons and provide extra tutoring or reenergize from a long workday. Unfortunately, as mentioned in his participant profile, these challenges eventually led to his decision to move on to a more affluent school to teach because he could no longer continue sacrificing his personal time and money once he decided to start his own family. Sophie, a former math teacher, reverberated his frustration, sharing how difficult it was to balance teaching math while simultaneously providing reading and writing support. She stated, "I was already stretched thin, and adding literacy support to my math content made it even harder." Although she wanted to help her students, Sophie, like Feeny, was weary of the constant demands on her time and energy, and sadly, she also represented the ultimate price of such demands on teachers. As seen in Sophie's participant profile, she left the field after a year of such demands to pursue other options. These teachers' experiences reflect the emotional burden on educators serving economically disadvantaged communities and show their potential to negatively impact teacher retention in lower-income schools.

In addition to resource limitations, economic inequality also exacerbates behavioral and emotional challenges in the classroom, thus, further hindering literacy

development. Sophie described how poverty and instability at home often led to behavioral issues that interfered with student learning, recalling, “I had one student who struggled to focus because he came from a single-parent household where he had to take care of his siblings. It was hard for him to keep up with school.” Although sympathetic towards her students’ situation, she admitted that her student’s lack of focus usually showed itself externally through talking out, playing around, and joking. Thus, the single child’s struggle to focus often distracted several other classmates and limited their learning experience until Sophie could find a strategy that helped him. Gabriel similarly noted how students’ home environments impacted their ability to engage with literacy, stating, “Some of my students came from homes where there was so much going on that school was the last thing on their minds.” Furthermore, Gabriel found that these recurring situations were often highly correlated to a lack of classroom engagement. Instead of just accepting defeat, as reflected in his participant narrative, Gabriel tried his best to go beyond his teaching position to act as a listening ear, a basketball fan, and even a jailhouse tutor in hopes that “even if [his] students don’t become fluent speakers, they will know their teacher cared.” Gabriel’s story showed the reality of teaching in poverty-stricken areas, that literacy and content learning were often put in the backseat when it came to more immediate issues like behavioral and emotional needs. These teachers’ experiences illuminate how economic inequality impacts students’ academic performance and emotional and behavioral well-being, thus negatively contributing to pervasive literacy issues.

These teachers’ experiences illustrate how economic inequality incurred through systemic segregation creates significant barriers to literacy for marginalized students.

Whether through limited access to resources and support or the emotional toll on students and teachers, economic disparities significantly impact literacy development in Georgia's public schools.

Holistic Teaching Practices Improve Student Outcomes

Another common thread among participant narratives revealed that holistic teaching practices effectively raised student engagement and literacy. This rang especially true within schools serving students suffering from significant opportunity gaps. The three most recurring holistic practices among participant stories were Culturally Relevant Teaching, relationship-building, and interdisciplinary literacy initiatives. Each participant repeatedly testified to the value of creating inclusive learning environments through Culturally Relevant Teaching. Most also attributed their most successful teaching memories to building relationships with their students and spoke to how well it paired with Culturally Relevant Teaching methods. Lastly, even teachers who did not teach English courses specifically discussed the positive impact of interdisciplinary literacy in their schools. Across the board, participants testified that these holistic practices inspired more equitable educational outcomes, as seen in the discussion below.

Building on the theme of holistic teaching practices, one of the most critical elements discussed by the teachers was the power of relationship-building in the classroom. When students feel connected to their teachers and trust that they are cared for, they are more likely to invest in their learning as supported by Emily's story. Emily passionately voiced that: "The relationships you build with your students are more important than the content you teach. Once they know you care, they will usually engage

more.” As a teacher with experiences ranging from teaching within a rural village in Thailand to an alternative school in suburban Georgia, Emily saw repeatedly how relationships were a huge factor in the classroom experience. She noted how although positive relationships were important in any teaching environment they became essential within high-needs classrooms. Such powerful testimony shows how personal connections help break down the barriers that many students, especially those from underserved backgrounds, experience in the classroom. Sharon further built on this shared value when she reflected, “My students come from tough backgrounds, and for them to feel safe enough to try, they need to know I am here for them beyond the academics.” As seen earlier in her participant profile, Sharon shared how her new school community consisted of a diverse population with needs that went far beyond what her English Language standards would cover. Throughout her story, she sprinkled in memories of how she would build those relationships by calling parents with positive news about their child, really taking time to talk with her students, and going to students’ games and events after school. She went on to share how students tried harder in their reading and writing tasks as their relationships with her grew. Her story stressed that the emotional safety and trust fostered by strong relationships are prerequisites to academic success, particularly in literacy among traditionally marginalized students.

Another powerful practice that teachers spoke highly of in terms of promoting literacy engagement was Culturally Relevant Teaching. Olivia, a massive advocate of Culturally Relevant Teaching, provided a prime example of the power of using Culturally Relevant Teaching practices in her story. She reflected on her experiences integrating culturally relevant materials within her French language classroom: “When I use books

and examples that reflect my students' cultures, I see them perk up. They feel seen and start to connect with the material." Olivia saw firsthand how helping students make connections between their lives and her course content went a long distance when motivating her students. Thus, Olivia's story pointed to the value of Culturally Relevant Teaching in increasing literacy engagement in the classroom. Similarly, Grace, a former Title I science teacher and literacy supporter, discussed the importance of adapting the curriculum to meet the realities of her students' experiences. She stated, "I always try to find stories or topics they can relate to. I find this helps them connect and engage much better." By integrating opportunities to read and write in the science classroom alongside the careful selection of the materials based on students' interests and backgrounds, Grace found that students were more willing and able to grapple with the literacy tasks. These examples illustrate how Culturally Relevant Teaching helps break through many marginalized students' disengagement toward traditional, often Eurocentric, materials. When students see themselves and their communities in the content, they are more likely to participate and invest in developing their literacy skills.

In addition to relationship building and Culturally Relevant Teaching, embedding reading and writing into subjects beyond language arts classes, teacher participants repeatedly mentioned the value of reading and writing across content areas to support students' literacy development. Feeny explained it well when he told me how he uses literacy as a tool across subjects, saying, "In my history class, we read and write constantly. I tell my students that understanding history means engaging with it through reading and analyzing texts." He went on to discuss how it is usually challenging at the beginning of the class for students to acclimate to the rigor that comes with reading and

writing, but that over time, it would pay dividends when his students would grow both in their reading and writing, but also in their critical thinking skills. He found that this process, in turn, would produce much better social studies work too. Feeny's instructional choices are just one example of how successful intertwining literacy into the content area can be. By reinforcing literacy skills through multiple disciplines, teachers provide students with repeated opportunities to develop these skills, regardless of the subject, as seen in Emily's story. Emily, who also incorporates literacy into her science curriculum, agreed, "It's not just the English teacher's job to teach reading and writing. It's part of every subject, or at least, it should be." She, like many other teacher participants, spoke from a place of experience. As demonstrated in her participant profile, Emily repeatedly witnessed the effectiveness of supporting student literacy through her content area not only in test scores but in student thinking and the quality of work in her science course. By embedding literacy skills across all subjects, teachers can help students see reading and writing as critical life skills rather than isolated academic tasks.

Across participant interviews, it became clear that though relationship-building and Culturally Relevant Teaching were useful on their own, they were even more effective when used together. Teachers found that relationship-building paired with Culturally Relevant Teaching practices created an environment where students feel supported and engaged, which is vital for improving literacy outcomes. Micah explained that understanding his students' interests allowed him to make the curriculum more appealing to his students, saying, "I made it a priority to really talk to all of my students so I can gauge their interests and needs. When I knew them, I could find texts that spoke to them." He went on to discuss his experiences growing up as a Black student with few

materials and even fewer role models who looked like him in school influenced his teaching life. Micah desired for his students to have better representation in his classroom than he had and as a result, he found that his students came to better with him and the Spanish content. This glimpse into Micah's teaching life reflects the positive influence of connecting learning to student's experiences and interests, making literacy more meaningful and relevant during his teaching time. Olivia supported this approach, noting, "It's about connecting what we're learning and who the students are. When they feel connected, they engage more deeply with the material." As evidenced in her participant narrative, Olivia was well-versed in building up a positive repertoire with her students and credited Culturally Relevant Teaching with helping her do just that. Both teachers emphasized that when students see how literacy is relevant to their lives, their willingness to participate and improve increases dramatically. Furthermore, one can see how relationship-building and Culturally Relevant Teaching makes literacy instruction a collaborative process between teacher and student from their stories.

In addition to improving academic engagement, building strong relationships with students and using culturally relevant pedagogy also helped teachers address behavioral challenges in the classroom. Olivia explained, "Some of my students come in angry or distracted, but when they feel connected to me and the material, it helps them settle down and focus." Olivia's triumphant experience blending these strategies shows how nurturing a sense of belonging in the classroom can mitigate behavioral issues. She found this was true even when those issues stemmed from external stressors. Another example of the power of building positive student-teacher relationships can be observed within Gabriel's story. Gabriel told of a similar reality: "A lot of [his] students have rough home

lives, and sometimes they bring that into the classroom. But if they feel like they belong here and what we're doing matters to them, they're more likely to engage and less likely to act out." Both teachers show that building strong, trusting relationships can create a supportive classroom environment that improves literacy and reduces behavioral issues by addressing students' emotional and social needs.

Another excellent instructional pairing found across participants' narratives can be seen in integrating interdisciplinary literacy approaches within the Culturally Relevant Teaching model. Many teachers spoke to the power of blending these holistic teaching practices to better develop students' critical thinking skills. Feeny shared how this approach led to deeper engagement in his classroom, stating, "When we read texts that reflect the students' world, they start asking deeper questions. That's when I see them starting to think critically." Feeny continued to share that such practices gave students a starting point for their learning about other places, people, and cultures as they could then speak about the similarities and differences in relationship to their own. Feeny's experiences show how, by intentionally connecting literacy to real-world experiences, teachers can move students from rote memorization to thinking more critically about their learning. Diana also utilized this paired approach in her curriculum and instruction, adding, "Literacy is more than reading and writing; it's also about understanding the world. Students start making those connections when we make it relevant." As a long-time Spanish teacher, Diana spoke passionately about embedding literacy strategies and embracing students' culture and interests in language classes. She discussed how when used with fidelity, this pairing truly elevated students' comprehension and overall engagement in her classroom. These experiences show that when literacy instruction is

grounded in culturally relevant, real-world contexts and integrated across subjects, it equips students with the creative thinking skills needed to be successful in their academic careers and beyond.

Despite the general success of these holistic approaches shared across participant stories, the participants also revealed that there were costs to implementing them, particularly in underfunded schools. One example of these costs can be seen in Gabriel's story as he shares how a need for resources often conflicted with his desire to implement Culturally Relevant Teaching strategies with fidelity. He angrily explained, "I want to bring in better-fitting books, but we just don't have the budget." Gabriel's dilemma demonstrated how lacking resources could severely limit teachers' instructional intentions. More specifically, when teachers are forced to rely on outdated or irrelevant materials, this may stunt their ability to implement Culturally Relevant Teaching successfully. Participants also shared stories of how emotionally draining the implementation of practices like Culturally Relevant Teaching could be on teachers. Thus, despite teachers' desire to use powerful holistic practices, they can be limited by systemic issues like poor resource provision or low administrative support.

This dynamic instructional trio of relationship-building, Culturally Relevant Teaching, and interdisciplinary literacy practices form a holistic, student-centered approach that improves literacy outcomes across many teachers' experiences. Emily summarized this well when passionately proclaimed, "It's not just about teaching them how to read and write. It's also about making a positive connection in [students'] lives." Sharon also shared this belief: "When we take the time to build those relationships and make the content relevant, that's when we see real growth in their literacy and

confidence.” Centering curriculum and instruction in students’ identities, interests, and needs positively impacted these teachers’ teaching lives. It may be something the educational field may learn from.

Teacher Burnout and Overwork are Pervasive Issues

Teacher overwork and burnout are pervasive issues across segregated and integrated environments as seen through a diversity of teacher testimonies. Still, they are more prevalent in schools serving traditionally marginalized and economically disadvantaged groups. In such schools, many teachers’ in-field experiences evidenced the exacerbated strain placed on them during their tenure. Sadly, a fourth of participants admitted that they transferred schools due to the unmanageable overwork and burnout they experienced. Some even disclosed that they left the public-school teaching profession entirely because they were overworked and burnt out irreparably. Through my study, I found that teachers across different educational environments consistently share stories of high stress levels and overwork. In the following discussion, one can see through the window of teachers’ experiences into the realities of overwork and burnout plaguing the teaching profession.

When asked about overwork and burnout, inadequate resources and support repeatedly emerged in teachers’ experiences within underfunded schools. Sadly, this underlying struggle often left them with a tough choice. They could either sacrifice their emotional and, at times, physical health to make do or do without. One example of this situation can be found in Gabriel’s story. Gabriel explained how insufficient resources negatively impacted his daily responsibilities. He said, “There are just too many to manage: accommodations, emotional needs, academic gaps. I do not have enough time or

help to do it all!” As evident in his narrative, Gabriel constantly struggled with the growing demands of his position without the support and resources that he and his students needed to be successful. Unfortunately, after serving in his Title I school district for two years, Gabriel decided to transfer to a new district in hopes of finding a more manageable workload. Micah, a former Title I educator, shared much of the same worries, adding, “You’re not just a teacher in these schools; you’re a counselor, a social worker, a parent figure.” He also reflected on how “overwhelming” it was to juggle his “many hats.” His narrative reflected how his schools sadly never had enough social support for students coming from impoverished backgrounds. Sadly, after several years of trying to find a school with a more manageable workload, he lost hope of finding a less stressful and more manageable workload and left the teaching industry. From their shared stories, one can observe the additional roles teachers are forced to take on in marginalized communities and the correlation between their heavy workload and eventual burnout as they try to address both academic and social-emotional needs without adequate resources.

Another significant factor contributing to burnout in these environments was the high emotional toll of working with students who face multiple challenges outside the classroom. Emily, a former alternative schoolteacher, described how difficult it was to separate her work life from the struggles her students experienced at her job, stating, “It’s hard to leave their problems at the door.” In slight desperation, she exclaimed, “I care about them so much, so it’s heartbreaking when I can’t do more to help.” Emily’s narrative retold many stories of woe about students coming from homes where they felt unloved, neglected, or even displaced in foster homes. She was transparent in her deep feelings of care and empathy for her students, thus over time, it began affecting her

personal life and she was brought to the tough decision to transfer to an integrated school within the county rather than burn out at her old position. One can see yet another instance of the teachers' emotional battles in Gabriel's story. Gabriel saw that "kids were coming in hungry, dealing with trauma," and he "wanted to help." He would often keep snacks available for his students, talk out their problems with them, and even provide jailhouse tutoring. Despite his extensive efforts, he admitted to feeling like, "No matter how hard [he] work[ed], it was never enough." Arguably, the need for external support across participant profiles highly elevated these socioemotional pressures. Perhaps then, Gabriel and Emily would not have felt inadequate in their fight to support their students and could have remained in their positions to fight another day.

An additional major contributor to burnout in schools serving economically disadvantaged communities was the need for more administrative support, as evidenced by the participants' heartfelt stories. Grace told of how a lack of leader-based support exacerbated her feelings of exhaustion while teaching in a Title I setting. This frustration can be heard in her story when she reflected on how, despite her constant requests for help, she was told to "just deal with it." Another example of this issue can be seen in Micah's experiences. When speaking of his stressful experiences teaching at a Title I school, Micah expressed feelings of severe agitation because he felt "like the administration [didn't] understand or care about what [he] is struggling with. They don't see how much we struggle to keep up." These feelings of being unseen, unheard, and uncared for resounded in many Title I teachers' stories. When teachers suffer emotionally from insufficient administrative support, they feel isolated and frustrated. This unmet

need left several teacher participants to tackle the tough decision to move on or continue in their constant state of burnout.

Besides needing more administrative support, many participants longed for more manageable workloads. Several teachers shared stories testifying to the unspoken and, at times, audibly vocalized expectation to work beyond school hours. Many participants recalled memories that detailed using their time to meet their students' perpetual needs. Sophie expanded on her taxing experiences working extensive hours outside of school: "I was spending nights and weekends grading, planning, and just trying to keep up with everything." She shared how she often felt "there was no end in sight." Grace further contributed that she frequently had to use her own time to make up for the lack of support in the classroom, explaining, "I would stay late, come in early, and even use my own money to buy supplies because there was no other way to get things done." Stories such as those shared above illustrate how teachers in marginalized schools frequently sacrifice their time and resources to meet the demands of their jobs, thus leading to burnout.

Beyond being overworked and under-resourced, teachers often faced overwhelming behavioral and classroom management challenges, placing an even wider dent in their stress levels. Olivia's story serves as a clear picture of this widespread problem. She shared how tackling challenges like "managing behaviors" and "dealing with trauma" while trying to keep her class focused further fed into her feelings of burnout. Micah detailed his mutual feelings as he spoke to the pressures of managing a classroom with students who faced extensive personal challenges, saying, "You're trying to teach, but you're simultaneously trying to keep the peace. It's exhausting." These additional stressors, tragically, were more commonly found in the stories of teachers

serving in schools with higher populations of economically disadvantaged students. Thus, the levels of burnout among such teachers were higher than those reporting to have worked in more integrated or affluent school environments.

Comparatively, teachers in more affluent schools also divulged feeling similarly overworked. In contrast, their experiences with burnout were often tied to academic pressures rather than the previously described systemic challenges. Feeny, who had a wealth of experience in both affluent and impoverished educational settings, spoke comparatively: “The pressure to keep up with everything, grading, planning, and test prep, is a lot.” However, he also admitted that at least within his better-funded school, he “[had] the resources to support [them].” Since Feeny not only had adequate resources in his more affluent school but also heightened administrative and parent support, he explained that teaching became a much more sustainable career choice. Sharon, who could also speak to teaching in both settings, talked about the elevated pressures of academic competition in affluent schools. She saw a significant difference as she transitioned from a high-pressure, affluent environment to a school serving economically disadvantaged youth. In her more affluent teaching environments, she recalled that “it wasn’t just about doing your job well; it was about proving that you were the best.” Examining the experiences within both school settings, one can envision how burnout is felt across diverse types of schools. However, these educators’ stories also shed light on how the potential causes of burnout differ depending on the school’s economic context.

Despite the overwhelming nature of their work, many teacher participants expressed remorse or reluctance when they spoke of leaving their former schools. Across most of the participants’ storylines, they shared the belief that their students needed them.

Sophie, who dealt with the dilemma of staying in an environment where she felt continuously stressed said, “I love my students, and I didn’t want to leave them behind, but I didn’t know how long I could keep going like that.” Grace also shared similar feelings of responsibility, saying, “You don’t want to quit because you know these kids need you, but at the same time, you’re burning out, and there’s only so much you can take.” Despite its heavy toll on their well-being, this sense of duty to their students makes it difficult for teachers to prioritize their needs, even when burnout is inevitable.

The stories shared by these teachers show how burnout is a widespread issue across several schools in Georgia. Still, it is particularly acute in schools serving traditionally marginalized and economically disadvantaged communities. Teachers within these settings face an unrelenting workload compounded by systemic inequalities, lack of resources, and emotional demands that far exceed those in more affluent environments. Emily summarized it well when she said, “The burnout is real everywhere, but in schools with fewer resources, it feels like you’re fighting a losing battle every day.” Sophie also reverberated this perspective, saying she “tried so hard all the time” but always felt like she “wasn’t enough.” Each of these teachers’ voices spoke to the need for systemic changes in the educational systems within Georgia to address the root causes of burnout described in the discussion above, particularly in schools that serve traditionally marginalized communities.

Conclusion

Writing this chapter allowed me to synthesize the experiences of nine teachers who navigated the successes and challenges of teaching in Georgia’s economically and racially diverse public schools. Through exploring the themes of economic inequality

created barriers to student literacy, holistic teaching practices improved student outcomes, and teacher burnout and overwork were pervasive issues, I gained insight into the systemic barriers that impeded literacy and academic growth for traditionally marginalized and economically disadvantaged students. Despite these issues, I discovered that teachers' use of holistic approaches positively impacted student success. Yet, the burnout experienced by overworked teachers evidenced the heightened need for systemic support across school settings to improve teacher retention, especially within segregated teaching environments. Overall, my results conveyed both the potential for transformative educational practices and the importance of sustaining the well-being of educators.

Chapter VI:

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

In this chapter, I expanded on my thematic discussion into the lived experiences of teachers in Georgia's public schools as they navigate the challenges of double segregation and declining literacy. During my discussion, I revisited the reviewed literature to explore how my findings relate to established theories and previous research. Additionally, I considered the practical implications of these findings, especially for educators and policymakers; by analyzing the strategies, obstacles, and insights shared by nine Georgia educators. Throughout this process, I identified actionable steps that may help improve literacy outcomes in increasingly segregated contexts. These insights may inform potential school and district policies that guide leaders to consider creative measures to improve teacher well-being and support holistic teaching practices. Finally, I outlined the implications for future research. As discussed below, my findings support that the complex and evolving nature of double segregation and its impact on literacy necessitates further inquiry. Lastly, I conclude my dissertation through a brief overview of my narrative inquiry study, its key findings, limitations, and implications.

Discussion

My narrative inquiry aims to contribute an amplified understanding of the literacy crisis within Georgia schools through the stories of teachers serving in both integrated and segregated schools within the state. This knowledge may inspire educators, policymakers, and school leaders to prioritize and protect school integration, in-school social programs, and teacher well-being, in addition to supporting holistic approaches to education. This chapter thoroughly discusses my study's thematic findings and their

relationship to my literature review. Discussed themes include economic inequality create barriers to student literacy, holistic teaching practices improves student outcomes, and teacher burnout and overwork are pervasive issues.

Economic Inequality Creates Barriers to Student Literacy

The stories of nine Georgia public school teachers bear witness to the extensive barriers to student literacy caused by economic inequality. These educators' experiences attest to the negative impact of double segregation in schools, specifically within schools serving schools in economically disadvantaged and traditionally marginalized communities. Unfortunately, schools such as these that need higher levels of support and additional resources to combat opportunity gaps are often caught short on both. Such inequities in support and resources alongside more aggressive opportunity gaps perpetuate negative trends in teacher retention rates, thus triggering a cycle of issues within segregated schools.

Teacher participants' narratives testified to the resource disparities within their schools. One such participant, Feeny, held multiple years of experience in affluent and primarily Asian and White populated schools in addition to a predominantly economically disadvantaged and Black and Hispanic-populated school. Feeny, with his duality of experiences, spoke knowledgeably about the stark differences between his two school settings. For instance, he expressed how he "couldn't simply send a letter home" to request students bring in supplies for projects or bring in classroom donations in his Title I school in contrast to his affluent school. I found that the economic disparities that Feeny described correlated with the statistical data and historical trends presented within the United States Census (2023). The Census (2023) reflected that Black and Hispanic

populations experience disproportionate levels of poverty in comparison to their White counterparts within the United States. Such income and resource disparities within households may contribute to resource limitations in both school and home settings. Taylor et al.'s (2019) study involving school and residential segregation also connected to Feeny's experiences by demonstrating what structural factors like school and residential secession exacerbate both racial and economic divides in schools. The effects of double-segregation described in the study parallel Feeny's experience, where limited financial resources in his district meant students could not receive access to the same educational benefits as those in more affluent, and predominantly White districts. Thus, one can see how structural division significantly contributes to inequities which in turn may limit student learning opportunities for economically disadvantaged students like those Feeny describes.

Beyond resource differences, teacher participants told stories conveying a strong connection between opportunity gaps and economic inequality in schools. One instance can be seen in Sophie's narrative relaying how poverty paired with home instability negatively impacted some of her students' behavior which had a ripple effect on behavior and academic performance. Sophie retold her experiences with a particular student "who struggled to focus because he came from a single-parent household where he had to take care of his siblings" which made it "hard for him to keep up with school." She went on to describe further how this single student's experiences would transpire into whole class disruptions. Her experience stands as a reflection of how external, socioeconomic factors affect students' educational experiences in addition to complicating teachers' ability to maintain a learning-conducive environment. I found that Chiu and Khoo's (2005) study

only reinforced the link seen in Sophie's story between academic outcomes and the availability of resources and support systems. When resources are limited, whether due to national, housing, or school divides, students face additional barriers to their academic journeys as seen in Sophie's narrative. Jointly, Sophie's experiences and Chiu and Khoo's study results highlight how economic inequality not only hinders individual student focus and behavior but also relates to larger opportunity gaps.

Economic inequality as a barrier to educational opportunity is also found in missed support opportunities outside of school. One example is illustrated in Olivia's narrative as she sympathetically painted a picture of a common dilemma her students faced. She expressed, "For many of my children, school turns off at 3:30...there's no one at home reading a book to them at night." As previously mentioned, Olivia further described how her students rarely completed enrichment homework and were often less able to receive academic support at home in some cases because they had to work additional hours to provide for family needs. In Olivia's experience, many of her students suffering from poverty missed after-school enrichment and literacy support while students from more affluent families often supplemented education at home. Such inequalities place extra assumed responsibilities upon teachers like Olivia who feel an obligation to their students to fill those gaps in their already limited instructional time. Boger and Orfield's (2005) study on resegregation trends in Southern schools reinforces Olivia's perspective as it reflects how economic inequalities disproportionately affect Black students leading to double-segregation within schools. Double segregation further expands these disparities and feeds into the cycle of poverty within schools like Olivia's.

Thus, economically segregated schools typically have fewer resources, lower funding, and increased challenges in meeting their students' diverse needs.

Overall, these educators' narratives reveal that economic inequality alongside double-segregation in schools significantly impede student literacy among economically disadvantaged and traditionally marginalized communities. Resource scarcity in schools serving predominantly Black and Hispanic and impoverished students presented a sharp contrast with the support available in more affluent, predominantly White schools. Across narratives, teachers expressed their continuing struggle to bridge these gaps, sharing stories of denied resource requests and an inability to rely on parents to provide enrichment at home. These disparities in combination with students' economic adversities further impede focus and behavior at school, thus further widening opportunity gaps. As the research underscores, double-segregation perpetuates these cycles of economic inequality, thus limiting literacy development and academic progress within communities suffering from poverty and its many barriers.

Holistic Teaching Practices Improve Student Outcomes

Another common theme identified across participant narratives was their shared response to their students' literacy gaps: holistic teaching approaches. Teacher participants collectively recalled positive stories revealing their success in using holistic practices including Culturally Relevant Teaching models, relationship-building, and interdisciplinary literacy strategies to improve student engagement and literacy. Such practices were found particularly critical to teachers serving in more diverse and economically challenged communities, but contradictorily more challenging to establish and maintain due to lower levels of teacher support. As discussed below, participants'

successes and challenges in using such practices connect with previous studies' findings in relationship to the heightened importance and extended challenges of using holistic approaches within doubly segregated schools.

Culturally Relevant Teaching, which emphasizes the importance of representing and integrating students' identities and backgrounds within curriculum and instruction, was one of the most highly discussed holistic approaches by teacher participants. Micah, a former Spanish teacher with experience in both integrated and segregated school systems, spoke of Culturally Relevant Teaching's value in culturally diverse classrooms. He shared how his experiences as a Black male student informed his instructional practices as a teacher who wanted his students to feel seen within the academic world. He said, "I made it a priority to really talk to all of my students so I could gauge their interests and needs. When I knew them, I could find texts that spoke to them." Noticeably, Micah did not rely on his general observations alone to determine what was most culturally appropriate for his students. He blended in relationship-building strategies in the form of one-on-one discussions to inform how he could support his students' literacy through Culturally Relevant Teaching. This trend was also evident in Gabriel's approach to teaching as Gabriel explained, "A lot of my students have rough home lives, and sometimes they bring that into the classroom. But if they feel like they belong here and what we're doing matters to them, they're more likely to engage and less likely to act out." Gabriel echoed the importance of using Culturally Relevant Teaching practices to amplify student motivation and build a sense of belonging in the classroom environment. By addressing students' emotional and social needs alongside academic goals, Gabriel made his class more meaningful to his students, including those with

“rough” backgrounds. A sense of belonging stood out as a cornerstone of Culturally Relevant Teaching among participants’ stories. The research on resegregation by Houston and Henig (2023) alongside Frankenberg et al. (2019) further emphasized the barriers created by racial and economic segregation that undermine academic inequities. These studies demonstrated how resegregation not only deepens racial and economic divides but also correlates with widening achievement gaps. This was found to be especially transparent among the disparities between Black and White students’ reading proficiency levels in the Southern United States. Building on top of these two studies, Reardon’s (2016) work found that double segregation also perpetuates cycles of inequality, thus creating significant disparities among schools serving predominantly economically disadvantaged and traditionally marginalized youth. The study specified that such schools often lacked the resources or support necessary to effectively implement Culturally Relevant Teaching practices and reflected the dedication and resilience demonstrated by teacher participants who attempted to counteract some of the negative effects of systemic inequities by creating inclusive, engaging, and supportive classrooms.

As foreshadowed above, relationships were also determined as an overarching theme among participants’ narratives. Every teacher participant shared vivid memories of their positive experiences with the holistic practice. Sharon recollected building relationships with students from “tough backgrounds.” She reflected, “For them to feel safe enough to try, they need to know I am here for them beyond the academics.” She went on to describe positive phone calls home that she made on her students’ behalf and going to their games and how much these actions meant to her students as evidenced in

their productivity shifts. Sharon's story affirms the importance of fostering relationships to break down economic barriers that often result in school environments plagued by the effects of double segregation. Reardon's (2016) study provides a broader understanding of double segregation and its damaging effects which relationship building in the classroom can address. Reardon found that economic segregation correlates with academic achievement gaps, especially in schools with extreme poverty levels, and where Black and Hispanic students are more likely to be impacted by systemic inequities.

Although his study primarily works to highlight the structural implications of resegregation, his findings also emphasize the need for holistic approaches within schools that can mitigate some of these disadvantages. Arguably, holistic approaches such as the relationship-building techniques used by my participants are essential in these contexts as they foster supportive classroom environments that could counterbalance the negative impact of socioeconomic and racial segregation. Blatt and Vortruba-Drzal's (2021) study involving school choice and achievement gaps further contributes to this theme by showing how school policies inadvertently reinforce inequalities related to double segregation in school settings. The findings suggest that while school choice aims to provide more options, it oftentimes increases the likelihood of segregation, thus further widening test score gaps. This systemic barrier then makes relationship building within the classroom environment much more important because teachers can use their positive rapport with students to provide the additional support students need in light of inequitable school conditions.

Another effective holistic practice found in participant narratives was interdisciplinary literacy strategies. All participants provided strong recollections in their

teaching careers where integrating reading, writing, and other forms of communication became a strong bridge for their students' academic growth. Both science teachers within the participant sample were strong advocates of interdisciplinary and shared stories and values to this effect. Emily, who constantly blends literacy into her science curriculum, expressed, "It's not just the English teacher's job to teach reading and writing. It's part of every subject, or at least, it should be." She spoke of her positive firsthand experiences of developing collaborative units with an English teacher at her school and working argumentative essays about controversial topics like stem cells into her content. Emily also recalled the heavy literacy-based scaffolding she built in to prepare her students for the rigor that came with such complex tasks including differentiating their nonfictional text readings by reading levels and guiding them through a lively, yet less formal oral debate between her students before the writing assignment. Grace also endorsed the value of interdisciplinary literacy through her narrative. She told of how she "always [tried] to find stories or topics [her students] could relate to" and that doing so "help[ed] them connect and engage better" in her class. Her story further revealed heart-wrenching memories of how some of her students expressed that reading science-related books like *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* was the first time anyone had read aloud to them. She also demonstrated how pairing interdisciplinary literacy alongside Culturally Relevant Teaching practices made such efforts even more successful and memorable for her students. Reardon et al.'s (2011) study underscores the urgency of using holistic practices like interdisciplinary literacy strategies as his findings reveal the significant literacy gaps that persist across racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic lines. The researchers found that literacy gaps were widening among economically disadvantaged populations,

thus emphasizing the heightened need for literary interventions that extend beyond the language arts classroom. The study's call for expanded research on literacy interventions stresses the importance of integrating literacy support across content areas earlier in students' academic careers.

This triad of holistic approaches including relationship-building, Culturally Relevant Teaching, and interdisciplinary literacy practices were praised by teacher participants for their positive literacy outcomes. The literature confirmed the heightened need for such practices in racially and economically segregated schools to help minimize the students' correlated opportunity gaps.

Teacher Burnout and Overwork are Pervasive Issues

In line with the barriers posed by economic inequality and the resulting need to increase holistic approaches to learning, teachers are suffering from overwork and burnout in both integrated and segregated teaching communities. However, reasons for burnout and overwork varied in both intensity and reason based on the school setting based on nine Georgia teachers' narratives. Burnout and overwork were seen more extensively among teachers serving economically disadvantaged communities and for reasons involving unmanageable work expectations and weak teacher support. In contrast, teachers who served predominately affluent and White student populations found that their stress came in the form of highly competitive school environments. As discussed in detail below, participants' narratives are closely aligned with the existing literature on double segregation in schools.

Teacher participants, especially those serving low-income and traditionally marginalized communities, emphasized overworking to compensate for the inequities

their students faced. Repeatedly, teachers revealed how they felt compelled to sacrifice their own needs for their students' needs far beyond contract hours. One such story comes from Sophie, a former math teacher, who shared her intense and overwhelming workload in detail. She reflected, "I was spending nights and weekends grading, planning, and just trying to keep up with everything" with "no end in sight." As a young teacher still working on her teaching degree, she expressed feeling severely overwhelmed and overall declines in her mental health as she tried to navigate her student and teacher expectations simultaneously. She also revealed that despite her attempts to reach out for support, her administration and colleagues provided little assistance. Rather she was met with criticism and was ostracized by her faculty. Micah, a former Spanish teacher, expressed similar sentiments, saying, "You're not just a teacher in these schools; you're a counselor, a social worker, [and] a parent figure." He also spoke about the difficulty of juggling his "many hats" and the costs it accrued. Micah elaborated on how he often took it upon himself to fill these many roles for his students even when it meant giving up personal endeavors to do so and even when he received no additional assistance nor resources from his administration. Sadly, both teacher participants admitted they left the teaching field entirely after suffering from their overwork in high-needs schools. Their experiences capture the pervasive issues of teacher burnout and overwork, particularly in under-resourced schools and link closely to the research on structural inequalities that often amplify these challenges. The research conducted by Owens et al. (2016) regarding income segregation in schools provides a contextual backdrop for these shared experiences of overwork among teacher narratives. As income segregation increases, it further exacerbates resource disparities among affluent and economically disadvantaged

schools. This, in turn, creates environments where teachers are encumbered by the extra demands placed upon them due to inadequate resources and support systems. Their research implies that the impacts of income segregation fall upon teachers who then become burn out as they attempt to relieve these inequities from their students.

The trend of emotional turmoil followed closely behind teacher participants' stories of overwork. Again, those working within low-income schools more often than those working within more affluent schools disclosed feeling significantly challenged by the emotional toll of their working life. Emily, a former alternative schoolteacher, detailed her extreme difficulties creating emotional boundaries between her work and home life. She reflected, "It's hard to leave their problems at the door." She expressed that her care for her students prompted her to feel consistently "heartbroken" when she could not do even more to help them. Emily's narrative encapsulates the emotional stress of working with students who face neglect, foster care, and other traumatic home situations. Her difficulty in creating healthy work-life boundaries leading to her eventual decision to transfer schools reflects a tragically common issue in high-needs schools. When teachers establish strong connections with their pupils and their struggles, teachers become emotionally exhausted. This burnout, in turn, leads to teacher attrition. Waldfoegel's (2011) study supports this by identifying factors outside of school like socioeconomic adversity, parenting challenges, and home instability. The study further found that these external issues disproportionately impact disadvantaged students, especially from traditionally racially marginalized groups. When considering teachers like Emily's experiences, one can see how such external factors on students create a catastrophic domino effect in teachers' lives. Such factors place additional emotional

burdens on teachers as they often feel responsible for addressing needs arising from systemic issues beyond their control. Such extra responsibility then extends their stress levels and eventually leads to burnout. Gabriel, a Title I Spanish teacher, further reinforced the emotional costs of working in high-needs school environments. He described his heartfelt efforts to provide food to his students, listen to their problems, and even offer tutoring to his students with traumatic backgrounds. Despite all his efforts, Gabriel commented that “no matter how hard I worked, it was never enough.” His distress stands as a resounding echo of mutual feelings among teachers in under-resourced schools, where students’ needs often far outweigh available support. Waldfogel’s (2011) research draws attention to socioeconomic and external factors impacting students’ academic lives, highlighting the heightened pressures Gabriel faces in their efforts to fill opportunity gaps widened by these systemic issues. When teachers continuously grapple with such high emotional tension, teachers are more likely to leave their positions, thus further heightening challenges in these schools and perpetuating cycles of inequality for both educators and students alike.

While overwork and emotional stress were identified as common reasons for teacher burnout, participant narratives revealed causes of burnout varied depending on the socioeconomic contexts of the schools they served. Grace, a former Title I teacher, discussed how her years of teaching in economically disadvantaged schools weighed heavily on her emotionally and physically to the point that she left the profession completely. She admitted that despite the significant challenges of her job, she stayed in the profession for an extended number of years because she felt a strong sense of responsibility and care for her students. Grace reflected, “You don’t want to quit because

you know these kids need you, but at the same time, you're burning out, and there's only so much you can take." Sadly, Grace's story highlights a common conundrum among under-resourced schools as teachers struggle with the emotional strain of constantly trying to fill in for the systemic gaps in support and resources. Studies by Houston and Henig (2023) and Taylor et al. (2019) provide relevant context to these teachers' cyclical experiences. Both studies emphasize how resegregation efforts have intensified disparities in educational resources especially within the Southern region of the United States, where economically disadvantaged and traditionally marginalized racial groups often experience wider literacy and achievement gaps. In this context, teachers like Grace must cope with the extensive emotional demands, as they are often among the few consistent support figures for students who suffer from opportunity gaps connected to these structural inequities. Sharon, a teacher with experience in both economically disadvantaged and affluent schools, shared that while she did not experience any feelings of burnout due to systemic factors as those described in Grace's story, she did feel overwhelmed with the overly competitive atmosphere found in her more affluent schools.

Her reflection on her deeply rooted need to "prove that you were the best" spoke to the unique pressures experienced by teachers in affluent high-pressure environments. Her story illustrated how competition and performance expectations could contribute to burnout in wealthier schools rather than resource scarcity. These differences in experiences reflect that teacher burnout is not confined to low-income school settings but may manifest differently depending on the schools' socioeconomic context. Reardon's (2016) study involving opportunity gaps and socioeconomic disparities provides even more context to these differences in participants' experiences. While Reardon mostly

focuses on how segregation and economic inequality increase achievement gaps among disadvantaged youth, his work also indirectly highlights how such systemic inequalities affect teachers across different school settings. In affluent schools, teachers may deal with stress related to high expectations to maintain achievement standards, whereas, in economically disadvantaged schools, teachers may experience burnout from their efforts to bridge gaps in resources and students' emotional needs. Thus, the literature paired with participant narratives underscores the importance of tailoring interventions to support teachers' well-being based on the specific challenges they experience within different school environments.

These teachers' experiences alongside contextualizing literature reflect the pervasiveness of overwork and burnout in schools. Notably, such issues were found to be more prevalent among teachers serving within doubly segregated communities where they face increased workloads further intensified by systemic inequalities, decreased support, and emotional distress. Each participant's stories spoke to the significant need for systemic changes within Georgia's public education to remedy the root causes of burnout discussed above, especially within schools facing double segregation.

Implications for Practice

The results of my narrative inquiry study suggest that teachers serving in economically disadvantaged schools encounter significant barriers when addressing student literacy. From my investigation, one can see how systemic economic inequalities such as limited access to resources, family support, and literacy support may contribute to the special plights faced within such schools.

For educators, this informs us of our need to adapt our curriculum and instruction by intentionally weaving holistic teaching approaches such as Culturally Relevant Teaching practices, relationship-building techniques, and interdisciplinary literacy strategies into our courses. By embedding Culturally Relevant Teaching practices and relationship-building techniques into instruction, teachers may foster higher levels of engagement and comprehension among their students. Culturally Relevant Teaching practices and relationship building can take many forms including intentional selection of culturally diverse texts, establishment of real-world connections, and community building. As evidenced in my findings, teacher participants shared many practical examples of how such practices can look in different class settings like making positive parent phone calls, adapting curriculum so that it may connect to more relatable topics in their lives, or even simply talking with students and attending their extracurricular events. Furthermore, by developing a more interdisciplinary approach to literacy in all content area courses, teachers may be empowered to bridge gaps in literacy by making reading and writing more accessible to students of varying backgrounds. Akin to its holistic predecessors, interdisciplinary literacy tactics also come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Educators may find some helpful ideas shared within the participant narratives in this very dissertation like weaving storytelling and skit performances into instruction. Gamifying vocabulary, attending to different learning styles, and providing ample opportunities to read, write, speak, and present across subject areas were also found to be effective ways to support literacy.

Notably, to successfully minimize literacy gaps, educators require higher levels of administrative support through actions such as increased access to instructional resources,

literacy intervention programs, and protected planning time. These actions from administration will not only assist teachers in alleviating students barriers related to economic disparity but will likely improve teacher retention. By protecting, supporting, and maintaining teachers' well-being, especially among those teaching within high-needs schools, teachers will be empowered to support students' needs. As seen across teachers' narratives, one can see how educators often struggle to strike a balance between caring for their students' needs and maintaining sustainable work practices. Educators constantly grapple with their perceived duty to fill in any gaps left in their students' lives because of systemic inequality as shown in my earlier findings. Sadly, without proper lines of support, this constant imbalance in teachers' work-life even with the best intentions can lead to burnout and teacher turnover. To protect against these issues, educators may opt to collaborate with their administration to advocate support services like social workers and behavioral interventionists to relieve some of the emotional demands stacked upon them. Arguably, school administrators and policymakers may consider implementing creative strategies to reduce teacher burnout and overwork. For instance, finding ways to reduce teacher workload by budgeting for additional support staff, providing adequate and protected planning time during school hours, and budgeting for teacher-selected classroom resources may have the dual benefit of decreasing teacher burnout and increasing teacher retention rates. In summary, my findings reveal that while educators play a significant role in tackling literacy issues and student needs, systemic changes are critical to supporting their efforts and well-being.

Implications for Future Research

My study's findings revealed the narrative insights into the teaching lives of nine Georgia public schoolteachers from both integrated and double-segregated settings. From these narratives, the following themes emerged: economic inequality creates barriers to student literacy, holistic teaching practices improve student outcomes, and teacher burnout and overwork are pervasive issues. Beyond providing practical implications for educators, school leaders, and policymakers, this study may stimulate several implications for future research. Implications may include addressing systemic barriers within segregated schools, analyzing the effectiveness of holistic approaches in high-needs schools, and examining teacher burnout and its systemic drivers.

Considering the consistent findings regarding systemic barriers within double-segregated school environments illustrated in both the current literature and supported by teachers' narratives within my study, researchers may be inspired to further examine the impact of double-segregation on access to high-quality literacy resources. This would allow a more thorough exploration of how systemic inequities transpire into curricular limitations, teacher-student ratios, and resource deficits. By investigating these factors, researchers may better identify targeted interventions to address the literacy crisis, especially among economically disadvantaged and traditionally marginalized student groups.

As holistic approaches such as Culturally Relevant Teaching, relationship-building, and interdisciplinary literacy were cohesive threads among participants' responses to systemic inequities, a larger examination of the longitudinal impacts of such approaches may be suggested. While this study highlights the importance of such holistic

approaches, a future study may investigate how sustained use of any one of these practices may impact reading comprehension and engagement over an extended period. This may be of heightened use in more diverse, economically disadvantaged classroom environments.

Lastly, in light of my study's findings regarding the pervasiveness of teacher burnout and overwork, one might consider further investigating teacher burnout and its systemic drivers. As my study revealed teacher burnout in high-needs schools is both a symptom and a consequence of systemic inequities, future studies should not only probe into the immediate stressors but also the structural factors at play including double-segregation. Future researchers could potentially look deeper into the role of administrative support, workload policies, and expectations, in addition to financial aspects in remedying teacher burnout and improving teacher retention in these settings.

Conclusion

Through my narrative inquiry study, I sought to fill a gap in the literature with the voices of Georgia public school educators experiencing the systemic inequities related to double segregation. Through the narrative recording and interpretation of nine educators' teaching lives, my research may stimulate a better understanding of and empathy toward educators teaching within doubly-segregated school settings. Furthermore, I endeavored to contribute greater insight into the literacy crisis as seen through the firsthand experiences of teachers in both integrated and segregated settings, trusting that policymakers might be urged to expedite and protect school integration plans.

By studying the experiences of teachers within both segregated and integrated contexts, their similarities and differences in literacy-related experiences, and school

culture, through a Critical Race Theory lens, three central themes emerged. These themes included economic inequality creates barriers to student literacy, holistic teaching practices improve student outcomes, and teacher Burnout and overwork are pervasive issues. My findings were further contextualized by the existing literature. Studies such as those conducted by Boger and Orfield (2005), Reardon (2016), and Taylor et al. (2019) provided a crucial backdrop to the tragic effects of double segregation inside and outside of schools and how such effects could cascade down upon teachers, thus further perpetuating this cycle of inequity.

Limitations

Notably, my narrative inquiry study presented some limitations. One such limitation was that since my findings represented individual perceptions, their responses cannot be guaranteed to be completely factual or accurate. Although my relational and open-ended discussion methods granted me a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of a diversity of teachers in Georgia public school settings, I was limited by time constraints only to secure the stories of nine participants. Despite the benefits of using a virtual interview model, this model did limit interactions in a way that I was unable to make full observations of my participants' settings. Lastly, with respect to participants' privacy and rights and anonymity, full details of participants' lives were excluded.

Implications

My findings allowed me to develop key implications for practice and future research. Implications for practice included providing more equitable lines of support, encouraging educators in their utilization of holistic approaches, and constructing

creative means of protecting and maintaining teachers' well-being, especially among schools experiencing the brunt of double segregation. Implications for future research included addressing systemic barriers within double-segregated schools, analyzing the effectiveness of holistic approaches in high-needs schools, and examining teacher burnout and its systemic drivers.

Overall, I hope to see that my study sparks not only empathy but action. By sharing these educators' heartfelt narratives, I desire to inspire both scholarly conversations and real change to address the persistent inequities pervasive within Georgia schools. It is my sincere hope that these teachers' experiences prompt stakeholders, policymakers, school leaders, and the like to renew their commitment to integrated and equitable school environments. As we move forward, I trust that we will come to fully recognize the vital role of teachers and in doing so strive to make a better educational system that truly supports their work in creating a literate and empowered future for our students.

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APPENDIX A:

Research Participant Recruitment Email

Subject: School Diversity and Literacy Research Participant Recruitment

Dear Potential Participants,

My name is Jaimee Beal, and I am a graduate student at Valdosta State University looking for willing participants to interview in my qualitative study entitled: “The impact of race and socioeconomic status on literacy study.” The purpose of my study is to explore the experiences of middle grades reading and English Language Arts educators within demographically diverse teaching environments and it is my hope that if you are eligible and interested in joining this study, that you would use the following link: https://valdosta.co1.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_brd3d4hDs5z3qcu to complete a brief survey to join the candidate pool for my study.

You may participate in this study if you are:

- 18 years or older
- Have current or former experience teaching reading and/or English Language Arts to middle grades students (grades 4-8)
- Taught in a school with either of the following criteria:
 - Over 50% economically disadvantaged and over 60% Black, Hispanic, and/or Mixed Race,
 - Under 50% economically disadvantaged and over 60% Caucasian and/or Asian/Pacific, Islander
 - Or at a school with:
 - No more than 50% of the student body is from a single racial/ethnic group.
 - At least 10% representation from two or more racial/ethnic groups.
 - And, between 25% and 75% of the students are economically disadvantaged.

If you are selected, I will use the contact information provided in the survey to schedule a virtual meeting where I will conduct an in-depth, semi-structured interview with you. The interview may last up to 1 hour. The questions will relate to your experiences with teaching literacy, school culture as it relates to literacy, and the impact of demographic disparities in teaching reading, writing, and listening skills to students.

Please note that your participation in this research is voluntary. You have the right to not answer questions or withdraw during the study, for any reason. Furthermore, interviews will be videotaped to accurately capture your concerns, opinions, and ideas. Once the recordings have been transcribed, the tapes will be destroyed.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Jaimee Beal at jbyearwood@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Jaimee Beal

Graduate Student Researcher

Valdosta State University

IRB Protocol number: 04527-2024

APPENDIX B:
Qualtrics Survey

[Candidate Screening for The impact of race and socioeconomic status on literacy study](#)

Survey Research Statement

You are being asked to participate in a survey entitled "Candidate Screening for The impact of race and socioeconomic status on literacy study," which is being conducted by Jaimee Beal, a graduate student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of middle grades reading and English Language Arts educators within demographically diverse teaching environments. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about teaching literacy skills within demographically diverse schools. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation in the survey should take approximately 5 minutes to complete.

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. You may choose not to take the survey, to stop responding at any time, or to skip any questions that you do not want to answer. Participants must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this study. Your completion of the survey serves as your voluntary agreement to participate in this research project and your certification that you are 18 or older. You may print a copy of this statement for your records.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Jaimee Beal at jbyearwood@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. 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.

1. Personal Information

1.1. Full Name: [Text box]

1.2. Personal Email Address: [Text box]

1.3. Cell Phone Number: [Text box] (Optional)

1.4. Age:

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 65+

2. Professional Background

2.1. Current Teaching Status:

- Currently teaching
- Formerly taught
- Never taught (Ineligible)

2.2. Years of Teaching Experience:

- Less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- More than 10 years

2.3. Subjects Taught (Select all that apply):

- Reading
- English Language Arts
- Other: [Text box]

2.4. Grades Taught (Select all that apply):

- Grades K-3
- Grade 4
- Grade 5
- Grade 6
- Grade 7
- Grade 8
- Grades 9-12

3. School Demographics

3.1. Please provide the name and location (city/state) of the school(s) where you have taught: [Text box]

3.2. Approximate percentage of students at your school(s) who are economically disadvantaged:

- 0-25%
- 26-50%
- 51-75%
- 76-100%

3.3. Approximate percentage of students at your school(s) who are:

- Black: [Drop-down menu: 0-100%]
- Hispanic: [Drop-down menu: 0-100%]
- Mixed Race: [Drop-down menu: 0-100%]
- Caucasian: [Drop-down menu: 0-100%]
- Asian/Pacific Islander: [Drop-down menu: 0-100%]

4. Consent and Availability

4.1. Are you willing to participate in a virtual, semi-structured interview that may last up to 1 hour?

- Yes
- No (Ineligible)

4.2. Preferred Days/Times for the Interview (Select all that apply):

- Weekdays - Evenings
- Weekends - Mornings
- Weekends - Afternoons
- Weekends - Evenings

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Jaimee Beal at jbyearwood@valdosta.edu. This study has been approved by the Valdosta State University Institutional Review Board (IRB) 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 C:

IRB Approval



**Institutional Review Board (IRB)
for the Protection of Human Research Participants**

PROTOCOL EXEMPTION REPORT



Protocol Number: 04527-2024

Responsible Researcher(s): Jaimee Beal

Supervising Faculty: Dr. Jamie Workman

Dissertation Research Member: Dr. April Strevig

Project Title: *The Impact of Race and Socioeconomic Status on Literacy Study.*



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 COMMENTS:

- *Exempt protocol guidelines **permit** recording interview sessions provided recordings are made to create an accurate transcript. Exempt guidelines **prohibit** the collection, storage, and/or sharing of recordings. Therefore, upon creation of the transcript, the recorded interview session must be deleted from all recording and storage devices used.*
- *In keeping with established consent guidelines, audio/video recordings must include the researcher reading aloud the consent statement, confirming participant understanding, and establishing their willingness to take part in the interview. Participants must be provided with a copy of the research statement. The transcript must document the researcher reading and obtaining consent.*
- *Upon completion of the research study all data (e.g. data, pseudonym list, email list, transcript, payment logs, 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.*

Please submit any documents you revise to the IRB Administrator at tmwright@valdosta.edu to ensure an updated record of your exemption.

Elizabeth W. Olfie *07.30.2024*
Elizabeth W. Olfie, IRB Administrator Date

*Thank you for submitting an IRB application.
Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-259-5045.*

Revised: 04.02.16

APPENDIX D:
Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Interview Research Statement:

*You are being asked to participate in an interview as part of a research study entitled “The impact of race and socioeconomic status on literacy study,” which is being conducted by Jaimee Beal, a graduate student at Valdosta State University. The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of middle grades reading and English Language Arts educators within demographically diverse teaching environments. You will receive no direct benefits from participating in this research study. However, your responses may help us learn more about teaching literacy skills within demographically diverse schools. There are no foreseeable risks involved in participating in this study other than those encountered in day-to-day life. Participation should take approximately one hour. 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 Jaimee Beal at jbyearwood@valdosta.edu. This study has been exempted from Institutional Review Board (IRB) review in accordance with Federal regulations. 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.

Background Questions:

1. Can you tell me a little about your background and how long you have been teaching?
2. What subjects and grade levels do you teach, or have you taught?
3. Can you describe the type of school where you currently teach (or most recently taught)? (e.g., segregated, integrated)

Research Question 1: Experiences of Teachers in Integrated Schools

1. Can you describe your experiences teaching in a desegregated school?
2. What challenges and opportunities did you encounter in this environment?
3. How did the racial and socioeconomic diversity of the student body impact your teaching methods and strategies?
4. Can you share any specific stories or incidents that stand out to you from your time teaching in an integrated school?

Research Question 2: Experiences of Teachers in Segregated Schools

1. Can you describe your experiences teaching in a segregated school?
2. What challenges and opportunities did you encounter in this environment?
3. How did the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity of the student body impact your teaching methods and strategies?
4. Can you share any specific stories or incidents that stand out to you from your time teaching in a segregated school?

Research Question 3: Literacy Experiences in Integrated vs. Segregated Schools

1. Could you describe your observations of literacy-related achievement and engagement within your school environment?
2. Can you describe any specific literacy programs or initiatives that were particularly successful or unsuccessful in your school?
3. Could you discuss a time when the availability of resources and support impacted your teaching of reading and/or English Language Arts?

Research Question 4: Literacy Culture in Integrated vs. Segregated Schools

1. How would you describe the literacy culture in the integrated school(s) where you have taught?
2. How would you describe the literacy culture in the segregated school(s) where you have taught?
3. Could you tell me about some of your experiences related to student attitudes toward reading and/or writing in your school?
4. Could you tell me any stories related to parent or community involvement in literacy-related activities that you have witnessed or experienced at your school?
5. Can you share any specific examples of how the school's literacy culture influenced your teaching practices and student outcomes?

Conclusion:

1. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences teaching reading and/or English Language Arts at your school?
2. Are there any other topics or issues related to race, socioeconomic status, and literacy that you think are important to discuss?

Closing:

- **Thank You:** Thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences with me. Your insights are incredibly valuable for this research. If you have any questions or think of anything else you would like to add, please feel free to contact me.