

Telling Their Stories: White Women Educators Teaching Multicultural Literature

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Brooke Payne

M.A.T., Georgia College and State University
B.A., Kennesaw State University

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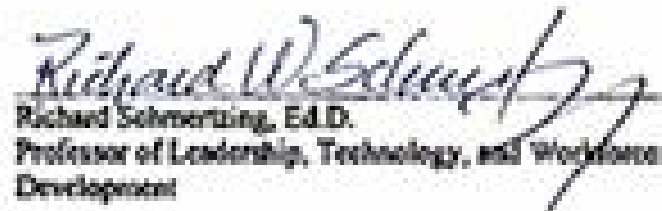
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This dissertation, "Telling Their Stories: White Women Educators Teaching Multicultural Literature," by Brooke Payne is approved by:

**Dissertation
Committee
Chair**


Lorraine Schertzberg, Ed.D.
Professor of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce
Development

**Committee
Researcher**


Richard Schertzberg, Ed.D.
Professor of Leadership, Technology, and Workforce
Development

**Committee
Members**


Colette Drouillard, Ph.D.
Professor of Library and Information Studies

**Associate Provost
for Graduate
Studies and
Research**


Becky K. deCruz, Ph.D., J.D.
Professor of Criminal Justice

**Defense
Date**

2/21/25

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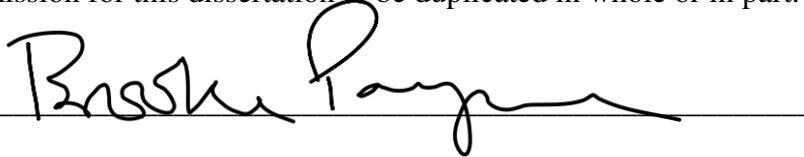
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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the experiences of six White women who teach English in Southern states with active book bans. I conducted a series of three interviews with each participant in which I followed an interview guide focused on the principles of narrative inquiry, constructed a timeline of each participant's life to ensure accuracy, and created life story narratives by applying narrative smoothing to interview transcripts. I coded the data using the in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding methods, which led to categorizing and connecting the data to form three major themes: 1) Unique experiences and phases in life opened participants' eyes to race and/or culture as influential, important constructs in the world and made them aware that biases, both their own and others', are detrimental to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives; 2) By understanding the need for minority students to feel represented in the classroom, these English teachers intentionally chose multicultural texts that embraced the cultures of all students; and 3) When teachers used their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature, they not only confronted their own fears but those of others as well. The findings of this study suggest the impact of past experiences on teachers' curricular decisions, the significance of representation through classroom literature, and the courage necessary to teach multicultural literature in a climate of censorship.

Keywords: multicultural literature, book banning, censorship, female educators, White educators, narrative inquiry

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my students—past, present, and future. You have been my constant motivation throughout this study. You deserve classrooms where you are welcomed and teachers who see your value. I strive to foster that classroom and be that teacher for you every day.

Chapter I

INTRODUCTION

“When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, . . . they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part. Our classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1).

I learned to read by the time I was 5 years old. Apparently, I told my mom that I wanted to learn how to read because I was not patient enough to wait for someone to read to me. Once I could read, I read everything I could get my hands on. I went to the public library down the road and learned how to flip through the card catalog to find specific books. I participated in summer reading competitions and placed first by a landslide just by the sheer number of books I would read. The stories I read as a child mostly depicted characters who looked like me: *Anne of Green Gables*, *Nancy Drew*, *The Magic Tree House*, *The Boxcar Children*—all White characters, all mirrors. But somewhere along the way, even though the American Girl dolls I bought also looked like me, I began to read the other American Girl books of Addie, an enslaved girl searching for freedom during the Civil War, and Josefina, a Mexican settler living in New Mexico. These books were my first experience with books that Rita Sims Bishop (1990) referred to as “windows,

offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange” (p. 1). Little did I know that my love for stories as a 5-year-old girl would one day lead me to writing a dissertation on the importance of stories and experiences; to understanding the need for students to read both mirrors and windows; and to advocating for multicultural literature in a time of censoring voices that differ from mine.

As Maxwell (2013) noted, by choosing to conduct qualitative research, I as the researcher was the instrument for my study, meaning my identity, experiences, and positionality were continually present throughout my research as biases. Furthermore, as Peshkin (1991) explained, researchers must remain aware of subjectivities and how they can impact research. Thus, I present my background and educational narrative identity below to not only share my identity, experiences, and positionality but also to remain transparent regarding my biases and subjectivities.

I grew up sheltered in a variety of ways: I was an only child; I was homeschooled from kindergarten through high school; I knew few people of color; I attended the same church for all but 5 years of my childhood. When I started the journey to obtain an undergraduate degree at a public university, my horizons began to broaden. Not only was I no longer in a class of one, but I also found myself surrounded by diversity, from students to professors. For the first time, I was truly exposed to cultures different from my own, and rather than continuing to shelter myself, I sought to learn as much as I could. I began volunteering as an English as a second language (ESOL) teacher, and while I was supposed to be teaching my adult students, they were actually teaching me. I began to understand the struggle that immigrants face when they come to this country. I began to understand why people will risk everything to come here, even if it is through

undocumented methods, because living in fear and poverty here is still better than what they left behind. I realized, not without some initial discomfort, that my views were starting to change from what I had always been told. This, I believe, was the first time I truly began to self-reflect upon my beliefs and biases, beginning my journey toward becoming a passionate user of and advocate for multicultural education and culturally relevant teaching.

My Educational Narrative Identity

After graduating with my bachelor's degree, I spent several years in publishing as an editor before making the decision to pursue a career in education, which also required going back to graduate school for a master's in teaching. My first teaching position was in a Title 1 public middle school with a diverse student population. Like my ESOL teaching experience, I still had students who had immigrated here themselves or whose parents had come here before they were born, all with the goal of having a better life. While I was familiar with teaching Latinx students, this experience was the first time in my life I was teaching Black, Asian, and Middle Eastern students. As a result, I often found myself as the minority in the room. I often felt uncomfortable but not because I felt threatened or afraid. I wanted to make an impact on their lives, but I did not know how to make them see me as more than just another White teacher. Through their writing and class discussions, I learned their stories. I heard stories of parents being deported, killed, or imprisoned. My heart broke and my mind changed with each story I heard. I felt angry, sad, disgusted, and ashamed. Again, my students were the ones teaching me. I continued to self-reflect.

The summer after my 1st year of teaching, I took a course as part of my master's degree on diverse learners. I read Wayne Au's (2014) *Rethinking Multicultural Education* and experienced a life-changing moment of self-reflection. I was reading one of the chapters, and I suddenly realized what I needed to do to be more than just another White teacher. I then read Christopher Emdin's (2017) *For White Folks Who Teach in the Hood . . . and the Rest of Y'all Too*, which further confirmed my decision: I would begin teaching with multicultural literature, and by doing so, I could not only help educate students about cultures outside their own but also simultaneously show my students that I valued their cultures. I spent the rest of that summer reading and collecting examples of multicultural literature that would work within the existing units mandated by the district, crossing my fingers that the books I selected would not be rejected, especially in a district that had mandated middle schools could no longer teach novels.

I began my 2nd year of teaching by reading my students excerpts from Clark's (2019a, 2019b, & 2019c) *Green Card Youth Voices* Fargo, Minneapolis, and Atlanta editions, each a collection of personal narratives written by teenage immigrants from all over the world who came to America in their youth. Suddenly, my students who had been afraid to tell their stories became both willing and wanting to share their experiences. My students who had not yet come to realize their White privilege began to understand another perspective for the first time in their lives. I had my students read *I Am Malala* by Malala Yousafzai (2016) and saw students who had been taught—and born—in the wake of 9/11 realize that what they had been told about Muslims was not true. I cried when I heard my students talk about why Malala was someone to look up to and respect rather than someone to fear for wearing a headscarf. I read excerpts from Levine's (2000)

Freedom's Children: Young Civil Rights Activists Tell Their Own Stories, and I saw students realize how children and teens just like them were treated just for wanting to go to school. In a matter of weeks, I glimpsed the power multicultural literature could have and decided that I would embrace the mission of not only incorporating as many multicultural texts into my curriculum as I could but also to encourage others to do the same.

My Topic Journey

When I began considering topics for this study, I knew multicultural literature would be at the heart. I thought I would focus on the benefits that come from reading multicultural literature such as those I saw firsthand in my classroom. I thought I would find that multicultural literature increases test scores or reading performance. I thought that I could use numbers to prove the value of multicultural literature. Then, I remembered what had started me on this journey all those years ago: I listened to stories.

My passion for teaching with multicultural literature has continued to grow over the years, and I have amassed a classroom library that honors diverse voices and their stories. The past few years, however, there has been an increase in attempts to silence these voices and hide their stories; I cannot tolerate such actions. My passion, the experiences of my students, and the years I spent in self-reflection led to this dissertation focused on the problem I could not ignore, the goals I wanted to accomplish, and the research questions I wanted to answer.

Overview of the Problem

Despite the significant lack of diversity in literature when compared to the White heterosexual norm (Gay, 2018), at least 30% to 41% of the books banned from 2021 to

2022 represented multicultural literature (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Meehan & Friedman, 2023). Multicultural literature comprises texts that “[embrace] all marginalized groups,” such as those that go against the “normative conceptualizations of (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, immigration, race, social class, and sexual orientation” (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019, p. 1). However, some English teachers, specifically in the South, consciously continue to teach with multicultural literature, regardless of the climate of censorship, and risk their teaching careers to both embrace and include diverse voices and stories in their classrooms. Thus, I focused this study on gaining an in-depth knowledge of why English teachers who identify as White women continue to teach using multicultural literature in the current climate of censorship and put their careers at risk in the process.

As Ladson-Billings (2021) argued, the current climate of censorship began with former president Donald Trump’s executive order against critical race theory in 2020 and his “refusal to denounce White supremacy” (p. 2). Trump’s actions, as Ladson-Billings argued and with which I wholeheartedly agree, “clearly exacerbated the racial divisions that have risen to the surface of our society since his election” (p. 2). As a result, since 2021, at least 20 states have banned K-12 schools from teaching critical race theory (Alexander et. al, 2023) and prohibited classroom discussions of race (Saul, 2023). Censorship disproportionately impacts multicultural literature. At least 41% of the 1,648 books banned from 2021 to 2022 included characters who represent the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more (LGBTQIA+) community; 40% depicted Black, Indigenous, or people of color (BIPOC) characters; 21% contained discussions of race/racism; 10% featured themes of activism; and 4% represented

religious minorities (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). As a result, censorship significantly impacts minority students and their cultures, especially as some states—particularly those in the southern U.S.—have taken censorship measures to the extreme. In Florida, a 20-year veteran English professor was fired for teaching a unit on racial justice (Sachs, 2023); a substitute teacher was fired for posting a video on social media displaying covered and empty bookcases that he argued were removed for ““race and making people feel uncomfortable”” (Connolly, 2023, para. 10); and a fifth-grade teacher was investigated for showing a film featuring a character of the LGBTQIA+ community (Rosales & Garcia, 2023). In Georgia, a fifth-grade teacher was fired for reading Stuart’s (2022) *My Shadow Is Purple*, a children’s book about inclusivity and acceptance with a nonbinary character, which she had purchased at the school’s book fair (Sonnenburg, 2023). In Texas, a teacher was fired for teaching Folman’s (2018) *Anne Frank’s Diary: The Graphic Adaptation*, a graphic novel version of the original diary, which included Anne’s thoughts on sexuality (Rahman, 2023). In South Carolina, a high school English teacher was officially reprimanded for teaching Coates’s (2015) *Between the World and Me*, which deals with topics of race and racism in America (Natanson, 2023). In Tennessee, a teacher was fired for reading Coates’s (2017) “The First White President” and Lacey’s (2017) “White Privilege,” as well as for discussing topics of systemic racism (Pendharkar, 2021).

As these instances indicate, multiple states have taken steps to silence minorities and censor diverse voices in the classroom by removing teachers who use multicultural literature. Thus, to combat the problem of censoring diverse voices in the classroom, I set several goals for my dissertation work.

Research Goals

According to Maxwell (2013), there are three types of research goals: personal, intellectual, and practical. Maxwell noted personal goals, particularly in a qualitative study, impact researchers in all aspects of a study, from selecting a topic to choosing an approach to maintaining the motivation necessary to complete the research process. Researchers should not only be aware of their personal goals but transparent about them as well (Maxwell). As researchers are the instrument for gathering data in qualitative research, they must both consider and report personal biases and goals that could impact the validity of the study (Maxwell). In contrast, intellectual goals focus on the participants by attempting to understand the contexts through which participants undergo processes and the meaning of those contexts and processes on the decisions they make (Maxwell). Finally, practical goals aim to impact those within and outside the study, such as educators and policymakers, to influence practices and policies (Maxwell). I had a variety of personal, intellectual, and practical goals with my efforts to gather and share the stories of White women educators who teach with multicultural literature.

Personal Goals

I chose the topic of multicultural literature because I am passionate about teaching literature that makes all students feel valued and that helps students to respect cultures that differ from their own. I have seen the power of multicultural literature in my classroom over the years, and I am angry and disappointed that books with such potential are not only under attack but also comprise a significant portion of censored books in various states across the U.S. (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). Stories are powerful, which is

why I chose narrative inquiry as the qualitative approach for this study as I believe teachers have stories to tell as to how and why they select books for their classrooms. My goal was that by sharing their stories, others will know that although I identify as a straight White woman, I am an ally to BIPOC and the LGBTQIA+ community, and I am trying to make a difference when it comes to amplifying their voices. As censorship of multicultural literature is a current issue that needs to be addressed, my personal goal has continued to fuel my motivation to tell these stories and try to make an impact, no matter how small.

Intellectual Goals

I understand how my past experiences shaped my personal beliefs of race and culture, how I came to teach with multicultural literature, why I advocate for its inclusion in the classroom, and why I am pushing back against efforts to censor multicultural literature in schools. I know my educational narrative and why I am passionate about multicultural literature, but I wanted to learn and share the narratives of other educators who share that passion. Thus, my intellectual goals were to understand how White women educators construct meaning from past experiences to develop their current beliefs and practices toward race and culture, as well as the role multicultural literature plays in those practices. Additionally, I wanted to understand the meaning that multicultural literature has for these educators and their processes for choosing books to teach in their classrooms. Lastly, I wanted to understand how they are responding to the context of teaching during a period of censorship and why they are pushing back against censorship efforts.

Practical Goals

I had multiple practical goals for this study, related to both influencing practice and policy (Maxwell, 2013). I hoped to learn how past experiences play a part in the practices teachers choose to implement in their classrooms. I wanted to learn how teachers begin using culturally relevant teaching practices, such as teaching with multicultural literature, and why they continue to do so. I wanted teachers who have never used multicultural literature in the classroom to read the stories of those who do and be inspired in their own teaching practices. I hoped they will realize the power of multicultural literature and understand why teachers should push back against censorship. I hoped that by inspiring more teachers to join the fight against censorship, they will share their stories more openly. Ultimately, I hoped the policymakers who are attempting, and succeeding, to censor multicultural literature will realize their censorship efforts will not be tolerated without pushback, will begin to self-reflect upon their beliefs and biases that led them to engage in those efforts, and will come to realize there is nothing to fear of powerful stories just because they are different from their own. To accomplish these goals, I established several questions that guided me throughout the research process.

Research Questions

I wanted to understand what experiences led six English teachers who identify as White women to reach their current beliefs regarding race and culture. I wanted to understand what multicultural literature means to other teachers and how they came to use multicultural literature in the classroom. I wanted to understand why, despite the potential repercussions, others are pushing back and taking a stand on the importance of discussing race and culture in the classroom. Therefore, my research questions focused

on the experiences of English teachers who identify as White women and what influenced who they have become as well as what they do in their classrooms daily.

Research Question 1: Learning from Past Experiences

As I wanted to elevate the voices of teachers who choose to teach with multicultural literature and understand why they continue to do so in a climate of censorship, I first had to learn how teachers' past experiences shaped their beliefs regarding race and culture. I am passionate about multicultural literature and learning the stories of other teachers who are as passionate, or even more, than I am. While I knew my beliefs and experiences, I needed to learn the beliefs and background experiences of other teachers who currently teach with multicultural literature. Knowing both what teachers believe and the experiences that shaped those beliefs was crucial as their understanding of race and culture likely impact why they teach with multicultural literature. Thus, my first research question was as follows:

RQ 1. How do past experiences of six English teachers who identify as White women shape their current beliefs and practices regarding race and culture?

Research Question 2: Using Multicultural Literature

Additionally, I wanted to learn how teachers came to make the decision to begin using multicultural literature in the classroom. While I knew my goals with teaching multicultural literature and how I reached a place of using and eventually advocating for multicultural literature, I did not know how and why other teachers reached the decision to begin using multicultural literature and, potentially, becoming advocates for its use. I needed to learn the process that led them to ultimately make this decision. I needed to understand how they began reading multicultural literature before I could understand how

they began to use it in the classroom. As such, my second research question was as follows:

RQ 2. How did six English teachers who identify as White women begin to use multicultural literature in the classroom?

Research Question 3: Pushing Back Against Censorship

Lastly, I wanted to learn why teachers continue to use multicultural literature in the classroom despite the climate of censorship. While I knew how the current climate of censorship affects the decisions I make and why I continue to teach with multicultural literature now more than ever, I needed to learn why others continue to use multicultural literature. Are they aware of the consequences they could face? Do they believe teaching multicultural literature is an act of pushing back against the censorship efforts that disproportionately impact multicultural literature? Therefore, my final research question was as follows:

RQ 3. Why did six English teachers who identify as White women decide to continue using multicultural literature in the classroom within a climate of censorship?

By answering these research questions, I hoped to achieve my purpose of advocating for the voices of teachers who continue to use multicultural literature, which has significance within the current climate of censorship.

Purpose and Significance

The purpose of this narrative inquiry was to advocate for the voices of White women English teachers who continue to teach with multicultural literature in their classrooms despite the consequences they could face within the current political climate

of censorship. While this study did not chastise teachers who do not use multicultural literature within the classroom, I did not interview teachers who no longer use multicultural literature in the climate of censorship. While I understood and respected their fears, especially given the consequences states such as Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Tennessee have enforced upon teachers (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023), theirs were not the stories I wanted to tell. The purpose of this work was to tell the stories of those who are continuing to use multicultural literature in the classroom, a decision that brings potential risks within the climate of censorship. My belief is that learning their stories will allow us to understand why using multicultural literature means more than the potential consequences (i.e., job loss, reprimands, and investigations) these teachers could face. Spreading this understanding, even if it only reaches a small percentage of teachers who need it, could potentially impact significant numbers of students given how many students middle and high school teachers have in their classrooms throughout their careers. For example, according to the Class Size (2000 & rev. 2007) rule in Georgia, the maximum size for a high school English class in Georgia is 32, with teachers typically having either three semester-long classes or five year-long classes, for a total of 160 students per year. Thus, each teacher has the potential to impact nearly 5,000 students throughout her career, meaning the significance of spreading the understanding of why teachers use multicultural literature could inspire more teachers to use multicultural literature and impact a student population that is ever-increasing in diversity.

Of the total teachers in the U.S., 80% of whom are White, 85.3% reported they have autonomy over the books they select to teach, and 97.9% reported they select their teaching strategies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Therefore, most teachers choose whether to use multicultural texts and/or employ other culturally relevant strategies in their classrooms or not. Multicultural literature is more important now than ever as 55% of students in the U.S. schools identify as BIPOC (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), yet minority students are disproportionately impacted by book censorship with at least 41% of books banned representing multicultural literature (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). I hope that by reading the stories of educators who are push back against censorship of multicultural literature, policymakers who choose to censor multicultural literature—an act that perpetuates prejudice and bias—will understand why teachers choose to take an active role toward achieving social justice by continuing to teach with multicultural literature in their classrooms, which leads to why I believe my research study was necessary.

This study added to the current body of research by providing the stories of educators who identify as White women in the English classroom to learn how their perspectives on the races and cultures included in multicultural literature were shaped by past experiences and why they choose to continue teaching with multicultural literature despite witnessing teachers in neighboring counties and states lose their jobs for similar actions. By gaining a deeper understanding of what it means for educators to push back against censorship in their classrooms, other educators who teach English and do not push back against censorship efforts may both understand the need for multicultural literature in the classroom and find the courage they need to join in the effort toward

social justice through multicultural literature. This study attempted to make positive social changes by illuminating the injustices facing teachers and students, as well as encouraging educators to continue using culturally relevant teaching practices and teaching with multicultural literature. This study also aimed to educate policymakers on the importance of multicultural literature so they will reverse censorship laws and, instead, make multicultural literature a requirement in the standards for every grade level English course in every state. Lastly, this study attempted to encourage any teachers and policymakers who read this study to engage in self-reflection for any potential biases, undergo a change in mindset, and become activists for social justice. If there is a hope that policymakers who choose to censor multicultural literature—an act that perpetuates prejudice and bias—will reverse their decisions, then we need to help them understand why teachers choose to take an active role toward achieving social justice by continuing to teach with multicultural literature in their classrooms.

My inspiration, passion for the problem, goals, and questions, as well as the purpose and significance for this study, influenced the decisions I made regarding the conceptual framework for my research. The inspiration I gained from my personal experiences and my passion for the problem influenced my experiential knowledge; my research questions impacted the theories through which I framed my study and the design of my pilot study; my goals guided my review of the previous literature; and the purpose and significance of this study were reflected throughout the entirety of the conceptual framework and the relationships between each element, which I displayed visually using a concept map.

Chapter II

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Both Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) stressed the importance of the conceptual framework to the research process. Maxwell defined conceptual framework as “the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research” (p. 39). Furthermore, Maxwell argued the conceptual framework is built to encompass the researcher’s individual “ideas and beliefs” on the phenomena of interest; what is currently “going on with these things and why”; what is already known and theorized about the topic; and how these elements connect cohesively around the study (p. 39). Maxwell further noted there are four main components of his proposed conceptual framework: the researcher’s own identity and experience, the theories and research of others, pilot studies, and thought experiments. Additionally, Ravitch and Riggan argued that the conceptual framework should argue for the importance of the proposed study and justify the methods the researcher chose as the most effective means of answering the research questions, thus contributing to the current body of knowledge. For Ravitch and Riggan, “a conceptual framework is an argument about why the topic one wishes to study matters, and why the means proposed to study it are appropriate and rigorous” (p. 5). Ravitch and Riggan explained the components of their conceptual framework as “personal interests and goals, identity and positionality, topical research, and theoretical frameworks” (p. 9). Lastly, Maxwell, along with Ravitch

and Riggan, argued for the importance of a map to visually indicate the connections between the concepts.

The conceptual framework I constructed for this study wove together elements from Maxwell's (2013) proposed components, as well as Ravitch and Riggan's (2017). My conceptual framework consisted of my personal identity, experiences, and positionality that shaped my experiential knowledge; theories that influenced my study; previous research and reports synthesized in a literature review; what I learned from conducting a pilot study; and a concept map that visually demonstrated the relationships between each element of the framework. Thus, I began with the knowledge I gained from personal experiences, which Maxwell argued is a "valuable component" of the knowledge the researcher brings to their study, which cannot be separated from the researcher as the "instrument of the research" (pp. 44-45). What follows is the "proposed relationship" between the theories that informed my conceptual framework and my study (Maxwell, 2013, p. 49). The literature review is a synthesis of "existing work related to [my] emerging research topic" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 10). I then detail the pilot study I conducted to "test [my] ideas or methods" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 66). Finally, I connect these framework elements visually through a concept map "as a means of clarifying connection between the various conceptual, contextual, and theoretical influences on" my study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 209).

Experiential Knowledge

My identity, experiences, and positionality comprise my experiential knowledge, in which identity refers to elements such as the researcher's "race, ethnicity, social class, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and other social identities" (Ravitch & Riggan,

2017, p. 10); experiences, which Dewey (1938/1963) noted are the “transaction[s] taking place between an individual and what, at the time constitutes his environment” (p. 43) that “modif[y] the one who acts and undergoes [the experience]” (p. 35); and positionality, which refers to my “role in relationship to [my] participants, setting, and topic” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017, p. 99). Thus, my identity, experiences, and positionality were crucial to my conceptual framework.

Identity

I previously discussed my educational narrative identity and how I came to develop my identity as a classroom teacher, but I must also detail the other aspects of my identity that impact my biases. I grew up in the South in an all-White family, raised with conservative values and Christian beliefs. I saw my family lock the car door when a person of color walked by on the street. I heard my family refer to Black people as “lazy” and Hispanics as “illegals.” I was taught that Democrats were not good people because they support homosexuality, which was something to abhor. I was taught that women are lesser than men, and when I voiced my opinion, I was told that I did not need to say everything I thought and to think before I spoke. I was homeschooled to avoid learning liberal ideas, such as evolution. I was sheltered in every aspect of my life, which led to biases toward BIPOC, immigrants, the LGBTQIA+ community, liberal thinkers, and others. My current identity, however, is drastically different. While I cannot change that I am Southern or White, and I still identify as a Christian, I worked hard to recognize my biases and overcome them. I now identify as liberal, a feminist, and an advocate of equality for all races, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientation, etc.

Thus, the political and religious environment in which my family raised me instilled within me numerous biases of which I was unaware for the initial 2 decades of my life, but college and work experiences, especially as a teacher, led me to begin the process of self-reflection to overcome those biases. At first, however, I was only focused on overcoming my own biases, yet experiences that took place around the end of my 1st year as a public-school teacher made me realize the need to help others confront their biases as well.

Experiences

I remember very clearly that we were reaching the conclusion of a unit that would culminate in each student presenting a speech to the class on a topic of deep importance to them. For many students, this topic was along the lines of family, education, dreams, faith, etc., but one student wanted to give a speech on why she believed there should be a wall between the U.S. and Mexico to prevent further immigrants from entering the country. I was appalled by this on multiple levels; not only did an eighth grader, barely a teenager, already have beliefs about building a wall, but she also wanted to present this speech in a classroom in which she, a White student, was the minority. Most students in the classroom were, in fact, either the children of immigrants or immigrants themselves. I remember thinking that I could not let her give such a speech to this particular audience, but, more importantly, I needed to figure out how to change her desire to give such a speech. I found my principal after school and explained the situation to him. He told me to speak with her one-on-one, not to tell her she could not give a speech on the wall (because I could not infringe upon her freedom of speech) but rather to encourage her to consider her audience. I did as he suggested and, fortunately, was able to convince her to

change her topic (ironically, she chose to present on her faith instead). However, this experience made me start to wonder how I could have done something differently leading up to that point in the school year that would have stopped her from ever considering such a topic in the first place. I knew I had students in that classroom who were undocumented or had parents who were undocumented because a few parents had already been deported earlier in the year. How could I teach others like her to show empathy rather than judgment?

The summer after my first year of teaching, I took a graduate course on diverse learners and multicultural education. The lightbulb in my brain did not just light up but possibly exploded from the energy overload surging through my mind. I suddenly knew how I, as an English teacher, could make an impact: through stories. It was so obvious, or should have been, but I had not put two and two together. I thought my priority as a teacher was to teach my students to love learning and reading when the reality was that I needed to teach them to love each other as well. The next school year, I incorporated as much diversity and empathy into my classroom in what has come to be my mission for multicultural literature. I realized that I could be, and was becoming, an activist in my classroom.

Once I came to the realization that my students would benefit from reading multicultural literature in the classroom, I never turned back. Though I no longer teach Clark's (2019a, 2019b, & 2019c) *Green Card Youth Voices* or Yousafzai's (2016) *I Am Malala* now that I teach AP English Language, AP Seminar, and American literature, I still find ways to bring in diverse voices that my classroom filled with a diverse mixture of students can both relate to and learn from. I have never seen harm come to a student

from reading a multicultural text, which is why I am of the belief that multicultural literature is under attack in the current climate of censorship.

Positionality

Based on my experiences, my positionality regarding multicultural literature is that reading a text with LGBTQIA+ characters does not make straight students queer, just as reading books with straight characters does not make queer students straight. What reading texts with LGBTQIA+ characters does do, however, is “help young people realize that they are not alone in their struggle for identity clarity and confirmation” while allowing straight students “who have been presented with negative, one-sided messages about LGBTQ+ people from home, places of worship, or various media outlets [to] explore other aspects of the needs, interests, and concerns of people who identify as LGBTQ+” (Phipps, 2023, p. 36). Likewise, reading a text with BIPOC characters makes BIPOC students feel valued and appreciated while leading White students to realize their White privilege and come to terms with any biases they may have, just as I did. Based on these experiences, my position regarding the topic of multicultural literature is that it should be a requirement; instead, the genre is under attack. As I wanted to understand why other teachers made the decision to teach with multicultural literature, as well as possibly advocate for its use, despite the potential risks, I studied the theories behind why people choose to become activists for social change.

Theoretical Framework

While critical theory (Bohman, 1996; Bronner, 2011; Horkheimer, 2002; Kincheloe; 2006) was the foundation of my theoretical framework, several points throughout my study drew from critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023; Ladson-

Billings, 2021) and queer theory (de Lauretis, 1991; O'Malley et al., 2018; Sullivan, 2003) as offshoots of specific aspects of critical theory. In what follows, I not only establish the tenets of each theory but also specify how these tenets influenced various parts of my research design.

Critical Theory

I chose to frame my study through critical theory for “its moral imperative” and focus on “the need to develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society” (Kim, 2016, p. 36). While critical theory stemmed from Karl Marx’s philosophy of Marxism, critical theory was given its name and guiding principles by Max Horkheimer in 1937 (Bronner, 2011). Horkheimer’s version of critical theory “aim[ed] at a political conception of justice” (Bohman, 1996, p. 11). There are three tenets of Horkheimer’s critical theory: “it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation” (Bohman, 2005, para. 3). Furthermore, critical theory acknowledges that people are “producers of their own historical form of life” (Horkheimer, 2002, p. 244). Critical theory allows researchers to “take an activist stance” by “fram[ing] and engag[ing] in qualitative inquiry with an explicit agenda of elucidating . . . social inequalities . . . to critique society, raise consciousness, and change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful” (Patton, 2015, p. 692). Furthermore, critical theory seeks to “[empower] human beings to transcend the constraints placed on them by race, class, and gender” (Creswell, 2014, p. 65). Likewise, Kincheloe (2006), a modern critical theorist, argued that a critical consciousness is essential to understand the why politics and education became

inundated with “efforts to ‘recover’ [W]hite supremacy, patriarchy, class privilege, heterosexual ‘normality,’ Christian dominance, and the European intellectual canon” (p. 221). Therefore, because the tenets of critical theory focus on those who raise awareness of and make efforts to change the inequalities in society, I interviewed teachers who are working against censorship of multicultural literature by listening to and telling their life stories. Because these censorship efforts significantly impact BIPOC stories, I also framed my study in critical race theory.

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory (CRT) stems from critical theory. CRT came from the work of numerous legal scholars, such as Kimberlé Crenshaw, Derrick Bell, Patricia Williams, Richard Delgado, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsudo, Linda Green, and Cheryl Harris (Ladson-Billings, 2021). The tenets of CRT are the “belief that racism is normal or ordinary, not aberrant, in US society; interest convergence or material determinism; race as a social construction; intersectionality and anti-essentialism; voice or counter-narrative” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 42). The first tenet, that racism is ordinary, means that racism is such a common occurrence in the BIPOC lives that it “is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged” by the dominant culture (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 8). Interest convergence or material determinism, the second tenet, means “align[ing] the interests of the dominant groups with those of racially oppressed and marginalized groups” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 44); this means convincing Whites, who often “have little incentive to eradicate” racism and lose their White privilege, to work together with BIPOC toward a mutual benefit (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 9). The third tenet of CRT is that race is a social construction,

meaning that the concept of race is a “social thought . . . that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 9).

Intersectionality and anti-essentialism comprise the fourth tenet of CRT, which refers to the multiple components of “identities, loyalties, and allegiances” that coexist within a person all at once and can produce conflict (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11). The final tenet of voice or counter-narrative is what started me on this research journey: stories matter. In this case, “because of their different histories and experiences with oppression, Black, Native American, Asian, and Latino writers and thinkers may be able to communicate to their [W]hite counterparts matters that the [W]hites are unlikely to know,” which is why multicultural literature is crucial for all students to read and learn from (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11).

Thus, I chose to frame my study in CRT, along with critical theory, because White teachers who acknowledge racism rather than perpetuating the belief that racism is ordinary can positively contribute to the education of minority students in ways those who do not admit it cannot. Some White politicians are currently seeking to ban any mention of CRT in schools (Frey, 2022). I believe this is due, in part, to choosing what benefits their own interests, whether they recognize it or not, rather than working toward interest convergence for the benefit of all, particularly for BIPOC students. These politicians appear not to realize race as a social construction that they could react to in ways that could be useful and, thereby, something that can be positively redefined or repositioned. Helping to change the majority’s way of seeing the world and race in it could function as a first step in helping White teachers overcome potential biases of racial stereotypes. One such belief that teachers need to acknowledge and overcome is

that being colorblind is a good thing (Ottwein & Mun, 2023; Style, 1988). I believe that everyone, including students of all ages, has a unique perspective and story to tell as a result of intersectionality and anti-essentialism. For many students, reading multicultural literature is the first step to experience a counter-narrative, as well as for many students to see themselves reflected in literature. Another important element that relates to my study is that CRT “contains an activist dimension,” meaning that adherents of CRT seek “not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 8). As such, CRT was particularly valuable when attempting to understand my participants’ beliefs about race and culture, as well as why they may advocate for multicultural literature in the classroom, which could be seen as a means of working toward social justice for BIPOC students. Because efforts to censor multicultural literature impact not only BIPOC stories but the stories of the LGBTQIA+ community as well, I also framed my study in queer theory.

Queer Theory

Queer theory also falls under the umbrella of critical theory. Queer theory—a term that originated with de Lauretis (1991) from the work of such scholars as Judith Butler, Michael Foucault, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick—offers “a critical analysis of all iterations of normalizing, privileging, compulsory, and dominant modes of social organization that characterize historically heterosexist and normalizing cultures” (O’Malley et al., 2018, p. 572). Furthermore, queer theory does not come with a set of tenets as critical theory and CRT do as the very nature of queer theory is “a sort of vague and indefinable set of practices and (political) positions that has the potential to

challenge normative knowledges and identities” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 43-44). However, queer theory was essential toward understanding how literature that goes beyond heterosexual and gender “norms” is essential to educators for creating learning environments that embrace students of all genders and orientations. By teaching with multicultural literature, English teachers can combat efforts “to silence and hide queer lives” (Helmsing, 2020, p. 136). Furthermore, as Schey (2020) argued, English teachers have an “ethical and professional responsibility to learn from people of color, queer people, and queer people of color through reading, listening, and reflecting so that we can collectively transform our sociocultural worlds” (p. 114). With multicultural texts that feature the stories of the LGBTQIA+ community at their disposal, English teachers are well positioned to inspire this transformation. As such, queer theory, along with CRT and critical theory, influenced several choices I made regarding the research questions I had for my study.

Theoretical Connections to Research Questions

The principles of critical theory, CRT, and queer theory connected with each of my research questions in various ways. First, I learned how my participants’ past experiences led them to their current beliefs of race and culture, including minority and queer cultures. Second, I learned how my participants have come to use multicultural literature and become advocates for the genre, which could not only empower students of all races, classes, and genders but could also achieve social justice by exposing inequalities. Lastly, I learned why my participants critique the current issues in society with the goals of raising awareness and affecting societal change for BIPOC and the

LGBTQIA+ community. These questions were the result of the gaps I found and questions I had after reviewing the existing literature.

Literature Review

Ladson-Billings's (1994) landmark text *The Dreamkeepers: Successful Teaching for African-American Students* defined culturally relevant teaching as “a pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). In a similar vein, Gay (2000) argued for the culturally responsive practice of using multicultural literature as “a powerful way to expose students to ethnic groups, cultures, and experiences different from their own to which they may not have access in their daily life” (p. 118). It has been nearly 3 decades since Ladson-Billings argued teachers should employ culturally relevant teaching and more than 2 decades since Gay argued for the culturally responsive practice of reading multicultural literature as best practices; however, not all current classroom teachers practice culturally relevant teaching (Sheron et al., 2020), not all preservice teachers (PSTs) have enough practice with culturally relevant teaching to implement it (Siwatu, 2011), and not all PSTs and current teachers understand the power of multicultural literature without guidance (Chen & Browne, 2021; Hoppe, 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021). Furthermore, numerous studies (Almager, 2018; Boyd et al., 2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Greytak et al., 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ramsay-Jordan; 2020) indicated that preservice and current teachers held negative biases against minority students, including BIPOC and LGBTQIA+. White teachers comprise the overwhelming majority of teachers in public schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) while the student population continually diversifies (National Center for

Education Statistics, 2023), making culturally relevant teaching essential if we want to help all students equally. This pedagogical practice seems to me to be even more necessary within the current political and educational climate than ever before given the impact of censorship on libraries and schools to restrict books that some believe children and students should not read (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019). Censorship particularly threatens multicultural literature, a tool Gay (2018) argued as effective and important when diversity is a factor in the population and benefits all students.

Style (1988) began advocating for curriculum to include mirrors and windows more than 3 decades ago, by which she meant that students need to see themselves reflected in what they learn as well as be able to glimpse into the lives of others. Just 2 years later, Bishop (1990) reiterated the need for mirrors and windows, adding that sliding glass doors allow not only look through the window but also to enter another world, specifically through reading. Bishop argued that multicultural literature can help children to become more accepting of those who are different from them, impacting their ideas of race and racism, while also giving children who rarely see themselves reflected in literature (or reflected negatively) to feel celebrated. Others (Gultekin & May, 2019; Rempala, 2006) have, in more recent years, continued the argument for mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors, reiterating the need for all students, including those in the majority, to gain perspectives about other cultures. There are other benefits to reading multicultural literature as well. Diamond and Moore (1995) found in their 4-year longitudinal study in three school districts that reading multicultural literature increased students' academic gains in reading and writing, as well as vocabulary and syntax. Similarly, Bennett et al. (2017), in their quantitative study using concurrent multiple

probe experimental design with seven students, found that multicultural texts increased students' reading comprehension and fluency. Likewise, Clark and Fleming (2019) found in a qualitative study of 13 teachers and their students that reading multicultural literature suggested improvements to students' reading comprehension, in addition to affirming cultural identity. McNair (2011) found in a study of 10 Black families that children were more interested in reading when they could see themselves in the text. Kosciw et al. (2022), in a nationwide survey of 22,298 students aged 13 to 21 of whom 90.4% identified as LGBTQIA+, found that students with access to LGBTQIA+ resources, including books, had higher GPAs, experienced fewer instances of bullying, and enjoyed more belonging and acceptance than those without access to inclusive resources. Furthermore, Boucher (2016) found in an ethnographic case study of a White teacher and his students that when a White teacher demonstrated solidarity with BIPOC student, the students saw him as an ally and social justice advocate. Thus, the benefits of multicultural literature for students are numerous, significant, and show up across multiple types of research with varied groups of participants.

In this literature review, I first summarize the research regarding the biases White teachers often hold toward minority students. Next, I summarize the research indicating that teachers need experiences that inspire self-reflection of biases and understanding of teaching multicultural literature. Finally, I reference the current political climate and the attack against multicultural literature.

Teacher Bias Toward Minority Students

To be effective teachers for all students, it is helpful to overcome negative biases one may hold against minority students. Multiple studies (Almager, 2018; Boyd et al.,

2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Greytak et al., 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020) in the literature made connections between teacher bias and minority students. The perceptions minority students perceive from White teachers indicate that there were teachers who had not confronted their biases and yet were currently teaching an ever-increasingly diverse student population. Douglas et al. (2008), in an interview-based qualitative study with eight Black high-school students, found that all eight Black students experienced disrespect from at least one White teacher, which most perceived to be based on their skin color. Similarly, Boyd et al. (2023), in a longitudinal study of 4,232 Black youth, found more than 50% reported facing “teacher-based discrimination” (p. 5). Likewise, Kosciw et al. (2022), in a nationwide survey of 22,298 students aged 13 to 21 of whom 90.4% identified as a LGBTQIA+, found 58% of LGBTQIA+ students have heard school faculty and staff express “homophobic remarks,” and 72% of LGBTQIA+ students heard school faculty and staff express “negative remarks about gender expression” (p. xvi). Student perceptions and remarks they reported hearing are not the only data to support concerns about teacher bias.

Ramsay-Jordan (2020), in a case study of two White PSTs, found that both participants had limited background experiences outside their own culture and possessed privileged notions, as well as negative perceptions toward minority students. In an autoethnographic study of five White teachers in Texas, Almager (2018) found that all five teachers were biased against Mexican students’ abilities and “exhibited deficit thinking at different levels by expressing that their students could not perform well and therefore working to ensure academic success was pointless” (p. 23). These negative perceptions extend beyond students’ skin color and race. Greytak et al. (2016) found that

out of 1,015 teachers surveyed, 16.7% of teachers do not believe they “have an obligation to ensure safe and supportive learning environments for LGBTQ students” (p. 63). Similarly, Hall and Rodgers (2018), in their study based on the survey results of 305 teachers, found that 48% “had negative attitudes about homosexuality” (p. 32) and 15% were against LGBTQIA+ books for kids in the library, while negative attitudes toward the LGBTQIA+ community were more significant in teachers living in southern states. Such biases toward minority students require self-reflection among teachers; however, as Diehm and Hendricks (2021) found in a survey of 571 teachers in Ohio, only 55% of teachers surveyed believed “their schools encourage teachers to reflect on their personal beliefs and biases” (p. 105). How, then, do teachers learn to confront and overcome any potential biases? Reading multicultural literature is a powerful experience that has the potential to help readers of all ages engage in self-reflection.

Inspiring Self-Reflection of Biases through Multicultural Literature

To work toward every classroom becoming a safe and welcoming environment for all students, including minorities, teacher preparation and advanced degree programs should inspire self-reflection and awareness of any potential biases in every PST and current teacher who enters their program. Gay (2018) argued that reading multicultural literature can inspire self-reflection of and a change in biases. Hoppe’s (2022) case study corroborated Gay’s argument. Hoppe found in her study with six White PSTs that reading multicultural literature can help PSTs to “confront their own personal biases [and] strengthen their cultural competence” (p. 10). Furthermore, Senyshyn and Martinelli (2021) found in their case study of 26 PSTs, 85% of whom identified as White, that collaborative discussions on multicultural literature helped the PSTs realize their biases.

Moreover, Amos and Nelson (2020) found in their qualitative study of 15 White PSTs that after reading a multicultural book all had previously believed should be censored, most changed their minds and decided to use the book in their future classrooms. Some teachers, however, do not have experiences that foster a mindset change until they pursue a graduate degree. Chen and Browne (2021), in their critical content analysis of 29 teachers, 86% of whom were White, in a graduate-level course found that by reading and discussing multicultural literature throughout the course, the participants “develop[ed] a stance that calls on a commitment to critical perspectives around reading instruction and deep reflection” (p. 35). Furthermore, Chen and Browne found that the participants began to “advocate for inclusive and affirming classroom and school environments” (p. 33), ultimately revising their curricula to incorporate multicultural literature. Using literature that showcases narratives other than the dominant culture can help form better student–teacher relationships between White teachers and BIPOC students, as Boucher (2016) found in an ethnographic case study of one White teacher at a school where the majority of students were BIPOC.

However, as Ginsberg and Glenn (2019) noted, not all teacher preparation and graduate degree programs teach future and current educators the culturally relevant teaching skills needed to teach diverse students. As Sheron et al. (2020) found in their critical discourse analysis study of five PSTs with six mentor teachers in an urban high school, only four of the six mentor teachers modeled culturally responsive teaching practices. Though Sheron et al. ultimately argued this experience showed the PSTs culturally relevant teaching’s importance, their research also indicated the deeper issue that not all current classroom teachers implement culturally relevant teaching, even when

teaching in an urban school where nearly 64% of the student population identified as BIPOC. Siwatu (2011) also found this issue while conducting a mixed methods study that surveyed 192 PSTs, 95.3% of whom identified as White, and interviewed eight in a Midwestern teacher preparation program. In this study of culturally responsive teaching self-efficacy beliefs among PSTs, Siwatu found that “on average, preservice teachers with higher self-efficacy beliefs had the most exposure to the theory and practice of culturally responsive teaching compared to those with lower self-efficacy beliefs” (p. 364). This finding is especially concerning when taken into consideration along with Iwai’s (2019) mixed-methods study of 25 predominantly White PSTs, where 68% had no prior knowledge of multicultural literature. Thus, for teachers to have the confidence in their abilities to practice culturally responsive teaching practices and learn the importance of multicultural literature, they need explicit culturally relevant teaching instruction and practice opportunities from teacher education programs.

As Thomas (2018) argued, teacher preparation programs should address PSTs’ biases through self-reflection. Ishii-Jordan (2010) agreed, arguing that teacher preparation programs need to produce and prepare culturally relevant teachers so they can become advocates for inclusive learning, ensuring minority students have equal educational opportunities. Moreover, teacher preparation programs should ensure PSTs have mentor teachers who understand and currently implement culturally relevant teaching so they can understand the importance of multicultural literature. Unfortunately, even those who do understand the importance of teaching with multicultural literature may fear the repercussions they could face for doing so in the current political climate of censorship.

The Attack Against Multicultural Literature

Despite the benefits (Boucher, 2016; Gay, 2000; Gultekin & May, 2019; Rempala, 2006) that come with reading multicultural literature, few states have made multicultural literature a requirement per the state standards, meaning teachers who teach with multicultural literature likely do so as an intentional choice (Gay, 2018). For example, the middle school English language arts (ELA) Georgia Standards for Excellence (GSE) in place from 2015 through the end of the 2025 school year did not mention culture or diversity as a requirement for literature read in the classroom, simply requiring that students read and understand grade-level literature (Georgia Department of Education, 2015a). While the high school English language arts (ELA) Georgia Standards for Excellence (GSE) in place from 2015 through the end of the 2025 school year did mention culture, American literature, British literature, world literature, and even included a multicultural literature course (Georgia Department of Education, 2015b), the standards in place starting fall 2025 make no mention of world and multicultural literature texts, much less a dedicated course, and now only require American and British texts and an understanding of a “cultural . . . movement” (Georgia Department of Education, 2023, p. 20). These new standards could easily incorporate diversity and culture, specifying the literature should include diverse authors, characters, and topics, suggestions Gay made back in 2018 for states that want their schools providing all students a rigorous and high-quality education. Unfortunately, however, these updated ELA standards in Georgia not only do not promote culturally relevant teaching but also no longer promote multicultural literature; because states create and use tests that

determine whether teachers have taught the required standards, Gay noted that teachers could fear culturally relevant teaching would negatively impact their test scores.

Moreover, the current political climate since 2020 led at least 20 states to ban public schools from teaching critical race theory (Alexander et. al, 2023), even though very few do as this abstract theory mainly pertains to legal studies (Saul, 2023). Despite that few schools likely teach critical race theory, Saul argued these laws have essentially prohibited classroom discussions that involve race. However, if states have banned race discussions that some could consider “divisive,” then they have essentially censored “an array of classroom discussions about race,” including race discussions that stem from reading multicultural literature (Saul, 2023, p. 1313). As stated previously, numerous studies (Boucher, 2016; Chen & Browne, 2021; Hoppe, 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021) indicated the benefits of multicultural literature in the classroom; however, these laws have incited a censorship surge. Friedman and Johnson (2022) reported that 1,648 books were banned in 2021-2022, more than any previous year, noting at least 41% included characters who represent the LGBTQIA+ community; 40% depicted BIPOC characters; 21% contained discussions of race/racism; 21% featured themes of activism; and 10% represented religious minorities. This data demonstrated the attack facing multicultural literature, which Ginsberg and Glenn (2019) defined as literature that “embraces all marginalized groups,” such as those that go against the “normative conceptualizations of (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, immigration, race, social class, and sexual orientation” (p. 1). As a result, some teachers now fear they will face repercussions if their curricula include multicultural literature deemed divisive (Saul, 2023). Unfortunately, for some teachers, this fear begins before even entering the

classroom. As Leland and Bangert (2019) found in their 2-year qualitative study of 155 PSTs, some PSTs fear teaching banned literature will have repercussions before they even enter the classroom; however, most of the PSTs in the study “responded in ways that challenged censorship,” such as suggesting teachers continue to read banned books to their classes and that communities should support these teachers (p. 177). Likewise, Martin and Spencer (2020), in an action research inquiry with a racially diverse group of five female educators taking a graduate course, found that despite the participants developing “an appreciation for multicultural texts” throughout the course (p. 397), they feared they would face resistance to having their students read books with topics and themes such as LGBTQIA+ characters, immigrants, and genocide of Indigenous Americans.

Thus, these researchers argued that unless states make multicultural literature a requirement for every grade per state standards, then multicultural literature has no protection against censorship. As a result, teachers may fear they will face repercussions as other teachers have (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023) and receive no administrative or parental support if they teach with multicultural literature. Because the current political context has significantly increased book bans, some educators fear using multicultural literature in the classroom. Some teachers have gone so far as to box up their classroom libraries out of fear they could lose their jobs and teaching certificates, even face charges, if parents complain about a book in the classroom (Griffith, 2023; Yurcaba, 2022). Thus, if teachers are too fearful to use multicultural literature, book bans not only censor books but the voices of minority cultures as well. However, as Martin

and Spencer (2020) argued, teachers need to “recognize that the selection of classroom texts is a professional, even moral responsibility that is not to be taken lightly” (p. 395). Ginsburg and Glenn (2019) argued that it takes courage for teachers to design their curriculum “in an attempt to challenge institutional norms” (p. 191). This courage has led some teachers, as Leland and Bangert (2019) discussed, to realize the need to push back against censorship efforts. The question, then, becomes why?

Summary of Literature Review

Because White teachers often have negative perceptions and biases toward minority cultures, many BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students reported being disrespected by their teachers (Boyd et al., 2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Kosciw et al., 2022). As such, providing teachers with experiences that encourage self-reflection and appreciation for minority cultures may not only improve student–teacher relationships but also inspire these educators to become social justice advocates. However, if negative perceptions toward diverse cultures still exist, and if teacher preparation and advanced degree programs do not realize and meet their responsibility to produce culturally relevant teachers, then minority students may continue to face bias and negative perceptions from some of their White teachers. Teacher preparation and advanced degree programs that not only teach culturally relevant teaching strategies but also provide practice opportunities for PSTs and current teachers were shown to improve practice in schools by confidently implementing culturally relevant strategies. Reading multicultural literature, a culturally relevant strategy, can both help PSTs and current teachers self-reflect as well as teach them how their curricula can incorporate multicultural literature. However, multicultural literature faces constant threat through censorship and state laws, despite numerous

studies that demonstrate the benefits both academically and personally. Properly integrated multicultural literature has previously increased student interest in reading (McNair, 2011); improved student achievement in reading (Bennett et al., 2017; Clark & Fleming, 2019; Diamond & Moore, 1995); fostered deeper cultural affirmation (Bennett et al., 2017); led to higher GPAs, fewer instances of bullying, and greater feelings of belonging and acceptance (Kosciw et al., 2022); and created better student–teacher relationships (Boucher, 2016). Despite multicultural literature’s power and possibilities, few state standards make the genre a requirement, leaving the genre unprotected against political agendas. As most current teachers are White and the PSTs numbers indicate the same, teachers have the responsibility to learn culturally relevant teaching practices. Likewise, teacher preparation and graduate degree programs have the responsibility of ensuring future and current teachers have experiences that impact their biases and show them multicultural literature’s potential. Otherwise, these teachers will unlikely embrace the genre as an educational strategy toward achieving social justice.

The research so far presents experiences that occurred during teacher preparation and graduate degree programs as inspiration for English teachers using multicultural literature in their classrooms; however, the research also indicates not all programs instruct their students in the importance of culturally relevant teaching. Thus, researchers must conduct more studies to better understand how past experiences of White women English teachers shape their current beliefs regarding race and culture, how they come to use multicultural literature in the classroom, and why they continue teaching with multicultural literature in a climate of censorship. To prepare for conducting such

research for this study, I administered a pilot interview to deepen my own understanding of how to apply interview protocols and test my theories.

Pilot Interview

Both Seidman (2013) and Maxwell (2013) advocated for researchers to practice prior to conducting a research study. Seidman suggested researchers conduct a “practice project” to “test their interest in it and explore some of the issues” (p. 30). Likewise, Maxwell argued for conducting a pilot study “to develop an understanding of the concepts and theories held by the people you are studying” (p. 67). Thus, I conducted a pilot study to practice my interviewing skills and gain a better understanding of “meaning and perspectives” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 68).

For this pilot interview, the participant, who chose the pseudonym “Rachel,” is a former English teacher who now teaches social studies at a Title 1 middle school in the north part of a Southern state. She grew up west of where she now lives and experienced a difficult childhood. She noted in the interview that her mother died from cancer and her father went to prison, both when she was a child. However, she did not allow these circumstances to deter her from success. She went on to attend two prestigious southern universities and married her high-school sweetheart, with whom she now has two children.

The purpose of this interview was for me to practice questions and topics from a working informal conversational interview and interview guide approach (see Appendix A) to determine whether those topics and questions would garner responses that could be used to answer my research questions. The informal conversational interview style I chose to implement for this pilot was what Rubin and Rubin (2012) referred to as

responsive interviewing, which allows for “flexibility . . . to change questions in response to what he or she is learning” (p. 7). I used responsive interviewing along with Kim’s (2016) narrative interviewing approach by asking “questions that will further inspire the telling of stories” (p. 165). Rather than having a set list of questions, I allowed the questions to come naturally in response to something the participant said in conversation, which I found allowed the conversation to flow more naturally. I did, however, have an interview guide listing topics I wanted to ensure we discussed, including family, childhood, race, school, students, friendships, and literature. I also included main and probe questions to keep the interview moving as needed, such as “What books did you read as a child that still stick with you today?” and “What are some of your earliest childhood memories?”

Throughout the interview, I asked for detailed stories of experiences she could reconstruct of her educational journey. I asked her to detail her earliest childhood memories, earliest school memories, memories of her parents and friends, as well as childhood books that stick out in her memory. In the interview, I asked my questions and remained silent throughout her responses, which were often longer and more detailed than I expected. When I needed more information or clarification, I would ask a follow-up question for more, which she provided without needing additional prompting and often produced rich data. For example, when “Rachel” discussed having to switch schools as a child, I asked if she remembered anything about the makeup of the school, to which she responded, “I’m sure there was diversity, but probably not anything that, like, stuck out to me.” She continued on, however, to recount an experience from her childhood with a Black friend who wanted to be her boyfriend. She recalled knowing her

father, who had openly and often expressed racist views, would not approve of an interracial relationship, which led her to tell her friend, “I can’t because my dad won’t let me because you’re Black.” She also noted feeling guilty over this interaction later in life: “I’m pretty sure I have reached out to him as an adult and apologized to him for that.”

After transcribing the interview, I began the coding process. I started with *in vivo coding*, which captures the direct words and phrases from the participant to form the codes (Saldaña, 2016). After applying *in vivo coding* to a previous project, I felt confident that this method would be applicable to my study, but I wanted to implement this coding style with my pilot study before making the decision for this proposal. After applying *in vivo coding* to my participant interview, I noted several codes and their relevant passages, such as “didn’t talk about race” when Rachel referred to her parents. She noted throughout the interview that her mom, who died from cancer when Rachel was a child, did not express views on race but rather viewed people as people. She also noted the contrast between how her parents viewed race. Another code was “because you’re Black,” which came from the memory about her friend who she could not date because she knew “my dad won’t let me because you’re Black.” She also mentioned that “race wasn’t a topic of conversation” when she was in high school as people often tried to avoid the topic and the feelings of discomfort when discussing topics like race. I also noted the code “the n-word was so freely used” in Rachel’s school and community growing up, explaining that though she never said it because it made her feel uncomfortable, “it wasn’t uncommon” to hear it being used by both Blacks and Whites.

I then applied *emotion coding* to the interview data. I appreciate how emotion coding captures participants’ emotions and moods by combining both “[i]n [v]ivo codes

with emotional states and reactions” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 125). As I believed it was important to focus on how participants were feeling during their “experiences and actions, especially in . . . decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking” (p. 125), I used emotion coding along with in vivo in my first cycle of coding. Emotion codes can both come directly from the words of the participants themselves—the in vivo aspect—or can be “inferred by the researcher” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 125). I did not have the opportunity to practice emotion coding with any previous projects, so I wanted to be sure I familiarized myself with emotion coding during this pilot study to practice. After applying emotion coding to this pilot interview, I noted several codes and their relevant passages. One code that I found myself noting multiple times was “guilty.” For example, Rachel noted feeling guilty, even 20 years after telling her neighbor that she could not be his girlfriend because she knew her dad would not approve of him being Black. She also said she was guilty of making comments about people only voting for Obama because he was Black when she was a teenager because she had not learned anything about race or why someone would vote for Obama based on policy rather than skin color.

From conducting this pilot study and memoing throughout the process, I learned that I am more invested in analysis when what I am analyzing aligns with my passion and interests. I found it easier to code using both in vivo and emotion coding when the words, phrases, and emotions conveyed related to my topic and what I know from reading the previous research as opposed to the other interview and analysis exercises that were contrived for course assignments in my doctoral program. This process also allowed me to become aware of where I need to improve my interviewing skills, such as the follow-

up questions I ask to help focus the participant on topics I am interested in. For example, I wrote in one of my memos:

Because I will be asking questions in response to something my participants have said, I will not have a lot of time to write down the exact wording of each question; therefore, I will have to be conscious that I craft open-ended questions rather than closed to ensure I am not encouraging “yes” or “no” answers. If I do ask a closed-ended question, I need to be prepared with a follow-up question, such as “Can you elaborate on that?” or “How so?”

I also learned that letting the participant talk and lead the conversation can reveal topics that I had not realized would be important or thought to ask.

This study also helped me to formulate my plan for data analysis for this dissertation. First, I recorded and transcribed all interviews using the Zoom online video conferencing system. Next, I reviewed the transcripts to correct any discrepancies while listening to the recordings. Following Maxwell’s (2013) advice, I then read through all the data I collected, including the documents, and began the coding process. I initially coded my transcripts and documents by hand following Saldaña’s (2016) advice to “code on hard-copy printouts” (p. 29). I enjoyed coding documents by hand and implemented color coding for each coding method. Then, I tried using MAXQDA to make the process more streamlined and organized, especially with how the software offers searching within the codes, grouping the codes, moving the codes, etc., but I ultimately found that coding electronically was “overwhelming” as a “first-time” researcher (p. 29). While I did try MAXQDA and spent time familiarizing myself with the software, this pilot study helped me to ultimately decide to code by hand for my study.

Conducting this pilot study also gave me the opportunity to practice connecting the data to my research questions. For example, I made connections to my first research question when “Rachel” recounted the experience from her childhood with a Black friend who wanted to be her boyfriend and she told him, “I can’t because my dad won’t let me because you’re Black.” I also noted that when “Rachel” discussed her student teaching experience at an inner-city school where the majority of students identified as BIPOC, she said she earned their respect through conversations that allowed them to see her as more than just a White woman. This past experience was instrumental in her later mentality teaching in her own classroom. Her experiences confirmed I was on the right track with my research question regarding how past experiences shape current beliefs of race and culture, tying together the continuous cycle of my conceptual framework, which I visually replicated in a concept map.

Conceptual Framework Map

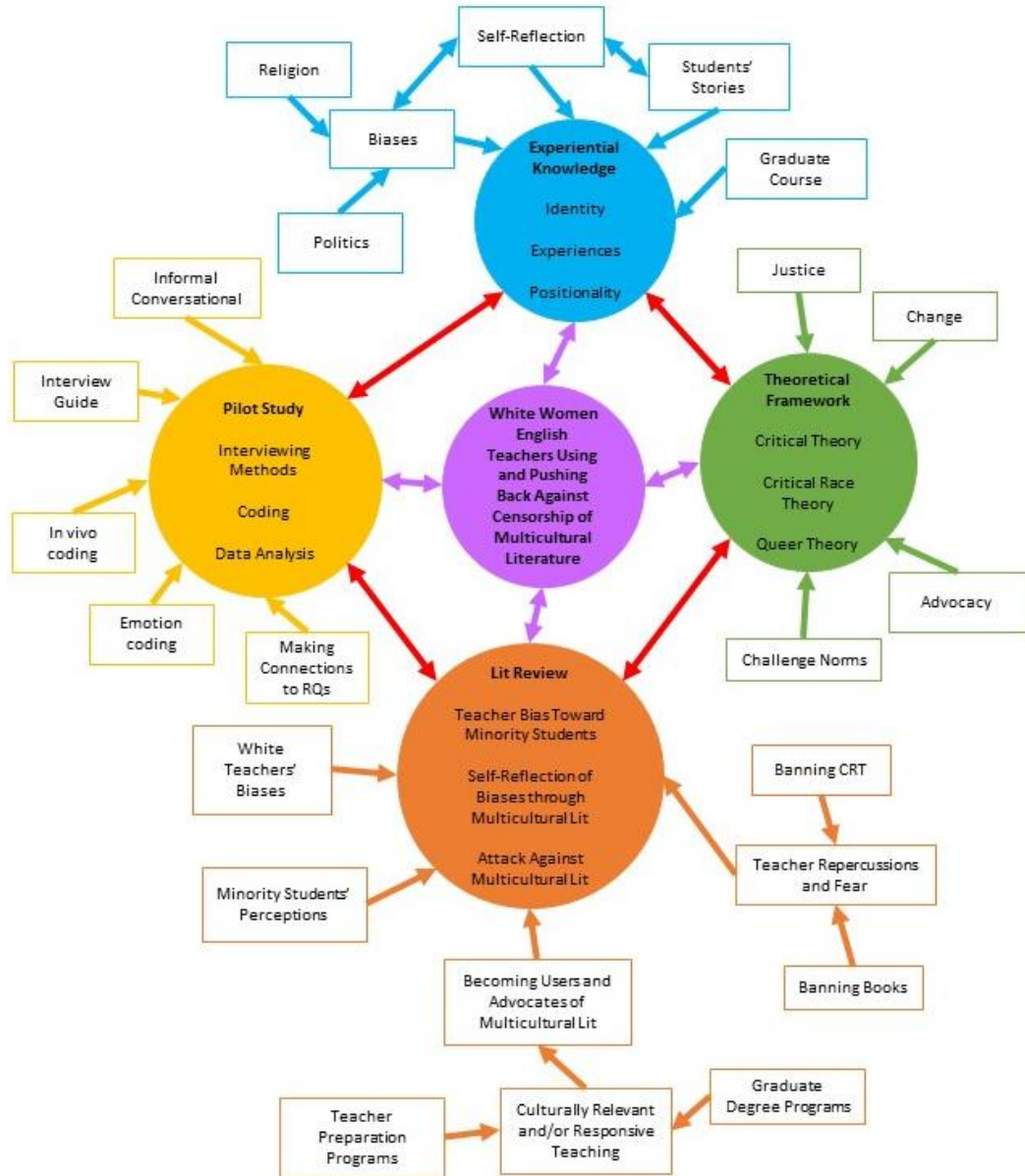
Both Maxwell (2013) and Ravitch and Riggan (2017) encouraged researchers to visually indicate the connections between the conceptual framework through a concept map. To demonstrate the connections between my personal identity and the experiences that shaped my positionality; theories that have influenced my study; previous research and reports synthesized in a literature review; and what I learned from conducting a pilot study, I created a concept map that represents the research cycle that led to my conceptual framework (see Figure 1).

This concept map displays my conceptual framework for understanding the stories White women English educators who use multicultural literature tell about their experiences, beliefs, and practices, as well as why they push back against the censorship

of multicultural literature, which is reflected in the title within the center of the map around which everything revolves. The top-most circle explains the various

Figure 1

Concept Map for Why White Women English Teachers Use and Push Back Against the Censorship of Multicultural Literature



Note. Figure one visually displays the cyclical relationship between my experiential knowledge, the theories that have informed my study, what I have learned from the

previous literature, and how my pilot study helped inform my practices. The arrows indicate the cycle of the research.

components of my identity and the experiences that have shaped my positionality, which was where this research process began as my experiences led me to have a passion for multicultural literature and to be an activist for social change.

The desire to achieve social change through multicultural literature led me to the theoretical framework I believe best ties my passion with my proposed research.

According to Patton (2015), critical theory allows researchers to “take an activist stance” by “fram[ing] and engag[ing] in qualitative inquiry with an explicit agenda of elucidating . . . social inequalities . . . to critique society, raise consciousness, and change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful” (p. 692). Furthermore, of the 1,648 books banned from 2021 to 2022, 41% included characters who represent the LGBTQIA+ community; 40% depicted BIPOC characters; 21% contained discussions of race/racism; 21% featured themes of activism; and 10% represented religious minorities (Friedman & Johnson, 2022). This statistic led me to choose CRT and queer theory under an overarching critical theory/lens as CRT considers the importance of “voice or counter-narrative” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 42), and queer theory challenges the “historically heterosexist” (O’Malley et al., 2018, p. 572).

In an attempt to familiarize myself with previous findings, I studied previous research and reports (Boucher, 2016; Chen & Browne, 2021; Hoppe, 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021) and found that teachers were more likely to teach their students multicultural literature if they engaged in self-reflection of their biases and learned the tenets of Ladson-Billings’s (1994) culturally relevant teaching, which she defined as “a

pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes” (pp. 17-18). However, researchers also found that some preservice and current teachers not only lack culturally relevant teaching knowledge (Chen & Browne, 2021; Hoppe, 2022; Iwai, 2019; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021; Sheron et al., 2020; Siwatu, 2011) but harbor biases toward BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ students as well (Almager, 2018; Boyd et al., 2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Greytak et al., 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020), creating strained student–teacher relationships and negative perceptions of minority students toward their teachers. Thus, teacher preparation and graduate programs have a responsibility to engage preservice and current teachers in self-reflection, as well as present them with culturally relevant teaching strategies, to hopefully produce teachers who will become users and advocates of multicultural literature. Because White teachers comprise the overwhelming majority of those in the profession (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022) while the student population continually diversifies (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), culturally relevant teaching is essential, especially with the political and educational climate of censorship, which has led some teachers to fear they will face consequences if they teach with multicultural literature (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Leland & Bangert, 2019; Martin & Spencer, 2020; Saul, 2023; Sonnenberg, 2023) given that states such as Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Texas, and Tennessee enforced such consequences as job loss, reprimands, and investigations upon teachers (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023). With at least 20 states banning K-12 schools from teaching critical race theory (Alexander et. al, 2023), which can prohibit

classroom discussions of race (Saul, 2023), and most states in the South enforcing book bans, with the highest numbers in Florida and Texas, these fears are not unfounded.

Finally, the pilot study I conducted not only allowed me the opportunity to practice using an interview guide and improve my interviewing skills following the informal conversational style, but it also helped me to realize the importance of silence on my part during the interview to allow the participant to lead the conversation. I also had the opportunity to practice and solidify the coding methods, including in vivo and emotion coding, I employed throughout the data analysis process. Conducting this pilot study also presented a chance to practice data analysis by connecting the data to my research questions, which my theory that past experiences shape current beliefs of race and culture. Overall, the pilot study served as yet another experience that continued to influence my identity and positionality.

The purposes of this research as reflected within the conceptual framework were to attempt to better understand how experiences lead educators to overcome their biases, confront the current political climate, and make the decision to teach with multicultural literature in the classroom. The concepts represented in this framework further influenced the decisions I made regarding the methods I used to conduct my research. Being aware of the bias I have from my identity, experiences, and positionality helped me to ensure validity; studying the theories behind choosing to pushback against the norm influenced how I selected my participants; researching the previous literature helped me to design my research and decide how I presented the data; and conducting the pilot study informed the decisions I made regarding how I gathered and analyzed the data.

Chapter III

METHODS

In this section, I explain the design of my study, particularly why I conducted a qualitative study using narrative inquiry. I also explain how and why I planned to purposefully select the participants for my study. Then, I detail how I as the research instrument collected the data, as well as how I analyzed the data and presented my findings. Finally, I detail the steps I took to counter the threats to the validity of my study and findings.

Research Design

I conducted qualitative research with purposefully selected participants to better understand the process of becoming and being teachers who use multicultural literature and push back against censorship efforts. I chose qualitative research rather than quantitative or mixed methods because qualitative research, as defined by Maxwell (2013), is “the meanings and perspectives of the people you study”; “how these perspectives are shaped by, and shape, their physical, social, and cultural contexts”; and, what sets Maxwell’s definition apart from others, “the specific processes that are involved in maintain or altering these phenomena and relationships” (p. viii). Creswell (2014) further defined qualitative research as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 246). Likewise, Patton (2015) noted that qualitative research “contributes to our understanding

of the world” (p. 2) and “understanding human *meaning making*” (p. 4). Quantitative research, on the other end of the research spectrum, “is a means for testing objective theories by examining the relationship among variables,” while the mixed methods approach combines both qualitative and quantitative (Creswell, 2014, p. 247). I chose narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Kim, 2016) as my approach within qualitative research to guide me as I amplify the voices of the English teachers who identify as White women and are continuing to teach with multicultural literature in their classrooms despite the consequences they could face within the current political climate of censorship. To share their voices as accurately as possible, I accepted Creswell’s assertion that qualitative research is well suited to discover “the meaning” of experiences (p. 246) and search for what it means to educators to push back against censorship in their classrooms. I had no interest in testing a theory or searching for relationships among variables, making qualitative research an ideally suited method for my proposed study.

The specific approach of qualitative research I applied to solicit and present data was narrative inquiry. According to Clandinin (2016), “narrative inquiry is a way of studying people’s experiences, nothing more and nothing less” (p. 38). Narrative inquiry is situated within “a three-dimensional space with temporality, sociality, and place” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 39), meaning that “studies have temporal dimensions and address temporal matters; they focus on the personal and the social in a balance appropriate to the inquiry; and they occur in specific places or sequences of places” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 50). Clandinin and Connelly argued “experiences taken collectively are temporal,” meaning that experiences are not isolated to just the past but continue to impact choices in both the present and the future (p. 19). Thus, an experience that a

teacher had in the past could continue to impact her present and future choices in the classroom, including the curriculum (Clandinin & Connelly). The sociality dimension refers to “the conditions under which people’s experiences and events are unfolding,” such as how the “cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic” conditions impact “our emotions, our aesthetic reactions, [and] our moral responses” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40). Thus, the conditions of a teacher’s life, such as how she was raised (e.g., religion, politics, etc.) and social expectations (e.g., submitting to censorship), can impact the context of an experience and how she felt it, reacted, and responded to the experience then versus now. The third dimension, place, refers “to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes,” which includes where a teacher grew up and lives currently (e.g., the South), where she attended school and college, where she worked in the past and works in the present, etc. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 51).

Inspired by the writings of John Dewey, Mark Johnson, Alasdair MacIntyre, and others, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued that “teaching and teacher knowledge . . . [are] expressions of embodied individual and social stories” (p. 4). Furthermore, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) declared, “Experience is what we study, and we study it narratively because narrative thinking is a key form of experience and a key way of writing and thinking about it. . . . Therefore, educational experience should be studied narratively” (pp. 18-19). Clandinin also noted the importance of “honoring lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (p. 17). Lived experiences, according to Seidman (2013) comprise “what we experience as it happens,” which requires participants to engage in “a reconstruction of that experience” (p. 18). The importance of stories and lived experience led Clandinin and Connelly to the realization

not only that “narrative thinking is a key form of experience” (p. 18) but also that “educational experience should be studied narratively” (p. 19). Moreover, I accepted Kim’s (2016) argument that “the main claim for the use of narrative in educational research is that narrative is a way of organizing human experiences” (p. 18). Kim also argued that “education researchers . . . need to be good storytellers” (p. 19), and with my background as an editor, writer, and English teacher with a passion for stories, I determined narrative inquiry was the ideal design for my study.

Thus, I employed the narrative inquiry method of research to solicit the life stories of White women English educators. My participants needed to be women who were, at the time of the study, using multicultural literature in the classroom, as well as advocating, on some level, for the genre and/or pushing back against the censorship efforts. As such, I made specific choices regarding the criteria I selected for my participants, as well as the setting.

Participant Selection

According to Patton (2015), “The logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting *information-rich cases* for in-depth study” (p. 264). Thus, I employed purposeful sampling throughout my study to recruit participants who were highly capable of answering my research questions; namely, I recruited English educators in public middle or high schools in the southeastern United States. From this population, eligible participants were White women who were continuing to use multicultural literature in their classrooms despite the climate of censorship; had at least 1 year of teaching experience; work in a state or district with book bans; taught a diverse student population;

and were making efforts to push back against censorship, potentially to the level of advocating for multicultural literature.

Gay (2018) indicated that a potential factor impacting book selection is the state standards, and because I taught both middle and high school, I am familiar with the standards at the secondary level; therefore, I focused on teachers with whose tasks I was already associated. My experience was beneficial with building rapport with middle and high school teachers. Furthermore, secondary English teachers tend to be content experts as they typically teach no more than two content areas (i.e., middle school teachers sometimes teach English and history or math and science, unlike elementary school teachers who typically teach English, history, math, and science). Their content expertise provides more likelihood they would know more about potential multicultural texts in their field than a teacher who provides instruction in numerous content areas daily.

I chose to purposefully limit my population to English teachers in middle and high schools in the southeastern United States for several reasons. First, the South was host to slavery, Jim Crow laws, and other institutions that promoted racism and prejudice toward BIPOC. The effects of such institutions still impact the South today. Acharya et al. (2016) found by analyzing data collected from more than 40,000 Whites living in the southern states (which Acharya et al. defined as Alabama, Arizona, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, Missouri, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia for the purposes of their study) and census records that “the larger the number of slaves per capita in his or her county of residence in 1860, the greater the probability that a [W]hite Southerner today will identify as a Republican, oppose affirmative action, and express attitudes indicating some level of

‘racial resentment’” (p. 621). In a similar vein, southern states have “typically been deemed a less hospitable climate for” the LGBTQIA+ community, which Frey et al. (2021) argued is likely due to the South’s “social conservatism and religiosity” that have earned the region the moniker of “Bible belt” (p. 3). In their qualitative study with 16 participants who identified as LGBTQIA+, Frey et al. found that, for many of their participants, “experiences with sexual identity stigma were tied to harsher forms of stigma in the South (e.g., structural stigma) in which religion and a conservative political system play significant roles” (p. 15). Furthermore, except for Alabama and Arizona, every state in the South has book bans, with the highest numbers in Florida and Texas (Friedman & Johnson, 2022); as mentioned previously, teachers have faced consequences in the southern states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas for reading multicultural literature; discussing race and racism; featuring LGBTQIA+ characters; and/or bringing attention to censorship (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023). Thus, if someone living in a southern state is more likely than someone living in other parts of the U.S. to have resentment toward BIPOC and the LGBTQIA+ community, I would argue that a teacher living in the South who chooses to use multicultural literature, which can provide cultural affirmation for BIPOC (Clark & Fleming, 2019) and greater feelings of belonging and acceptance (Kosciw et al, 2022) for the LGBTQIA+ community, would have a story worth listening to and learning from.

Of the English teachers who indicated their interest, I employed homogenous sampling, “the purpose of which is to describe some particular subgroup in depth” (Patton, 2015, p. 283), by selecting White women as eligible participants. Within the

setting of the southern states, where “evangelicals reaffirmed patriarchal authority” (Moon, 2015, p. 599), White women have historically been seen as inferior to White men. In the 1800s, according to Moon, “honor culture and conceptions of liberty both demanded [W]hite southern men prove their mastery over inferiors,” namely White women and enslaved peoples (p. 597). Furthermore, Case (2017) argued that even when southern women began to work toward equality and rights for themselves in the early 1900s, “most were committed to [W]hite supremacy” (p. 36). Nearly a century later in the 1990s, southern White women could still be seen as submissive to their husbands, with the wife of the president of the Southern Baptist Convention stating that she would submit to her husband, even ““when I know he’s wrong”” (SBC approves family statement, 1998, p. 602). As recently as 2010s, Anderson et al. (2016) found in their analysis of data from 14 southern states that “inequalities persist” and “disparities exist” in the South due to “the lasting consequences of the nation’s historical subjugation of women” (p. xxi). Furthermore, as Seidman (2013) argued, several factors can influence an interview, particularly the race and gender of the interviewer versus the interviewee; thus, as I identify as a White woman, the purposefully selected participants for the subgroup within my proposed study were English educators who identify as White women to lower potential influence over the interview based on race and gender. Furthermore, not only do 80% of U.S. educators identify as White, but also 77% of U.S. educators identify as women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). As I wanted to learn how White teachers overcame any potential bias(es) they may have had to become teachers who use multicultural literature, I believe interviewing educators who identify as White women allowed me to gather meaningful data that produced some

degree of identifiability for educators in the U.S., particularly in the South, where both race and gender carry strong historical stereotypes. Moreover, I would argue that a White woman who teaches in the South and chooses to use multicultural literature, which could be seen as failing to be in submission to the climate of censorship, would have a story worth listening to and learning from.

Furthermore, I needed to ensure that teachers I selected not only include multicultural literature in their curriculum but also had a diverse mixture of students in their classes to reflect the continually increasing percentages of BIPOC students in U.S. schools (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). I also looked for teachers who reported having taught for at least 1 year, who reported teaching in a state or district where the book bans have been in play for at least 2 years (i.e., the South), and who reported advocating for multicultural literature and/or pushing back against censorship. Because advocacy has different levels and forms, it is important to explain what level and forms of advocacy I looked for in my participants. My hope was to find teachers who intentionally found ways to teach books that fit Ginsberg and Glenn's (2019) definition of multicultural literature; teachers who knew they could face push back from parents and administrators for teaching certain books; teachers who knew the consequences for teaching multicultural literature in certain states, particularly in the South, but continued to do so anyway; and teachers who advocated for multicultural literature's inclusion in the classroom while flying under the radar, not necessarily participating in protests against book banning or speaking at school board meetings.

Thus, to identify my accessible population after receiving IRB approval (see Appendix B), I solicited volunteers by distributing an announcement through an online

teacher group, colleagues, peers, and fellow graduate students. I sent volunteers a brief demographic survey (see Appendix C) asking questions to learn their race, gender, years of teaching experience, grades taught, where they teach, examples of multicultural texts they teach, demographics of students they teach, their advocacy scale, etc. By having this basic information, I was able to identify six teachers with whom I scheduled interviews. I compiled the demographics of my participants in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Years Teaching	Student Demographics	Advocacy Scale (1- 10)
Dorothy	46-50	Female	White	26	Black, White, Latinx, Asian, Two or more races	10
Celeste	46-50	Female	White	20	Black, white, Latinx, Asian, Two or more races, Other	8
Anne	36-40	Female	White	1	Black, White, Latinx, Two or more races	8
Toni	46-50	Female	White	19	Black, White, Latinx, Asian	6
Evelyn	46-50	Female	White	6	Black, White, Latinx, Asian, Native American, Two or more races, Other	7
Alice	51-55	Female	White	23	Black, White, Latinx, Asian, Two or more races, Other	6

I chose to have a small sample size as Patton argued “in-depth information from a small number of people can be very valuable” when gathering rich data from a purposeful sample (p. 311). To gather this rich data, I needed a specific data collection plan that ensured sufficient data for analysis toward answering my research questions.

Data Collection

The main method I used to gather qualitative data was interviews with my purposefully selected participants. I used an interview guide (see Appendix A) to help remind me of topics to cover in each of the Seidman-style interviews. I also collected documents or artifacts, such as reflections and lesson plans, from participants to help contextualize their practices. Additionally, I started keeping a researcher journal of my reflections and memos in my advanced qualitative research class and continued that practice throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Interviews

Interviews were crucial to gather rich data for analysis to answer all three research questions. Talking to my participants and listening to their stories about their past, their process of becoming teachers who use multicultural literature, and how they make sense of and/or respond to censorship was the main source of rich data to analyze to answer my research questions. Collecting data through quantitative methods such as surveys would not have provided the rich data necessary to understand past experiences and the decisions teachers make, which led me to choose participant interviews as the ideal method of data collection for my research. I employed Seidman’s (2013) “in-depth, phenomenological” protocol of a three-part interview series with each individual participant (p. 20). In each interview, I focused on gathering rich data, starting with

gaining an understanding of the context of each participant's "life history" in the first interview, asking participants to "reconstruct" the "details of their experience" in the second interview, and asking participants to "reflect on the meaning of their experience" in the third research interview (Seidman, 2013, pp. 21-22).

As Maxwell (2013) stated, "in qualitative research . . . the researcher *is* the instrument" (p. 45), especially when conducting participant interviews. Throughout the interview process, I used a combination of two interview styles when it came to my interview questions: informal conversational interview and the interview guide approach. Patton (2015) explained that combining approaches is best when gathering data for sensitizing concept illumination, which he noted comprises culture, making a combination of approaches ideal for my study of beliefs regarding race and culture, as well as multicultural literature. The informal conversational interview approach does not require a specific set of questions to ask every participant without deviation from the list but rather allows for questions to be specific to each participant and their stories. To accomplish this informal conversational interview approach, I followed the interview style Rubin and Rubin (2012) referred to as responsive interviewing, which allows for "flexibility . . . to change questions in response to what he or she is learning" (p. 7). Responsive interviewing focuses on "picking people to talk to who are knowledgeable, listening to what they have to say, and asking new questions based on the answers they provide" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 5). There are three question types in responsive interviewing: main, probe, and follow-up (Rubin & Rubin). Main questions are those that focus on answering "each of the separate parts of a research question"; probes "encourage interviewees to keep talking, providing examples and details"; and follow-up

questions ask for more information or clarity “on key concepts, themes, ideas, or events that they have mentioned” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 6). Furthermore, Kim (2016) noted that when conducting interviews for narrative inquiry, the researcher should ask “questions that will further inspire the telling of stories” (p. 165). Kim argued that “survey and questionnaire type” (p. 165) questions have no place in narrative interviewing, which should allow the interviewee to answer questions that are “flexible enough to expand the scope of the interview” with minimal interruption and the occasional redirection (p. 163). Thus, my main questions in the first and second interviews intentionally focused on “specific events and actions” (Seidman, 2013, p. 103) to evoke episodic memories by asking questions to gain details of past events. Figure 2 is an example of a flexible main question I asked in an interview.

Figure 2

Excerpt from Evelyn’s First Interview

Brooke: So, as I was saying earlier, the first interview, I really want to get a thorough understanding of your life history, starting as far back as you can remember. So, what is one of your earliest memories as a child?

Evelyn: I don’t know, I guess I can remember back to when I was two and three, which my mother swears that I can’t, but I can clearly remember things from it. Like, I remember pushing rocks out of the bed of a truck to make a driveway. I remember sitting on, taking turns with another cousin to sit on top of the ice cream machine so that we could, you know, make ice cream. I remember hiding under my bed. I remember hiding in the closet when I was little, so I remember. I mean, I remember, I don’t know. I remember a lot, actually, which is kind of weird, so.

Note. An example of how I began the first interview with a flexible main question.

My probe questions stemmed from listening to each participant in both the first and second interviews. Figure 3 is an example of a probe question I asked in an interview.

Lastly, I focused my third interview on asking follow-up questions toward making meaning from their experiences. This type of question also reflects Kim’s “two-sentence

Figure 3

Excerpt from Dorothy's Second Interview

Brooke: You mentioned “we” have talked at the board. Who is the “we” that you’re referring to?

Dorothy: So, there are several other women in the community that, so, we have a stand-up Facebook page. It was kind of defending the district against whatever, right, with with school board elections and stuff like that that started. And so, it was kind of a, 2,000 members there. And so, and on the parents of [the school district] page, some posting there. So, when the board, and the board just acknowledged in March that they needed some process to for parents to object to the removal of materials just like they objected to the materials, right? So, they set something up. And then, I am, it was right before Easter, so I I posted, you know, like, is anyone willing to, I’ll I’ll try to make it as easy as possible, is anyone interested in challenging any of these books? And I think five or six people stepped up. They wrote them. We submitted them the challenges. We had hearings, but only four of us took it to level 3.

Brooke: What’s level 3?

Dorothy: So, level 3 is in front of the school board at a school board meeting. It’s a public hearing. And instead of doing this one at a time, the books one at a time, they want this all-in at only one hearing. And so, they said it all came up at once, we’re treating it as one grievance. But it, at least, we wanted it recorded, and we wanted it in public, and I actually wanted the board to have to read them. Well, the board didn’t because it was all clumped at once. They didn’t even read through the materials we gave them. That was the goal, is to give the books a hearing in public.

Note. An example of a probe question in a second interview.

format” that “consists of a statement and a question” to indicate I listened with keen attention and would like more detail on an experience previously mentioned (p. 170).

Figure 4 is an example of a flexible main question I asked in an interview.

In addition to the informal conversational interview approach, I also used an interview guide (see Appendix A). I knew I would not always ask the same questions in each interview nor know exact follow-up questions in advance; however, from conducting the pilot study, I foresaw asking main, probe, and follow-up questions. I created an interview guide to indicate the nature of the main and probe questions I would ask without being a finalized list, along with topics to discuss, such as childhood,

Figure 4

Excerpt from Toni's Final Interview

Brooke: You talked about how you would have, like, those Sunday or Saturday lunches where you would be reading, your mom would read, your dad would read. What do you think that meant to you and as far as, like, instilling that importance of reading so young for you?

Toni: I thought it's just, in a way, like as a child, I thought, it's what people did. You know, it was just books were always, always around, and they were always interesting to me, you know. It was a place to get information. Like, it literally blows my mind that people don't have books in their house. I'm like, I can't process that. Something that I don't know if this fits in or not, but it was something that I read a couple weeks ago how Gen. X., we had to go get information. Like, I look at my kids today, and I'm like, I spent weekends in the library with a roll of dimes and highlighters, and that's what I did. So, the fact that you had to go out and get the information, I think that made information more important to us than it being passively, it's just right in front of you whenever you want. And I, so, I like playing trivia, and I was like, God, you know, like my grandparents always had an almanac. . . . And I've started to realize, like, that was a way of starting to acquire information. And it was through a book. And so, I mean, I read that stupid thing over and over and over again when I was at my grandparents' house, because it was a way of absorbing information. So, I guess, you know, I would kind of say, like, from early on, books were a source of information, like, knowledge was important in our family, so.

Note. An example of how I used a two-sentence format for a follow-up question.

school, family, friendships, community, and student teaching in the first interview and classroom culture, diversity, advocacy, and culture in the second interview. I also included examples of follow-up question starters. My interview guide included questions such as:

- What were you like as a child?
- What was your family like?
- What values did your family instill in you as a child?
- You described an experience when . . . How did that make you feel?
- You briefly touched on . . . Would you tell me more about that?

Using an interview guide helped keep my focus on the goal of the interview at hand with question starters and topics that facilitated the flow of conversation.

Both the informal conversational interview and interview guide approach work well in conjunction with Seidman's (2013) three-part interview series as he noted researchers should ask "effective question[s] [that] [flow] from an interviewer's concentrated listening, engaged interest in what is being said, and purpose in moving forward" (p. 95). Seidman's interview protocol also pairs well with narrative inquiry as he argued for the importance of "stories and the details of people's lives as a way of knowing and understanding" (p. 1). Seidman further argued that interviewing participants to learn their stories indicates that the researcher understands that "stories are important" and "of worth," which aligns directly with my personal beliefs that stories are powerful (p. 9). While interviews served as my primary means of gathering data, I also collected documents and artifacts.

Documents and Artifacts

I gathered documents and artifacts, such as lesson plans and previously written work, for analysis. Lesson plans allowed me to see the process of how teachers plan to teach a multicultural text, the standards they teach using a multicultural text, how they ask students to think critically about a multicultural text, as well as how they ask students to respond to and think critically about a multicultural text. Figure 5 displays a prompt from a lesson on Trevor Noah's (2016) memoir, *Born a Crime: Stories from a South African Childhood*, that addresses standards on citing text evidence, writing original commentary, making connections to personal experiences, and analyzing a text.

Previously written work also allowed me to see how participants shared their beliefs on culture in other contexts outside of the interview series. Figure 6 is an example of previously written work as part of a teacher of the year nomination.

Figure 5

A Prompt from Dorothy's Lesson Plan on Born a Crime

Write the following quote from *Born a Crime* on a sheet of paper:

“Language brings with it an identity and a culture, or at least the perception of it. A shared language says, ‘We’re the same.’ A language barrier says, ‘We’re different’” (49).

In four to six thoughtful sentences respond: Do you agree or disagree with Noah’s statement? How did you come to that conclusion?

Find two (2) additional quotes from *Born a Crime*.

1) Record the quote on your paper, including the CORRECT parenthetical citation.

2) Then, in four to six thoughtful sentences, respond to each quote. You can use your personal experiences to connect to what Noah says, expand on what he says, and/or explain why you think what he said is interesting or thought-provoking.

Note. An example of a prompt from a lesson plan using standards to teach a multicultural text.

Such documents and artifacts, in addition to conducting interviews, allowed me to collect rich data toward answering my research questions.

Figure 6

Previously Written Work by Evelyn for a Teacher of the Year Nomination

From day one, I let my students know that I was far from being a perfect student, and I do not expect them to be. I openly celebrate that students come from different cultures, with different languages, different beliefs, different pronouns, and different gods, and in my room, respect for differences is right, and anything but is wrong. Most importantly, creating a safe and welcoming environment comes not just from loving the easy kids but from feeling no shame in loving the tough ones, in spite of the criticism it may yield. Each of them is watching how you treat the other. If they do not learn to write a better essay, I hope they learn to be better people. After all, the world needs more empathy and kindness than it does essayists.

Note. An example of previously written work on importance of valuing students’ cultures, identity, religion, etc.

Data for Answering Research Questions

To gather data for analysis toward answering my first research question, “How do past experiences of six English teachers who identify as White women shape their current beliefs and practices regarding race and culture?” and sub questions, “What experiences (social, cultural, educational, and familial) did six English teachers who identify as White women have before and while teaching with multicultural literature?” and “What stories do six English teachers who identify as White women tell often and in what circumstances?” the most appropriate sources were interviews with English teachers who teach with multicultural literature and any documents, such as written reflections, on their past experiences. I gathered data on my participants’ past experiences through interviews by asking questions on topics including their childhood, their families, books they have read, their education, their friends, their teaching experiences, etc. This data helped me to answer what specific experiences shaped their current beliefs regarding race and culture.

To gather data for analysis toward answering my second research question, “How did six English teachers who identify as White women begin to use multicultural literature in the classroom?” the most appropriate sources were interviews with English teachers who teach with multicultural literature and documents, such as written reflections, on the need for reading multicultural literature. I gathered data on the process that led my participants to teach with multicultural literature through interviews by asking them to define what multicultural literature means to them, about their first experience with reading a multicultural text, how they select multicultural literature to include in their classroom (both in their classroom libraries and in their curriculum), their journey to teaching with multicultural literature in the classroom, etc. This data allowed me to

answer what specific experiences were key in the process that led them to begin using multicultural literature in the classroom and become advocates of multicultural literature.

To gather data for analysis toward answering my third research question, “Why did six English teachers who identify as White women decide to continue using multicultural literature in the classroom within a climate of censorship?” the most appropriate sources were interviews with English teachers who teach with multicultural literature and documents such as written reflections and lesson plans. I gathered data on why teachers make sense of and/or respond to censorship by continuing to teach with multicultural literature through interviews by asking them about their thoughts on censorship, why they believe multicultural literature is important, why are they continuing to use multicultural literature, etc. To ensure that I kept my personal thoughts on and biases toward multicultural literature to a minimum in the interview data, I memoed any thoughts and connections I made in a researcher journal throughout the research process, from initial conceptualization to final defense.

Memos

Maxwell (2013) argued that “Memos are one of the most important techniques you have for developing your ideas” (p. 20). Memos will be of significant value to track my growth as a researcher and change in thinking, as well as any changes in my participants. I memoed to reflect upon my thinking and understanding of the data. I wrote memos immediately following interviews, while I was transcribing the interviews, and as I was reviewing the interview transcripts in preparation for the next interview. I followed Maxwell’s advice that memos should be written with “serious reflection, analysis, and self-critique” to ensure I captured my process of learning while gathering data (p. 20).

Following Seidman's (2013) advice, I also "regularly [wrote] memos while [I was] doing data analysis" (p. 105). Though I memoed in a researcher journal that I had with me through the research process to always be prepared to memo, I organized these memos digitally and transferred any handwritten memos into a digital format. By organizing these memos in chronological order along with other memos I had already written and digitized up, I was able to trace the evolution of my thinking from the beginning of this research process to the end. After conducting an interview exercise in my coursework using the informal conversational interview and interview guide style, I memoed (see Figure 7) on how that experience contrasted with a previous interview I had conducted in an earlier course using a set list of questions.

Figure 7

Previously Written Memo on Interview Styles

I had made a list of interview questions and did not vary from the questions, even when something my participant said prompted other questions. That style felt both limiting and presumptive to me. I had assumed what would be said and had already determined exact questions to ask without letting my questions come naturally from the conversation. While I know there are questions that I can have written down, especially to start off the interview or to ask when the conversation reaches a lull, having topics to discuss and asking questions that come in response to what my participants say will be more meaningful and valuable to my research.

Note. An excerpt from a previously written memo in earlier coursework.

Through this memo, I was able to reflect on the two styles and decide the informal conversational interview and interview guide style would be more applicable and valuable for my study. Memos also helped me to bracket my bias by allowing me to note my own perspective, especially when I wanted to respond to something my participants said in an interview but know I should remain silent to focus on their perspective and not

my own. Figure 8 is an excerpt from memo I wrote after conducting Dorothy's second interview.

Figure 8

Memo After Dorothy's Second Interview

Remember, these are HER opinions. Even though I share many of the same, I cannot allow that to sway me. I cannot give as FACT what she gave as opinion. Are people banning books because they fear White people becoming the minority? Maybe, but that is just her opinion, even if it sounds like a good reason. And even if that is something the other participants think, that still does not make it a fact. I am not surveying the Moms for Liberty to find out why they do what they do.

Note. An excerpt from a memo written immediately following an interview.

Keeping my bias in check was not only important for me to keep in mind but also valuable for the sake of my study. I had to continuously remind myself through the interview process to keep my bias at bay. I also memoed between interviews to note any connections I made between participants. Figure 9 is an excerpt of a memo I wrote after interviewing Alice.

Figure 9

Memo on Making a Connection between Dorothy and Alice

Like Dorothy, Alice was also sexually assaulted in her youth. Both noted the significance of reading a book that helped them to process their emotions. For Dorothy, this was *Where the Heart Is*, which helped her to overcome her guilt as an adult. For Alice, this was *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, an example of multicultural literature that she connected to though the "common experience." Both women did not heal from their trauma until years after the assault. Would reading such literature in high school have helped them process and heal sooner?

Note. I revised this memo later to reflect the participants' chosen pseudonyms.

As seen in this memo on Dorothy and Alice, I made a connection between the two participants so I could follow-up on their thoughts during their final interviews. Thus, memos were of particular use during the data collection process.

Data Collection Timeline

Upon receiving permission from the Internal Review Board (IRB) (see Appendix B), I began my data collection by seeking willing volunteers for my study. For my purposeful sampling procedures, I recruited potential participants by distributing a flier (see Appendix D) that explained my study and the expectations for participation (i.e., teaching with multicultural literature in a middle or high school, classes with a mixture of diverse students, experiencing frustration with censorship of multicultural literature, etc.). I recruited participants by distributing the flier digitally through colleagues, peers, fellow graduate students, and the Georgia Council of Teachers of English (GCTE). I did not recruit from my current place of employment to avoid conflicts of interest, nor did I engage in recruitment practices that violate Valdosta State's code of ethics or the professional code of ethics for educators. I circulated this flier for 1 month through colleagues, peers, online teacher networks, and other means as approved by the IRB. This flier asked interested parties to contact me via my Valdosta student email to indicate their interest in participating in my study.

When a potential participant sent me an email indicating their interest, I responded with an email thanking them for their interest, describing the necessary qualifications, a brief description of the study, and asking them to follow the link to the Qualtrics survey (see Appendix C). Next, I spent less than 1 month from the initial release of my flier reviewing survey responses from willing volunteers to select from potential participants who meet the criteria (i.e., identify as White women, teach with multicultural literature in middle or high school, etc.). After selecting potential volunteers, I contacted them via email, thanking them for their willingness to participate

in the study. To ensure their participation was truly voluntary, I informed potential participants that their participation would be kept confidential and that their names would not be shared with my professors, colleagues, their administration, or any other person. This information was addressed in the email I sent in response to their initial interest. Though I knew the real names of the participants, I had each participant select a pseudonym that I used in writing to ensure I would never identify them by their real names. I also used pseudonyms for participants' schools, districts, cities, counties, and states. Furthermore, I did not associate the data with their names, using pseudonyms for participants in the filenames to ensure anonymity to all but myself. Lastly, I stored the files on a password-protected computer in a password-protected folder.

Then, I allotted 1 week to begin scheduling the first interview of Seidman's (2013) three-interview series with each participant. I conducted all the initial interviews over the next 3 weeks. Prior to each initial interview, I started the recording, read the IRB research statement for recorded interviews, and asked the participant for verbal confirmation of their agreement to participate in the study and be recorded. I obtained this verbal consent in lieu of written consent to further ensure the protection of my participants and their anonymity. I cautioned them to avoid saying real names aloud during the recorded interviews, but I replaced any mention of their names with their participant numbers in brackets in the transcripts. I spent no more than 3 weeks between the first interview and the second to review the transcripts, correct any discrepancies while listening to the recordings, and note any follow-up questions I had. I conducted the second round of interviews over 3 weeks, asking participants to share relevant lesson plans. I spent no more than 2 months after each second-round interview correcting any

discrepancies while listening to the recordings; noting any follow-up questions I had from the interviews and lesson plans; and creating a detailed timeline for each participant to review and make meaning of in the final interview. Finally, I scheduled the last round of interviews with each participant after completing their respective timelines and spent 3 weeks reviewing the transcripts, correcting any discrepancies while listening to the recordings, and reviewing the lesson plans.

Overall, the timeline for data collection took approximately 5 months. Interviews were scheduled at times that were most convenient for the participants, making the Zoom online video conferencing system the most logically viable option for collecting interview data that simultaneously ensured participants' identities were kept confidential without the potential for administration to be alerted if interviews were to take place in person at schools or in proximity to participants' schools. Zoom (2019) ensures the privacy of all communications and, per the privacy and security policy, "complies with all applicable privacy laws, rules, and regulations in the jurisdictions in which it operates," including the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the California Consumer Privacy Act (CCPA), and the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA). Zoom is also compliant as a Service Organization Control Type 2 (SOC 2) by ensuring "Cloud Recordings are processed and stored in Zoom's cloud after the meeting has ended" and that "recordings can be password-protected." Zoom also ensures that each "session's video, audio, and screen sharing . . . is protected with the Advanced Encryption Standard (AES) 256 using a one-time key for that specific session." Furthermore, "Zoom does not monitor your meetings or its contents." Zoom also creates transcriptions of all meetings, which I reviewed for correctness to ensure all transcripts remained true to

participants' grammar and word choice, as well as their gestures and pauses. Following Seidman's (2013) suggestion, I "[made] note of all the nonverbal signs, such as coughs, laughs, sighs, pauses, outside noises, telephone rings, and interruptions" using braces and inserted notes for clarity in brackets (p. 118). If I made any changes to transcriptions, such as notes for clarity, that were reflected in the life stories, I made note of the changes during member checks. To further ensure protection of my participants' identities, I deleted recordings and the Zoom account once I completed transcription to protect the identity of the participant and reduce potential identification through voice recognition.

I also asked participants to send digital copies of their previously written work and lesson plans. Throughout the data collection process, I began analyzing the data after each interview to determine follow-up questions, but I began the categorizing and connecting elements of data analysis once I completed the three-interview series with each participant and gathered documents.

Data Analysis

For data analysis, I recorded and transcribed all interviews using the Zoom online video conferencing system. Next, I imported the transcriptions into Word and reviewed the transcripts to correct any discrepancies while listening to the recordings and notate tonal variances, body language, and emotion as was appropriate. Following Maxwell's (2013) advice, I read through all the data I collected, including the artifacts I collected, and began the categorizing process by applying in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding. After using categorizing strategies to decontextualize and analyze the data, I began connecting the data and maintaining context to create narratives of each participant, which are presented in Chapter 4 of the dissertation. I used coding,

categorizing, and theming to present similarities and differences across the participants and articulate my findings in Chapter 5 of the dissertation.

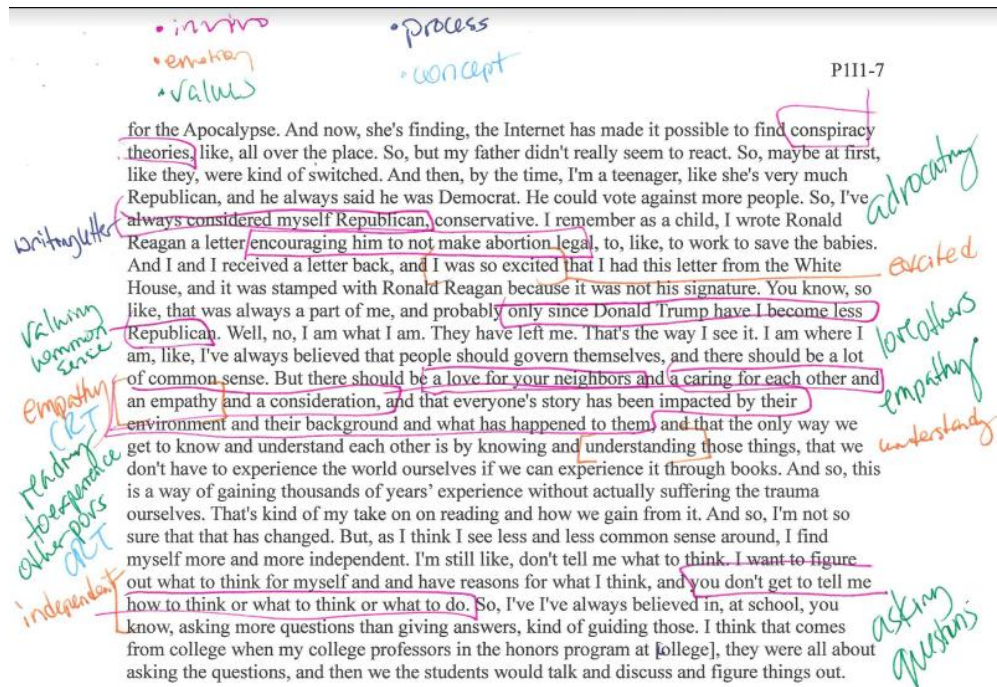
Categorizing Strategies

Per Maxwell and Miller (2008), coding is “the most widely used category strategy in qualitative data analysis” (p. 465). I began the coding process by applying first cycle coding methods directly to the data I gathered to generate “a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attitude” of a word, sentence, paragraph, or page of data (Saldaña, 2016, p. 4). I coded my documents by hand following Saldaña’s (2016) advice for “first-time” researchers to “code on hard-copy printouts” (p. 29). I found this method, as Saldaña noted, gave me “more control and ownership of the work” than using MAXQDA (p. 29). I used a different color pen for each code and went through each transcript multiple times during each cycle of coding, as seen in Figure 10.

From my study of coding methods as set forth by Saldaña, in vivo coding was the first approach I took to the data as it “help[ed] preserve participants’ meaning of their views” in their own words (Saldaña, 2016, p. 109). Preserving participants’ voices was crucial as narrative inquiry is “designed to tell of participants’ storied experiences and to represent their voices” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 147). In addition to preserving my participants’ words and voices, I also focused on how they were feeling during their “experiences and actions, especially in . . . decision-making, judgment, and risk-taking” (p. 125), by using emotion coding. Emotion codes can also be in the participants’ words originally and when grouped into a category with multiple codes, even the category title can come from, but does not have to be, in vivo in nature (Saldaña). Emotion

Figure 10

Coding Transcripts by Hand



Note. Coded transcript from Dorothy’s first interview with color key for each code.

coding was appropriate for my study as the sociality dimension of narrative inquiry captures how the “cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic” conditions impact “our emotions” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40). Furthermore, values coding ensured I focused on the things of importance in the lives of the participants as the purpose of coding in this way is to “reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspective or worldview” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 131), which I found foundational to the topic at hand. Saldaña noted that “the importance we attribute” to something or someone refers to value (p. 131); how “we think and feel about” something or someone refers to attitude (p. 131); and the “system that includes our values and attitudes, plus our personal knowledge, experiences, opinions, prejudices, morals,” etc., refers to beliefs (p. 132). Values coding was also appropriate for narrative inquiry as the sociality dimension

includes “feelings, hopes, desires, aesthetic reactions and moral dispositions” (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 480). Thus, for my first cycle of coding, which Saldaña argued as the most “direct” forms of coding (p. 69), I applied both in vivo and emotion coding in a combination known as eclectic coding as a “purposeful and compatible combination or two or more first-cycle coding methods” (p. 293), in addition to values coding, as seen in Table 2, prior to beginning the second cycle of coding.

Table 2

“Representation Matters” Code across Participants

Name	Phrases Coded as Representation Matters
Dorothy	<p>“I really started expanding the idea of multicultural to really the cultures in our class”</p> <p>“I try to really get contemporary short stories from around the world”</p> <p>“We were all encouraged to choose classroom libraries that fit our populations”</p> <p>“How do we bring in something and have these discussions yet still allow them to see themselves?”</p>
Celeste	<p>“Not all books are like this”</p> <p>“It’s also important to think about who has not been included”</p> <p>“I will try to make sure I have different representation in the texts that I give them”</p> <p>“I think we should use more modern texts that reflect current cultural understandings”</p> <p>“Teaching multicultural lit is important for students who don’t fit the majority demographic to see themselves represented”</p>
Anne	<p>“I was a parent first and seeing the lack of books of Asian characters”</p> <p>“For me, it’s really important to bring in not just a story about Asian people but Asian American stories”</p> <p>“That means less than 25%, less than a quarter, about anybody that’s not White or an animal”</p> <p>“I think it’s important for people to see themselves and hear themselves in the books that they read”</p>
Toni	<p>“I want them to see themselves in literature”</p> <p>“They haven’t seen themselves in literature a whole lot”</p> <p>“You’re able to see yourself in a story, that is hopefully going to resonate with you”</p>
Evelyn	<p>“I do it from s place of wanting to be inclusive and representative”</p> <p>“looking at your culture through your own cultural lens”</p> <p>“I want them to represent themselves”</p>

“I’m going to represent all of my kids in the classroom”

- Alice “Let’s read something about people that you can identify with because representation matters”
“Kids can see their own culture in their books”
“How can we incorporate more things that are representative of the people who are in our class?”
“Everyone wants to see themselves represented in what they read”

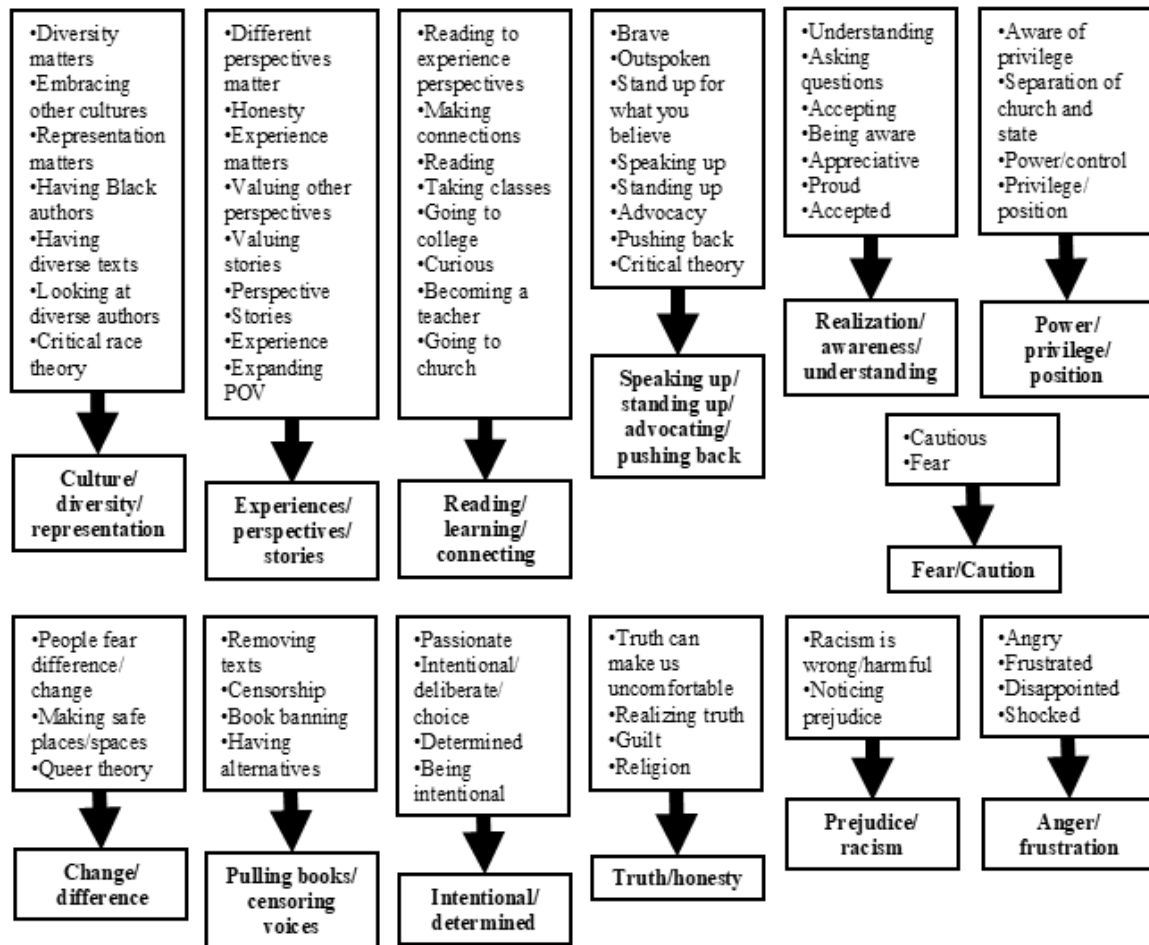
During my second cycle of coding, I spent time “reorganizing and reanalyzing” the data “to develop a sense of categorical, thematic, conceptual, and/or theoretical organization” of the codes I created during the first cycle of coding (Saldaña, 2016, p. 234). Thus, as I was looking at a process that was “intertwined with the dynamics of time, such as things that emerge [and] change” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 111), I applied the process coding method during my second cycle of coding. Process coding connects to what Clandinin and Connelly (2000) referred to as the temporal dimension of narrative inquiry, which strives to understand how participants’ past experiences impacted their past decisions, as well as continue to impact the decisions they make in the present and will make in the future. Because second-cycle coding methods “require such analytic skills as . . . theory building” (Saldaña, 2016, p. 69), I also used concept coding in combination with process coding during my second cycle of coding to look for the “big ideas” of critical theory, CRT, and queer theory (p. 123). Each of these concepts were crucial to my study and connected to narrative inquiry. Kim (2016), in her discussion of critical theory, noted that researchers need to “remove the distance between theorizing and reality. . . . Hence, we need to get to the narratives and stories of people” to convey their realities (p. 41). Kim also connected CRT to narrative inquiry by stating that “real-life situations . . . that [are] rich, engaging, and suggestive [work] to reach truth and justice” (p. 47). Lastly, Kim pointed out that narratives are “a way to rethink notions of

power, agency, and subjectivity,” which connects to queer theory’s goal of challenging the norm (p. 212).

After conducting the coding process, I “[linked] the codes to create a unit or a category” (Kim, 2016, p. 189), as seen in Figure 11.

Figure 11

Linking Codes into Categories

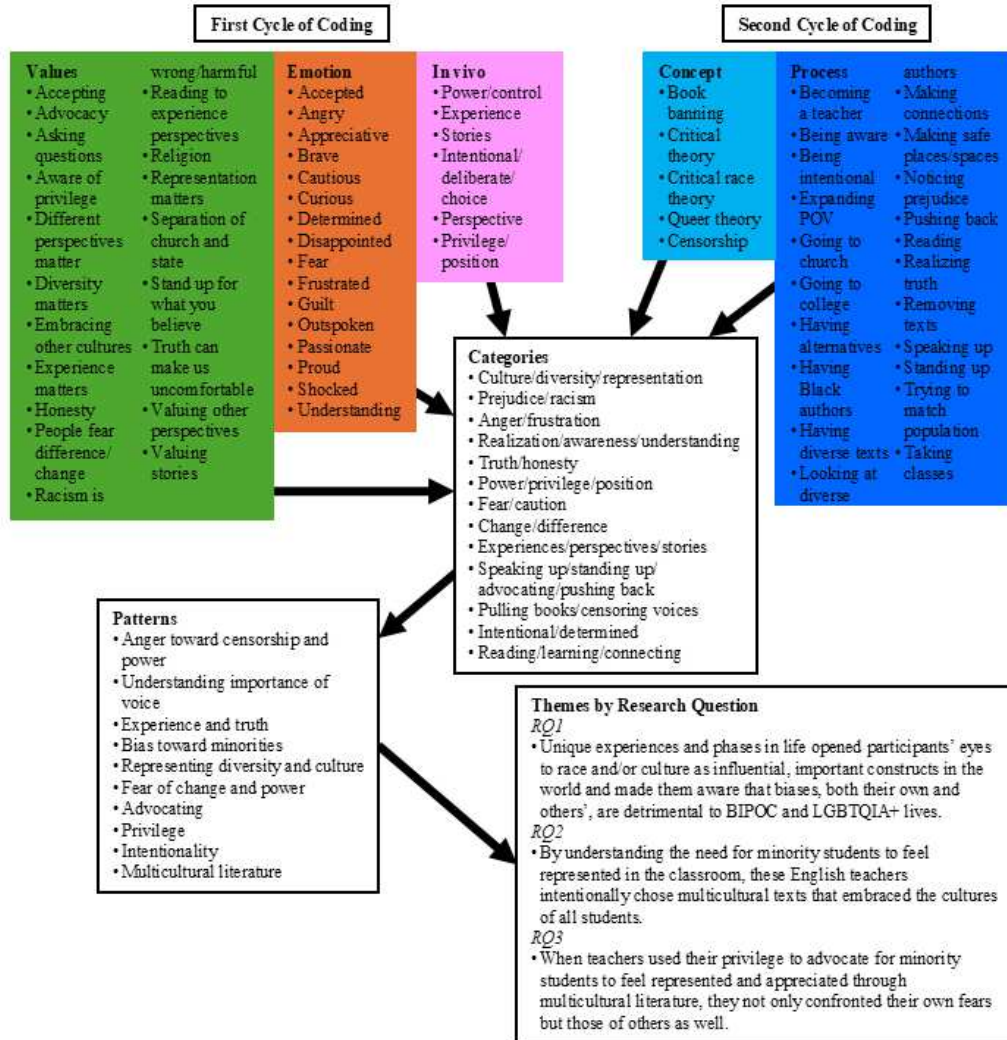


Next, I “identif[ied] an emerging pattern in each category” (Kim, 2016, p. 188) because, as Maxwell and Miller (2008) pointed out, “the categories generated through coding are typically linked to larger patterns” (p. 466). The patterns I constructed from the categories are depicted in Figure 12.

my categorizing strategies (see Figure 13) was crucial prior to connecting strategies, the next step in the data analysis process.

Figure 13

Organizational Framework of Categorizing Strategies



Connecting Strategies

After categorizing the data by codes and themes, I began looking for connections. Maxwell and Miller (2008) referred to connections as “contiguity-based relations . . . [that] involve juxtaposition in time and space, the influence of one thing on another, or relations among parts of a text” (p. 462). Maxwell and Miller further elaborated that

connecting data in narrative analysis “is generally done by identifying key relationships that tie that data together into a narrative” or story (p. 467). Thus, I looked for the “actual *connections* between things, rather than similarities and differences” (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 462), which ultimately led to “developing a ‘story line’ about the central phenomena of the study, and identifying ‘conditional paths’ that link actions with conditions and consequences” (p. 470). Part of making connections required that I “[preserve] the chronological order” of my participants’ lives (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 473), which was not always the order in which they presented their stories to me; thus, I constructed a timeline for each participant per Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) suggestion that timelines can be “especially useful in constructing oral histories and in writing narratives” (p. 112). Figure 14 is an example of a timeline I created after completing the first and second interviews in the three-interview series.

Figure 14

Timeline Created After Second Interview and Reviewed in Final



Note. Alice’s timeline

Each participant's timeline was instrumental during the meaning-making final interview to "make sense of . . . experiences," as well as to find the gaps in the narrative (Clandinin, 2016, p. 113). As Kim (2016) pointed out, "individual stories have their own narrative meanings" (p. 190) and "narratives are context-sensitive" (p. 191). Thus, context was key throughout this process as I looked for narrative linkages that connected participants' experiences, focusing on understanding that "narratives are carefully constructed communications in a certain time and place" (Kim, 2016, p. 214). Clandinin and Connelly concurred, noting that "in narrative thinking, context makes a difference" (p. 27), especially for this study, where the time and place of the narratives were schools in southern states with book bans in the current climate of censorship since the events of 2020. After finding connections in the data, I organized the data by research questions and returned to the codes within the rich data by "present[ing] and comment[ing] upon excerpts from the interviews thematically organized" in Chapter 5 (Seidman, 2013, p. 127).

Data Presentation

Not only are stories "capable of illuminating other settings through their epiphanic power" (Kim, 2016, p. 19), but they also have the power to "make a difference in society by planting a seed for social justice" (Kim, 2016, p. 237). Therefore, as I sought to learn how past experiences of English teachers shape their beliefs regarding race and culture, as well as how experiences lead English teachers to become advocates of multicultural literature, I employed the life story genre of narrative inquiry for my method of data presentation, the purpose of which was to gain "an in-depth study of one's individual life as a whole" (Kim, 2016, p. 303). Kim's guidelines for writing a life story

narrative include describing the participant’s cultural context, personality, relationships, choices and actions, and events that led to an outcome, all told following the elements of narrative plot (i.e., exposition, rising actions, conflict) building up to “the point of denouement,” or climax (p. 134). The life story genre of narrative inquiry offers two approaches: portal and process. The portal approach uses a life story as a representation of society, while the process approach I followed uses rich description to tell a life story, which “hop[es] to provide the reader with some glimpse of narrative experience different from the reader’s own” from which to interpret meaning (Kim, 2016, p. 133). Thus, I employed Kim’s guidelines, as seen in Table 3, to construct the life stories of my participants, presenting the opportunity for readers to gain a deeper understanding as to why these educators have chosen to take an active role toward achieving social justice by continuing to teach with multicultural literature in their classrooms, regardless of the consequences they could face within the current political climate of censorship.

Table 3

Life Story Elements per Kim’s Guidelines

Cultural context	Southern state, sheltered by parents, racist family, gay friends, church as a young child
Protagonist’s personality	curious, skeptical, passionate, protective, rebellious, bold, brave, transparent, honest
Relationships	parents, teachers, ex-husband, friends, husband, children (son and two daughters), students
Choices and actions	reading informational texts, learning about cultures, learning ASL, joining speech and debate, joining Young Republicans, becoming liberal, getting married, working at Christian children’s home, divorcing husband, becoming a paraprofessional, becoming an English teacher, teaching multicultural literature
Events	Black teacher for second grade, moving for mom to teach, husband having multiple affairs, finishing college degree, Trump presidency, Covid-19

Note. These elements reflect Evelyn’s life story.

I also followed Seidman's (2013) suggestion to use the first-person point of view "in the words of the participant" (p. 123), which corresponds with Kim's (2016) life story genre of narrative inquiry that aims to "produce a first-person text in the words of the interviewee" (p. 167). I then made connections between commonalities, as well as differences, "to the experiences of [other]" participants in my study in Chapter 5, following the life stories I present in Chapter 4 (Seidman, 2013, p. 127). Because I knew I would be presenting the life stories of my participants, I remained constantly aware of the potential threats to the validity of my study to ensure I would present stories that accurately represent participants' lives.

Validity

Both Maxwell (2013) and Seidman (2013) argued that no method or approach inherently creates validity within a research study. Instead, the researcher must be aware "of validity threats and how they can be dealt with" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 123). As I was the instrument for my research (Maxwell), my identity, experiences, and positionality were ever present throughout my study; however, as Peshkin (1991) explained, I had to remain aware of my subjectivities and how they could impact my research. Furthermore, Maxwell noted that two main threats to validity are researcher bias and reactivity, which I addressed through strategies such as purposeful sampling to avoid bias in participant selection; memoing to keep note of my bias; member checks to verify accuracy of stories; reader checks to note any subjectivity; and gathering rich data to achieve saturation and internal generalizability.

I could not set aside or change my identity as a person and researcher throughout my study, but I was aware of how my goals, identity, and positionality had "potential

benefits and liabilities for [my] research” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 32). I could not rid myself of the fact that I grew up in the South as a White Christian woman with extremely conservative parents any more than I could rid myself of my liberal leanings because of what I have learned outside of that upbringing throughout my experiences. While my goals, identity, experiences, and positionality were what motivated me throughout this study, they also involved subjectivity. As Peshkin (1991) argued, “one’s subjectivity is like a garment that cannot be removed” (p. 286); thus, as Maxwell noted, one must always be aware of subjective tendencies. Peshkin suggested that “researchers should be meaningfully attentive to their own subjectivity” and created a list of what he referred to as “subjective I’s” (p. 285, 288). The two subjective I’s that had the most impact on my role as an educator and researcher were the Equality-and-Diversity I and the Social-Justice I. Like Peshkin, I can look around my school and see the diversity in the hallways, but in my classroom, I often see a definite lack of diversity. Why are on-level classes composed almost entirely of BIPOC students while advanced classes are whitewashed? As an educator, I strive to move students to the classes they should be in based on their abilities, not the color of their skin, but I have heard comments from some teachers suggesting not every teacher believes the same. I have seen BIPOC students who made 4s on the previous year’s state test remain in an on-level class while white students with 3s were in advanced. Some like to argue that they must have “slipped through the cracks,” but I have seen it enough times to know that teachers’ beliefs of race often impact the decisions they make in their classrooms.

This leads, then, to my next subjective I: the Social-Justice I. Not only does this impact me as a teacher trying to right the wrongs of others when it comes to student

placement, but I think it also impacted me the most as a researcher. I feel very strongly about the topic of multicultural literature in the classroom. I believe teachers should read books in their classrooms that reflect their students. I also believe teachers should educate students on other cultures around them. I want to rid the next generation of racist leanings and not have to hear White students say the n-word and think there is nothing wrong with it. I want my LGBTQIA+ students to not have to come to me crying because their other teachers will not use their preferred name and pronouns or because someone is bullying them and calling them the f-slur. I want to make a difference, and that subjectivity was the most difficult for me to set aside in my research.

I also took steps to prevent any biases I have from impeding my research in any way to skew the findings, especially when conducting interviews with my participants. Maxwell (2013) argued this threat of reactivity, or reflexivity, “is powerful and inescapable” as I am the instrument for data collection (p. 125). Therefore, not only did I take steps with the wording of my questions, but I also needed to “understand *how* [I am] influencing” the interview process and my participants’ responses (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). While I remained personally invested in my topic, which was an advantage to maintaining my motivation, this personal investment could also have been a disadvantage if I had allowed my own identity, experiences, positionality, biases, beliefs, and assumptions to overshadow the stories I wanted to learn and tell. There are other educators who are as angry as I am about the current political efforts to stifle diverse voices, which meant I found volunteers willing to share their stories with me; however, I had to keep my story to a minimum as sharing too much of my experiences with my participants could have swayed their responses. Therefore, I remained aware of saying

enough to show them my passion and motivate them to share their stories with me without allowing my passion to bias my interpretation of their stories or lead them with my questioning. I was constantly aware of my biases and remembered the value of stories outside of my own. I made all efforts to convey the meaning my participants garnered from their experiences as their meaning fuels their passion, just as my meaning fuels mine.

Because I was aware of my biases throughout the research process and knew they could have led me to misinterpret something said or written, I took steps to ensure my interpretation of the rich data did not reflect any bias I have for this problem or toward any participants. To minimize threats to the internal validity of my study, I was prepared to address any threats to the validity of the data through my sampling procedures, which was why I employed purposeful sampling to ensure I was not interviewing teachers with whom I have close relationships as this could have skewed and created gaps in the data. Additionally, I kept my bias and subjectivity in check by constantly memoing to express my thoughts and feelings, keeping my biases separate from the results and interpretations. If I made a memo during or immediately following an interview, my memo reflected any thoughts of subjectivity that I had during the interview so I would be aware during data analysis. Furthermore, I asked my participants to conduct member checks to verify their life stories are correct, as well as to clarify, correct, or offer additional information. I also had unbiased peers conduct reader checks for any indication that my personal researcher biases were skewing the data. While I could not completely rid myself of my biases and subjectively, I took multiple steps to remain aware and keep them in check.

Maxwell (2013) argued that conducting “intensive interviews,” such as Seidman’s (2013) three-part interview series I conducted, produced rich data that serves to both “[ground] . . . and test . . . [my] conclusions” (p. 126). Collecting such rich data results in saturation of the data to check for “validity of [my] conclusions” (Maxwell, 2013, p. 125). According to both Saldaña (2016) and Creswell (2014), when I had enough data to credibly answer my research questions, I achieved saturation of the data. Saldaña noted that saturation is found during coding, when the researcher has combed through the data and nothing new emerges (p. 248). Likewise, Creswell said that “when gathering fresh data no longer sparks new insights or reveals new properties” (p. 189), one has achieved saturation and should have sufficient data to credibly answer the research questions. To achieve saturation, I gathered rich data by interviewing each participant three times in accordance with Seidman’s three-interview series, where the first interview focused on “life history” to answer the first research question, the second focused on “details of their experience” to answer the second research question, and the third focused on “the meaning of their experience” to answer the third research question (pp. 21-22). As Subedi (2021) argued, when I found that my participants began to “repeat the same data they shared earlier” (p. 7) and, as Naeem et al. (2024) argued, when “no new keywords, patterns, codes or themes are emerging from the collected data set” (p. 3), I knew I achieved saturation of the data. Furthermore, by having my participants submit lesson plans and previously written work, I had multiple sources of data to counter threats to validity and knew the data was credible to answer each research question. By collecting at least two forms of in-depth, rich data for each research question, I gathered sufficient data to achieve saturation and answer all three research questions, as well as to achieve

internal generalizability by having enough data “to adequately understand the *variation*” between each of my participants’ processes of becoming teachers who use multicultural literature (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137).

Though 80% of U.S. educators identify as White and 77% identify as women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022), not all White women educators share the same beliefs on race and culture (Diehm & Hendricks, 2021; Mark et al., 2020; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). While I chose to purposefully select participants who fit within these demographics, my rationale behind this decision was not necessarily been for the purpose of achieving external generalizability. As Maxwell (2013) argued, “the value of a qualitative study may depend on its *lack* of external generalizability in the sense of being representative of a larger population” (p. 137). Because not all teachers have the same beliefs on race and culture, advocate for multicultural literature, and push back against censorship efforts, this study may “provide an account . . . that is illuminating as an . . . ideal type” in an effort to inspire the general population of teachers (Maxwell, 2013, p. 137). In the following chapter, I present this account in the form of narratives to gain an in-depth knowledge of why White women English educators are continuing to work toward social justice by teaching with multicultural literature in the current climate of censorship, putting their careers at risk in the process.

Chapter IV

NARRATIVES

After conducting two interviews of Seidman's (2013) three-part interview series and reviewing the transcripts for accuracy, I created a timeline of each participant's life following Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) suggestion. I reviewed and revised each timeline with the participants during the final interview to both ensure accuracy and make meaning of each event. This review process was crucial as there were moments from participants' lives I had not considered relevant to include on the timelines, but during the final interview, the participants noted the importance of including the moment in their life story. I memoed on one such moment following a final interview as seen in Figure 15.

Figure 15

Memo After Final Interview

An experience in Toni's life I did not think was necessary to include (the senior projects), she noted once again in this final interview. Initially, I did not see the importance of her bringing it up again when I asked if we needed to add anything to the timeline, but to Toni, the conversations she had with the Black students expressing frustration with racist comments from the judges were important in her life story. She noted that when these senior projects took place before Covid, her reaction had been "to Whitesplain" the judges' reactions; however, she now recognizes that rather than Whitesplaining, she should "tell people . . . so it'll have a ripple effect." Now, I understand why she brought this experience up again because she has since become more aware of how to advocate for students rather than excusing the judges' behavior.

Note. Memo I wrote after completing Toni's final interview.

After making additions to timelines and revising the final interview transcripts for accuracy, I began coding each transcript using the in vivo, emotions, values, process, and

concept coding methods as explained by Saldaña (2016). After coding, which I discuss in Chapter 5, I began narrative analysis, a process which Polkinghorne (1995) described as “the procedure through which the researcher organizes the data elements into a coherent developmental account” (p. 15). First, I transferred the chronological timelines I created with each participant into a Word document, preserving the same order, with each event on the timeline as a separate heading. I then went through the transcripts for all three interviews in the series one by one, copying and pasting sections from the transcripts to the corresponding heading from the timeline, which Polkinghorne called a “to-and-fro movement from parts to whole that is involved in comprehending a finished text” (p. 16). Some participants mentioned certain events from their lives in more than one interview, so I combined the excerpts to avoid repetition. This combining of excerpts and arranging the transcripts into a narrative is also part of narrative smoothing, a process Kim (2016) argued “is a necessary method that many narrative researchers . . . use to make our participant’s story coherent, engaging, and interesting to the reader” (p. 192). As Polkinghorne noted, “Not all data elements will be needed for the telling of the story” (p. 16). However, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) pointed out risks can come with narrative smoothing as the researcher “must make a series of judgements” that can lead to the “idea of untold stories as narrative secrets” (pp. 181-182). Thus, to avoid “untold stories,” I followed Clandinin and Connelly’s advice on how to combat the issue by “discussing the selections made” (p. 182). When engaged in narrative smoothing, I often pieced together excerpts of a transcript from different sections for continuity and coherency. I also cleaned the material as I worked the transcript into a narrative by removing repeated words such as “I I” to “I”; phrases such as “you know,” “like,” and “and so”; and answers

to questions such as “No, I don’t think so” and “Yes” that would not have made sense without also including my question. Figure 16 provides an example of how I used narrative smoothing and cleaned the material to begin Dorothy’s narrative.

Figure 16

Narrative Smoothing and Cleaning from Transcript to Narrative

Before Narrative Smoothing and Cleaning

00:02:39.150

Dorothy: So, I was incredibly shy as as a child, and I don’t know, I mean, I was shy in school. I don’t know if I was before that or not. I am the second of seven children, and I didn’t know it at the time or growing up, but my mother has always been someone who believed the Apocalypse was happening imminently. And so, we went from kind of living in a suburb in the city to moving out to the country.

00:03:47.257

Dorothy: So, growing up we were out in the country. They’re kind of wild, out in the dirt, that kind of thing.

00:21:47.495

Dorothy: So, like growing up, we lived out in seven acres in the country. My mother had huge vegetable gardens, and she canned her her produce. And she kind of wanted to live off the land.

After Narrative Smoothing and Cleaning

I was incredibly shy as a child. I was shy in school. I don’t know if I was before that or not. I am the second of seven children, and I didn’t know it at the time or growing up, but my mother has always been someone who believed the Apocalypse was happening imminently. So, we went from living in a suburb in the city to moving out to the country. So, growing up, we were out in the country. They’re kind of wild, out in the dirt, that kind of thing. We lived out on seven acres in the country. My mother had huge vegetable gardens, and she canned her produce. She kind of wanted to live off the land.

Note. I smoothed and cleaned these excerpts from Dorothy’s first interview transcript into the beginning of her narrative.

I chose narrative inquiry as the method of research to solicit the life stories of White women English educators because, as Clandinin and Connelly (2000) argued, “experiences taken collectively are temporal” (p. 19). Past experiences in a teacher’s life

can continue to impact her present and future choices in the classroom, including the curriculum (Clandinin & Connelly). Because narrative inquiry is situated within “a three-dimensional space with temporality, sociality, and place” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 39), I studied everything from a teacher’s “cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40) conditions growing up to how she was raised (e.g., religion, politics, etc.) and where she was raised to where she currently lives and works. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) also noted that “teaching and teacher knowledge . . . [are] expressions of embodied individual and social stories” (p. 4). Thus, when engaging in narrative inquiry, I intentionally “honor[ed] lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding” (Clandinin, 2016, p. 17), because, as Seidman (2013) pointed out, lived experiences are “what we experience as it happens” (p. 18). Furthermore, I chose to present the lived experiences of my participants through the life story genre of narrative inquiry to provide “an in-depth study of one’s individual life as a whole” (Kim, 2016, p. 303). Stories are not only “capable of illuminating other settings through their epiphanic power” (Kim, 2016, p. 19), but they can also “make a difference in society by planting a seed for social justice” (p. 237).

Critical theory, critical race theory, and queer theory are crucial elements of the conceptual framework for this study. Critical theory contains a “moral imperative” and focus on “the need to develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society” (Kim, 2016, p. 36). Furthermore, critical theory supports “an activist stance” to “critique society, raise consciousness, and change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful” (Patton, 2015, p. 692). CRT also “contains an activist dimension” that also critiques society “to transform it for the better” (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2023, p. 8). Per queer theory, English teachers have an “ethical and professional responsibility to learn from people of color, queer people, and queer people of color through reading, listening, and reflecting so that we can collectively transform our sociocultural worlds” (Schey, 2020, p. 114). Therefore, the following narratives are the stories of educators who identify as White women and have chosen to advocate for multicultural literature, despite the consequences they could face within society’s current political climate of censorship. For each participant, I wrote a short biographical introduction with information that may not be included within the narrative. After each narrative, I also wrote a reflection which features some thoughts from my memos throughout the data analysis process.

Dorothy

Dorothy has lived in the same southern state for her entire life. She has lived in various parts of the state, from rural to urban, and has seen the growth in diversity over the years. She noted that the district she teaches in is one of the largest in the state, with students who represent more than 65 different native languages. She has been a teacher for 26 years, and in that time, she has taught a variety of English courses and levels, from on-level to college credit.

Dorothy’s Life Story

I was incredibly shy as a child. I was shy in school. I don’t know if I was before that or not. I am the second of seven children, and I didn’t know it at the time or growing up, but my mother has always been someone who believed the Apocalypse was happening imminently. We went from living in a suburb in the city to moving out to the country. So, growing up, we were out in the country. They’re kind of wild, out in the dirt,

that kind of thing. We lived out on seven acres in the country. My mother had huge vegetable gardens, and she canned her produce. She kind of wanted to live off the land. But we were outsiders because we moved in. So, we were newcomers for 30 years. My mother has been there now for 55 years, and she's considered now a member of the community. But growing up, we were those outsiders from the city, and so, that was kind of who we were. Looking back, we probably never seemed to have much money, so we were probably associated with the poorer kids without even realizing it.

We absolutely had church every Sunday and Wednesday, a little, town church. We were a very strict Catholic family: mass every Sunday, CCE every Wednesday. God is watching. Sex is bad. I definitely can go to hell. Hell is a real place. I don't think I remember a time that my mom was not our religious coordinator at the church. At whatever church we were going to, she was the one organizing all of the grades of Sunday school or Wednesday school, or whatever it was. I made my first communion a year or two early—maybe four or five when you were supposed to be in first or second grade—but I had memorized the entire mass. Because we went to daily mass, I could say it with the priest, the whole mass, so they agreed to let me make my first communion early. The first friends I had, if I remember, were friends from church. Looking back, it was probably a completely White church. They considered themselves multicultural because the Polish family spoke to the German families, and that was cutting edge because for probably 80 years, the two churches within 4 miles of each other did not interact.

Growing up, just right around me were all White families—just White, country families—but when I went to school, the classrooms were very mixed, and I didn't know

any differently. So, I had Black friends, White friends. I don't know that we had Hispanics at the time; that has kind of increased. But I was so far out in the country that going to friends' houses didn't really happen. We had friends at school, and we had a few neighbors within a mile or two of the house. So, we kind played at home. But in second or third grade, I don't remember which one, I was sexually molested, and I just didn't ever tell my parents because God knew we were all going to hell for having sex, and I hadn't stopped him. My mother thought it was okay to send us walking a mile through the woods to go play in an old man's house in another neighborhood, probably gave her some time off from the little kids. He was a pedophile, but I spent years thinking my sexual abuse was my fault.

I did not know how to read when I went to kindergarten, and my mother had no idea. We had so many books in the house and she read to us so often that I had memorized all our books that she read to us, and I knew the words on the right pages. She didn't figure out that I didn't know how to read, actually know how to read, until first grade. And then, I went from the lowest reading level to the highest reading level in that year. Since then, I've always been a reader. Our house always had tons of books or schoolbooks. We had shelves and shelves and shelves of books at home, but looking back, they were not very culturally diverse. There was *Heart of Darkness*, which talked about the African continent, but that was different. I don't remember finding Zora Neale Hurston on my mother's shelves, and there was certainly nothing on my mother's shelves that would constitute something inappropriate. When I was 12 or 13, I found a book that had sex in it. It was hidden behind the other books—that's where my mother or my father, because he read those too, were hiding those. There was only one or two in the

house, but they were all completely appropriated for raising young Catholic children. I never told my mom what I was reading, but it's not like I was picking up inappropriate books. I didn't ask her when I went to the library. I grew up reading tons. I had all these biographies. Your English classics, think Western civ, covered our shelves. Encyclopedias covered our shelves. *Heidi*, Hardy Boys, Trixie Belden, Nancy Drew, all of the complete sets. There was a set of blue books that were biographies for kids. So, I read about Zeb Pike, Helen Keller, *Emily of New Moon*, and *Anne of Avonlea*. I read children's books like *Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel*, all of Leo Lionni's children's books, and the *McBroom's Wonderful One-Acre Farm*. I was reading constantly. We poured over the encyclopedia, and we had competitions with flags and making sentences using the names of countries, and only the names of countries, to make sentences. That's what I had growing up.

I also had speech impediment growing up, so I could not say my Rs. I would look for paragraphs, because they would call when I was in class to read aloud paragraphs, so I would read ahead, count the paragraphs, and find the paragraph that had the fewest Rs. That's the one that I would volunteer to read because I could make my way through that. I don't necessarily remember being made fun of. Being bullied or being made fun of is not a part of my memory. Being aware of it, maybe, is a part of my memory but not necessarily being made fun of. Maybe that came from thinking about others, or maybe it came from always having siblings and always having the other people around. It's not ever been about me, me, me, me, ever. I was the second child, and my older sister was not necessarily the responsible one, so my parents turned to me. When my mom went back to school, I was the one that got the kids up, and there were seven of us by then. I got the

kids up, got us dressed for school, made lunches, got us off the bus, got homework done, made lunch, made dinner, and put everybody to bed.

My mother always told me that my that she and my father were politically opposite, and I always thought that meant Democrat and Republican. But I remember in intermediate school, Ronald Reagan was running president for the first time. We voted at school, and he won our little third, fourth, and fifth grade vote. I came home so excited, and when I told her, she just thought that was appalling. Then, he won for real, and she cried. I don't remember seeing my mother cry very much, but she thought we were going to have nuclear war. One of the reasons we had moved out to the country was my parents had a plan for when the city was attacked with nuclear bombs: where they were going to live, where they were going to meet back up, and how they were going to survive. But my father didn't really seem to react to Reagan's election. So, maybe that switched, because by the time I was a teenager, she was very much Republican, and he always said he was Democrat so he could vote against more people. I've always considered myself Republican, conservative. I remember when I was 12, I wrote Ronald Reagan a letter encouraging him to not make abortion legal, to work to save the babies. I received a letter back, and I was so excited that I had this letter from the White House. It was stamped with Ronald Reagan because it was not his signature. So, that was always a part of me.

I've always been kind of a rebel, I think, before I even knew I was a rebel. It started with playing tuba. When I went to sixth grade band, I wanted to play piano because I wanted to learn to play piano. They said, "We don't have that many." I said, "Well, then, what do you need?" The teacher told me he needed a tuba player. My mother complained that I couldn't play tuba in church, so I said, "I'll take it." I didn't want to

play in church, so I was a tuba player after that. I was one of the first girl tuba players at any school I went to, so I've always been a rabble rouser.

I also made a new friend in sixth grade, and I'm still friends with her, too. She was a new student who came to school, and she lived in town. She lived a few blocks from junior high, and I was given permission to walk to her house to spend the night. So, on Friday afternoons after school, we would walk over, and then, my mother would pick me up on Saturday. Her parents were both older when they had children. When we were in junior high, I think her parents were 50 already, so older than my parents. I remember she warned me about her father, that he could be rude, scary, or something. He was a cantankerous old man and an absolute, outspoken racist. He talked about the Blacks and Mexicans in town and how they were the downfall, and that's when I figured out our town had had segregated schools. It never had even occurred to me that they did. The whole idea of segregation or desegregation was not a part of my norm. I thought we were just a society together, but I didn't even notice it. We were a very mixed school district. Nancy was the tallest girl in junior high, and she was African American, and I was the second tallest girl, so we were always together in the class pictures, that kind of thing. It was not a part of my register until I met her father. That was the first time I ever had to think about Blacks and Whites being together in the school. To me, we were just classmates. In school, I don't remember ever picking or choosing friends. We were friends with whomever. There was not a difference in us; we were just classmates. The idea that that someone's skin color or country where they grew up made them other had never entered my consciousness. Then, my immediate thought was that is wrong and inappropriate. I had never considered before that someone could be innately racist, so that

was also when I became aware some people were racist, and I wasn't. Then, I noticed it more, and I noticed it with other people more, because I hadn't even noticed it beforehand. I certainly noticed it more growing up, and looking back, I can see where it was in the school district, where it was implemented, and where adults around me maybe didn't speak up about it or notice it.

Back to the City. The summer before my sophomore year, I had to go to summer band. My parents would drop me off at 6:00 in the morning at the library five or six blocks from the high school. I would stay at the library until summer band, I would go to summer band for 3 hours, and then, I'd go back to the library. They'd pick me up about 6:00 or 7:00 at night, so I probably spent 8 hours a day at the library. Then, we'd go home, go to bed, and repeat. We did that for 3 or 4 weeks, and in that time, the only people I spoke to were my parents. I was too shy to speak up in band. I could not open my mouth and speak, and I thought to myself, *Well, that's just not gonna work.* I was at the library anyway, so I just started pulling books and reading them. I pulled etiquette books on how to talk to people and on social rules because I didn't know them. I was at the library for 2 or 3 weeks that summer, and then, we moved. My parents had told us we were moving back to the city because my sister had gotten pregnant. My mom moved us all within a month. It was a very abrupt move, and I can't help but think she was a bit embarrassed. She was the religious coordinator at the church, and she had led parenting classes. Now, her oldest was carrying an illegitimate child—definite evidence of premarital sex. So, we were up and shipped to move in about a month to the city, which, of course, was this wide expanse. I was involved in band and other things, and I thought nothing out of it, but I was probably a bit sheltered. Then, I was introduced to Chinese

food by the tuba players, and I just thought, *Oh, my gosh*, and honestly, we didn't eat out a lot ever, but the whole idea of ethnic foods was new to me in high school. For me, going out to eat was Red Lobster or Pizza Hut.

When I graduated high school, I decided to go to college at the catholic university in the heart of the city. We went up early for honors orientation, and I got dropped off cause my parents were going to work. I didn't drive yet; I was scared of driving in the city, so I just didn't get my license until I was 21. City traffic was scary. When they dropped me off, I didn't know where I was dropped off. It was somebody's apartment. It turned out he was a student, a senior in the honors program, but I did not know who he was at the time. Then, out walks this girl from his shower with a towel on and her hair up, and she wanders across the apartment, goes somewhere else, and then, out wanders this other girl. It turned out that they were all dropped off early, too, and he had offered to let them stay at his apartment so they didn't have to get a hotel when they were 17 and 18. But I just thought they were living some kind of wild lifestyle that I didn't know, and it wasn't until we talked a year later, because we all stayed friends and everything, that I realized what their experience had been that day.

When I moved into the dorms, my roommate was an immigrant from Vietnam, and I was fascinated with her story. She left Vietnam in the early 1970s. Her family, it turned out, had money in Vietnam. They managed to buy plane tickets out, but those were some of the last plane tickets out of South Vietnam at the time. Vietnam fell, and they lost everything in Vietnam. But they had someone who was willing to sponsor them in New York, so they all moved to New York. It's your American dream, immigrant family story. She introduced me to all kind of ideas. She took me to my first Vietnamese restaurant,

where there was nothing in English. She had two older brothers and a younger sister, and I have met the younger sister once, but that was it. She talked about how in high school, her parents didn't really know where she and her siblings were or what they were doing in school. She could get away with things, like sneaking out at night, going out, doing this or that. I never did any of that, probably from fear of going to hell since I had been abused, and that was part of my psyche. I had nothing wild to report. My life was pretty boring, but I certainly had wild siblings.

Our balcony mates were from Brazil, so when it snowed one day—not a ton of snow, just the kind where you can stand outside, catch the snowflakes on your jacket, look at them, and they melt—we were standing out on our balconies, and they had never seen snow before. Brazil was warm, so this was all new to them. Then, I met someone who came from divorced parents, and as strange as it sounds, that had not been registered to me before. I met another student who would tell us stories of a club, so we went, and it was nothing like we thought. It was just some surfer bar where you ordered fish and chips or something. I also saw my first gay person during that time. We followed around a man dressed as a woman in Kroger late at night as freshmen. I think living in the dorms, being surrounded by everybody, was kind of a whole eye-opening experience from all these different perspectives that were going on. I think moving from out in the country to the city itself had been a little eye opening, and then, moving into the heart of the city for 4 years and living there was even more eye opening, which I think was very much a part of me being willing to and eager to kind of understand the rest of the world. Talking to people in college, just hearing their different experiences and stories growing up and how that influenced them, absolutely expanded my worldview, my understanding of the world,

and how different it is. If I had stayed out in the country, if we had never moved, I don't think I would have that at all.

In the honors program in college, they had us reading all kinds of works, to the extent I don't remember them all. Philosophies, literature, history—it was just a lot, and a lot of it included classics. These were not works I would have necessarily picked up. The discussion of them was certainly about connections, humanity, how we change our behaviors, and what drives us to act the way we do. They were very diverse at the time, but they were probably still Western civilization. It wasn't just British land but across all of Europe. One of them, I don't know who wrote it, was actually about the current society in China, and reading about it made me think that the only way China was going to solve their population problem was by going to a war where they sent in tons of soldiers to die. But we read all kinds of things. I was a history major with an English minor, a theology minor, and a philosophy minor, which are mostly Western. But I had a history professor, Dr. Brown, and she taught the freshman U.S. history course from the loser's perspective using a textbook she had written entirely from a minority female perspective. Her emphasis on the other perspective, not just the White male founding fathers, led to a real understanding for me. I had her as a professor probably once a year as part of the honors program, so I didn't only have her for that history class. The honors program was a combination of history professors and philosophy professors. The courses were always team taught, so I always had multiple perspectives encouraging me to see other perspectives. Even though it might have been Western civ, it was a questioning of text and a looking at context, which I think if you're not willing to look at a text or question a text or look at the context of the author of the text, it doesn't really matter who's writing

it. So, the honors program encouraged me to read and question everything, and I didn't sell back a single textbook from college. I kept them all. My college experience taught me to question myself, because it's kind of a self-reflection, and ask: What do I not know? Where am I ignorant?

Reading taught me not only about others but about myself. At some point during college, I read a book called *Where the Heart Is*. It was something I found somewhere, and I don't know where I found it. I don't where I picked it up. The novel was set in Walmart. It was about a White trash girl finding herself abandoned. She's living in the camping stuff at Walmart, and they help her, and she names her child Americus because of made in America signs in Walmart. She ends up in a little trailer and has a boyfriend who rapes her 6-month-old, and then, when the 11-year-old brother defends the 6-month-old, he rapes the 11-year-old. None of the books I'd read had anybody who took advantage of children. They didn't have people who treated children inappropriately. They didn't touch them inappropriately. They didn't steal things. They didn't have an abusive parent. That did not happen in the literature that was in my mother's library. That was the first time I realized that my abuse from my childhood wasn't my fault.

Becoming a Teacher. I've always been a teacher. I started teaching Sunday school at probably 16, and I've taught some form of something every year since then, with the exception of 1 or 2 years. But I didn't go to college to be a teacher. In high school, my counselor had asked me to apply for an education scholarship, and I told her, "No, that would be dishonest. I am not going to be a teacher. More kids needed to fail than teachers are allowed to fail, so I'm going to be a college professor and flunk everyone who deserves it." It's funny because look at me now. I did not keep going to get my PhD. I got

married in my senior year, and I worked as a receptionist after I graduated. We moved back and forth for about 18 months or 2 years. Then, our parish priest called me up and said, “Our Catholic school needs a PE teacher.” I told my husband, “Literally God called.” So, I went to become the PE teacher and just moved into the classroom, even though it was a pay cut. The next year, I did religion and PE again. The year after that, I did religion and social studies, and that was the year I got pregnant. My salary started at \$15,000, and we could not raise a kid on that. So, I quit the Catholic school and was hired at a public high school for advanced academic studies. I was emergency certified because I had not gotten certified in college; I had just gone to college to learn. The advanced academic studies class was required by the school. It was a semester course on research skills, study skills, vocabulary, personalities, getting along with each other, asking questions, and stuff like that. Then, my husband was transferred to another city, so I didn’t even finish my first year at that school. But I once we moved, I was hired as a long-term sub for the state assessments, doing whatever they needed. Mostly I did math and English for the state assessments because I was a certified teacher with my emergency certification. I worked there from January to April, and then, the state assessments were over. So, the principal had me come back and just sub. Then, she told me that she had signed me up for alternative certification classes. She said, “You’re gonna get certified and be an English teacher for me.” I said, “Okay.” I don’t know how she did it. I did not apply to the program. I just was told where to show up, and everything was signed up for me.

My first year teaching English, I was part of a team. So, I taught whatever the team was teaching. We did *Tom Sawyer*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, maybe *Fahrenheit*

451, maybe not. I want to say we did a few more, but I don't really remember what they were at this point. The next year, my husband got another job, so we moved again, and within the first or second year of teaching at the new school, I had a College Board training to teach pre-AP. College Board has a diversity statement, and I think that's where I first got into thinking that our classrooms should reflect the populations of our schools. I did some poetry that was varied and short stories from the textbook. I think that my first experiences with multicultural lit—we did *To Kill a Mockingbird*—were probably Black and White, making sure I had Black authors in there. I had my students read *Things Fall Apart* and *Heart of Darkness* at the same time to realize that these two different perspectives were happening at the exact same time. I didn't really do anything deliberately multiculturally until I started my master's years after I began teaching. I had to take a multicultural reading class, so I really started expanding the idea of multicultural to the cultures in our class. At that high school, the demographics were pretty much 40% White, 30% Hispanic, 20% Black. So, I tried to match that in our options, and in doing so, I was thinking, *Yes, I'm multicultural. I'm doing that.* But it was about mixing perspectives. For me, the whole really getting into thinking about multicultural literature was about perspectives, bringing in different perspectives and that kind of thing. Then, teaching became automatically to make sure that that the literature fit the students around me and what they needed. I started reading the well-known multicultural novels, and then I started asking, "What should I be reading? What's the canon for that part of the world?" And people would say, "Well, actually, you should be reading this and this and this, or this and this and this." I would respond, "Okay, let me read those. Let me see what that is and what that's about."

Not long after I finished my master's, there was a major textbook adoption for ELA in the state, and those only happen once every 10 years. They had this huge list of works we could choose from: fiction, nonfiction, etc. We were also told we did not have read all of those works and that if they were on the list, we were fine. We were encouraged to pick texts to create classroom libraries that fit our populations and that the students would find interesting. We had a few instructional coaches and a secondary ELA coordinator that really encouraged us. They would bring us books and say, "Have you read this one? This one's really good. You might want to think about adding it." I took it upon myself to make sure that books I chose were very diverse, that I was really pulling a lot, and I didn't ask for class sets. I got 5 copies of this one, 5 copies of that one, and so on so we could do book clubs or something, but not whole class novels necessarily.

One of the texts that I think came from that textbook adoption was *Purple Hibiscus*. In my class, we would do 10 minutes of silent sustained reading every day, and I read in front of the kids, too, so I was reading *Purple Hibiscus* and had it sitting on my desk. One day, a girl who would not speak above a whisper at all, saw *Purple Hibiscus* on my desk and said in a whisper, "Ah, I love that book." I said, "Oh, you should bring it sometime, and we can talk about it together." She said, "I will. It's in my bedroom." I was just excited to talk about the book with her because she didn't speak. So, the next day I asked her, "Do you have it?" She said, "Oh, no, Miss, it's in my bedroom." I thought, *Okay, you go home to your bedroom at night*. Then, she said, "I'm gonna have my father bring it the next time he comes." I asked, "Oh, he lives somewhere else?" Finally, she said, "I have to get it from my bedroom, and my bedroom is in Nigeria." Eventually, she told me she had been told as a young child that she was too loud, she brought attention to

herself, so she solved it by never speaking or only speaking in a whisper. That was her solution. What was interesting to me was she and I had reverse experiences. I was incredibly shy as a child, and it wasn't working for me, so I taught myself to speak up. She was naturally loud and vocal, and in her society in Nigeria, she was shunned for that. She learned to not speak in public in order to fit in. So, when she came to my class, she talked to me because I was reading *Purple Hibiscus*. It made all the difference to her in the world that I liked one of her favorite books from a Nigerian writer. Over the next 2 years, we had some conversations about that, and I told her how I learned to speak up. When she took my senior dual-credit for British lit, she talked a lot more. She really came out of herself. By the end of her senior year, she had found her voice and was speaking up again.

The Pushback Begins. When Obama was elected, I remember thinking, *Oh, my gosh! We're finally figuring this thing out.* In my lifetime, I've seen society transform race relations within society, and I was so excited when he was elected because I thought, *Okay, the United States is turning a corner. American society has kind of educated themselves, come to some realizations. They're ready kind of to move past this really racist past.* Then, I can only assume because we elected him, we had the blowback and elected Trump. I always considered myself a Republican and more conservative until Trump, until the Republican party went over the cliff, but Trump openly advocated for hate and made it permissible for others to as well. People might have had these prejudicial thoughts and never said them out loud, but he made it socially acceptable. I didn't like the vibe with Trump and migrants. So, around that same time, I took over the school's National Honor Society, and our motto that year was "We Are One." I remember

wanting to put a map up on the wall of the school so that kids could put in their points where they came from, but I wanted to put it upside down, because very often we only see the world like we're on the top. The United States is on the top. But, in fact, the world is round. The United States is not on the top; it's just on a piece of it. So, by flipping it upside down, you make everybody question what it is you already know. That year, we did a lot of things together as a school, as a senior class, as the National Honor Society, just to be more unified.

Then, Covid happened. We were in the Covid shutdown when another high school opened, so our school was going to be split the next school year. Some teachers were moving, and others were staying. The dual-credit teacher was moving to the new high school, and they needed someone to teach that class, so that was me. I went through the Norton anthology from the multicultural course I had taken, and when I pulled stories, I thought geographically: *Where are most of the things they read? Where do they need to experience?* I wanted them to see that literature serves a human purpose, not a cultural purpose. I deliberately crafted that class so the first semester we really didn't touch European or American writing. I always gave them the culture, the country of origin, kind of a timeline, and told them, "Pretend you're on this cruise around the world and stop in different ports. Don't all stick with the same thing. Go exploring." I did a whole lot of curating some online experiences for them so they could go into museums and libraries and get background on these cultures, timelines, etc., in order to understand what they were looking at.

Just a few years later, things started to change. The state house passed a bill banning sexual content in books in public school libraries. They laid out a lot of different

things, including anything obscene, pornographic, etc. They also included the penal code that said the text has to be, as a whole, prurient interest; it cannot have any redeeming features, literary merit, or artistic; it has to be thematically, as a whole, enticing one to have sex or feel like one is having sex; however, they ignore most of those. Then, they went so far as saying there can be no nudity, mention of genitals, excretions, sexual-like actions, bare breasts, a penis, secretions—it goes on for eight pages. Before the bill even passed, districts began to adopt book policies using the language from the bill, and there is very vague language in it. Then, came the book bans. In May 2023, when they first told us certain books were banned, they said, “Oh, but that’s not for dual credit or AP.” So, we held off as long as we could. By November or December, they said, “Ship them back.” I said, “But what about for dual-credit classes?” I wanted to keep some on a special shelf so that I could teach them in dual-credit. They said, “No, no, no.” But we pushed it off again until February, and then, we had to pack up books. They sent us the list of books that were removed from the same curriculum we had adopted only a few years before. They said, “Oh, we’re just cleaning up that list.” But that was not entirely the case. Some of them were books like *The Kite Runner*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and *Brave New World* that we had already had huge sets of. Others we had to ship back included *The Part-Time Diary of an Indian* and *The Poet X* by Elizabeth Acevedo. It was not a transparent process. It was not open to the public when they removed these. For the most part, they were just removed, and we weren’t really given a specific reason, but they did say things like inappropriate ages; it wasn’t written for this age; inappropriate content; doesn’t really fit the state standards; educationally inappropriate. They tried to stick with those terms when they made us pack them up and ship them back.

But I took pictures. I took pictures of the titles and the books and looked up their values. Then, I posted those pictures and the book values on Facebook because I did not want this to go unseen. I wanted people to know we were shipping these back. That raised a ruckus. A local reporter got my name from the Facebook page and contacted me for interviews. At first, for a lot of the stories that came out, I remained anonymous. Most people knew who I was, but for the sake of not saying “f--- you” to the district, I remained anonymous. Then, the school board acknowledged they needed some process for parents to object to the removal of materials just like they objected to the materials. So, I posted on Facebook, “I’ll try to make it as easy as possible, but is anyone interested in challenging any of these books?” I think 5 or 6 people stepped up. We as a group, as well as the reporter who’d been working on these stories from the city press, filed freedom of information requests. Once we filed those challenges to the district, my name got out there, and whatever I’ve done since then has not been anonymous.

Next, we had the hearings. We had 27 books that we challenged at level 2. Level 2 was a hearing officer that the district appointed, so it was an assistant superintendent; however, when we took our challenges to level 2, the hearing officer didn’t have the documentation for why the books had been removed. Along with the freedom of information requests we had made, we had also requested the committee notes, reasonings, and things like that for banning the books, but they did not exist. We then had 19 books that we challenged at level 3. Level 3 was a public hearing in front of the school board at a school board meeting. Suddenly, they had documentation at the school board meeting, so we think they created them after the fact for the board meeting. So, we kind of pushed that a little bit. I did not take *Half of a Yellow Sun* to level 3 because it was

denied at level 2, but I wanted to see if it would get through at level 2. I also defended *Beloved*. Others in my group defended books like *The Bluest Eye*, *The Color Purple*, *Homegoing*, *The Hate U Give*, *Kite Runner*, *Brave New World*, *Slaughterhouse Five*, *We Are the Ants*, *Speak*, *My Sister's Keeper*, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close*, and *I Am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter*. Instead of allowing us to defend the book one at a time, the board wanted this all-in at only one hearing. They said, "Because it all came up at once, we're treating it as one grievance." But we wanted it recorded, and we wanted it in public. I actually wanted the board to have to read all the books, but they didn't because it was all clumped at once. They didn't even read through the materials we gave them. When I defended *Beloved*, the school board specifically talked about it using the word "pussy" and the grandfather raping the granddaughter. Then, the only Black gentleman on our board spoke up and said, "You just look at these titles. This is not right. Did we pull Mark Twain's *Huckleberry Finn* for using the n-word? Surely that that word is used a lot more." Even though they denied all our appeals, they've had some trouble defending some of those choices since then. They've had to acknowledge that the policy lent itself to racist outcomes—not necessarily the language of the policy but the application of the policy. They've acknowledged that it's had some racist repercussions, that it has harmful outcomes, and they need to reevaluate the book policy as a whole. Now, what will come from that, I don't know.

I figure if we can't stop books from getting banned, at least we can make it as difficult to remove a book as to keep a book, because for a while, it was just easier to remove books. But I think what we've seen with banning these books is just state-sanctioned hate that's driving people, and whether it's out of ignorance or fear, I don't

know. We've had a lot of immigrants move to our area over the years from all over the world: the African continent; the sub-Indian continent, Indians, Pakistanis, Nepalese; Russians, Ukrainians, Macedonians; Spanish from Spain; Brazilians, Peruvians, Argentinians, and Venezuelans. I've also just only recently discovered that there are three asylum centers where I live. When you have migrants, immigrants, refugees, or whomever seeking asylum, many of them are sent to one of those three centers. So, we have a huge, non-English speaking population right here. I think that plays into the banning of books. We're seeing a lot of a very straight-minded, Christian Republicans push back on books. Because they've also pulled books for LGBTQIA+ themes, but they didn't label it that way when they went through and removed it. Maybe it's a societal pushback to what to what they're seeing around them. Their daily surroundings are changing, and their interactions are changing. Maybe this is coming out of a fear of loss, a fear of this change, and they're pushing back with it with the literature, because maybe the literature in school is changing to match who's around them, and that's new and uncomfortable.

I'm 2 years from my number saying I can retire. I never thought I would retire at this age. I'm gonna be 53 when I retire. I really imagined I would be 65, 70 when I retire. I love teaching. I love the interactions with kids. I don't know that I can do this politics. I believe there should be a love for your neighbors, a caring for each other, an empathy, and a consideration. I believe everyone's story has been impacted by their environment, their background, and what has happened to them. I believe the only way we get to know and understand each other is by knowing and understanding those things. We don't have to experience the world ourselves if we can experience it through books.

Growing up, I wasn't inwardly rebellious. I don't remember intending ever to rebel. I was the pleaser *until* someone needed defending or something wasn't liked, and then, I would step in. That's only increased as I encounter more of those situations. I'm a rabble rouser now. I'm a rabble rouser in standing up for what I think is right—not seeking trouble for the sake of trouble or for the sake of adrenaline but for the sake of defending what is right. I'm not fighting these specific texts being banned. These are the texts that are banned. So, I'm fighting for them. But to me, I'm fighting for the freedom of thoughts, that someone needs to be able to read and think these books as their freedoms, and that when we take that away, that is the first step, and then there's a next step, and then there's a next step. So, to me, if I believe in democracy, if I believe in the Constitution and in the ability of my students to think critically, I don't ban a book. Because when I ban a book, I've told my students they're not capable of thinking about this. I've told my students they're free to think what I think but not free to disagree with me. And if there's anything I want, it's for my students to think whatever they want to think and completely be willing to disagree with me. I'm not looking for someone just to mirror what I'm saying. I want someone to engage and figure it out, because then, they're going to go out in the world and do the same thing.

Now, I'm doing everything I can to read up and choose other works because I had to edit my list. I took out *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Adichie, but I included some others by Adichie. I'm working with a librarian, an assistant manager at Barnes and Noble, an owner of an independent bookstore, and a couple of college professors to keep an eye out for alternate multicultural texts. I've found some. I've read some others that I don't think would work, but they're really interesting, and I have 10 more in the queue. So, we're

hunting. What I'm finding interesting now is I'm going to the book list that's approved and the book list that's banned: the banned includes authors who are openly gay. Their books have gay themes, gay characters. Whereas in the books that are acceptable, I found four LGBTQIA+ authors so far, but I had to hunt.

I also have a student teacher this year. She's my fourth student teacher. She graduated from the high school where I teach in 2019, right before the whole Covid year. Ironically enough, she took dual-credit to avoid having me, but she's got me now. We have a lot of conversations: *How do we choose our texts? What do I want out of a text? Where are my voices? What voices are coming in? How do I highlight those voices?* I'm hoping that's something that I can guide her into as a baby teacher instead of waiting until she gets it accidentally somewhere else. Honestly, we probably ought to start putting multicultural literature into the undergrad curriculum. I think in teaching, you can either have a teacher with 27 years of experience, or you can have a teacher with 1 year of experience that's been repeated 27 times. Our kids need us to keep experiencing and growing. The kids need to see that. I think we impact that with our conversations in the classroom.

My Reflection: Dorothy

Dorothy's past experiences continue to impact the decisions she makes within her classroom, which aligns with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). By conducting "an in-depth study of [her] individual life as a whole" (Kim, 2016, p. 303), I found Dorothy's past experiences—from her friend's racist father who opened her eyes to prejudice, to the history professor who taught from the loser's perspective, to College

Board’s diversity statement—taught her not only the importance of learning other perspectives but embracing them as well.

By following Clandinin’s (2016) advice to learn about the “cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic” (p. 40) conditions in which my participants were raised, I discovered that despite growing up shy, sheltered, and surrounded by several rebellious siblings, Dorothy became an outspoken, educated, and self-described “rabble rouser” who believes in empathy, the importance of stories, and defending what is right. Her decision to teach and fight for multicultural literature embodies Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) assertion that “teaching and teacher knowledge . . . [are] expressions of embodied individual and social stories” (p. 4). Dorothy’s story can also inspire others to pushback against censorship, giving her story the power to “make a difference in society by planting a seed for social justice” (Kim, 2016, p. 237).

Her beliefs of the importance of perspectives and multicultural literature also represent the voice or counter-narrative tenet of CRT, which asserts that BIPOC writers have “different histories and experiences . . . that the [W]hites are unlikely to know” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11). She also noted making the effort to find stories by LGBTQIA+ authors or with LGBTQIA+ themes as the district banned several such texts, which connect to queer theory’s assertion English teachers can better society by teaching their students stories by “people of color, queer people, and queer people of color” (Schey, 2020, p. 114). Furthermore, Dorothy exhibited the “moral imperative” aspect of critical theory with her actions concerning book banning (Kim, 2016, p. 36). By taking photos of the banned books the district required teachers to box up, speaking to a local reporter, recruiting other teachers to appeal the banned books, and speaking in front of

the school board, Dorothy took “an activist stance” to “raise consciousness” about censorship (Patton, 2015, p. 692).

Like Dorothy, Alice also experienced sexual abuse in her youth. *Where the Heart Is* and “its epiphanic power” allowed Dorothy to realize her abuse had not been her fault, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* began the healing process for Alice (Kim, 2016, p. 19). Both women experienced firsthand the power of reading as a mirror and a window (Bishop, 1990; Style, 1988), further leading them on their separate but connected paths to advocate for multicultural literature.

Alice

Alice grew up in the north in a city that bused students of color to the predominantly White schools. She attended a private liberal arts college, where she was largely involved in on-campus activism for sexually assaulted women. She moved to the south in her early 30s and has been a teacher for nearly 25 years. Throughout her career, she has worked in schools ranging from rural to urban and has taught a variety of English courses and levels, including British literature, multicultural literature, and AP courses.

Alice’s Life Story

I grew up playing outside and spent my summers outside and at the park. We lived on a dead-end street next to an assisted and independent living facility for older folks, so it was a fairly safe place to ride our bikes up and down the street because there wasn’t a lot of traffic. During the summer, the Parks and Recreation Department had college-aged kids who worked as the park directors, and they had arts and crafts, a wading pool, and, obviously, the playground. When I think about my childhood, we were at the park. We were playing in the pool. We were playing the Mandala game—we didn’t

even know that it had a name—but we used rocks instead of beads. I remember the chlorine tablets for the pools were white and puffy, and I remember the smell of the chlorine if the rec person let you put the chlorine into the pool, which was a big deal. I have a brother who's 13 months younger than I am, so I also remember playing at my grandma's apartment. I remember swimming and having plastic wading pools, and I remember my grandma watching my dog, who somehow got into some sort of poison and died. I babysat from the time I was probably 10, and I remember I made a dollar an hour and thought I was hot snot. I remember summers where I would end up watching seven or eight other kids so the parents could go out and do whatever it was that they did, and I was in charge of all these children just running amok.

Looking back, I was told I was precocious and probably too smart for my own good, but I was very social, very curious. I liked to be in charge, and apparently my kindergarten teacher told my mom I tried to boss her around, too. I knew I was smart, but I still didn't have lot of self-confidence in that. I liked learning things, I liked knowing things, and I liked learning things about people. I was always very social, always a people person, and extroverted for the most part. I liked to be around adults and a part of the conversation. I liked to act older than I was and grew up as a very sarcastic person from the get-go. I think I was always a little adult in a child's body. I was also very small, so I feel like in a lot of ways I had a little Napoleon complex, like I had to prove to everybody that I wasn't just a little girl. I wanted to prove that I could do all the things, so I was very competitive as a result of that.

I don't remember too much about kindergarten, but I remember some of the centers because we played a lot. It wasn't like it is now. If there was a curriculum, it was

more about socialization than anything. I remember we had the cardboard bricks, so you could build with the bricks. I remember we had wooden trucks, and there was almost like a jungle gym that was inside the classroom with the rope ladders and that kind of thing. I remember climbing on that. There was a kitchen, so we played house a lot. I don't remember kindergarten a whole lot, but I do remember first grade because that's when I started the gifted program. Once a week for the afternoon, a couple of us got. I remember there only being two people in my reading group because we were advanced readers. When we went to the library, the two of us could go pick out chapter books, whereas other kids couldn't pick out chapter books. During whatever morning work we did, the two of us had to write journals, and we had a book of vocabulary words we were encouraged to choose from and use. From that point forward, I was in split-level classes. So, in second grade, it was a 2/3 split, and in third grade, it was a 3/4 split, and in 5th grade, it was a 5/6 split. So, I was basically in class being exposed to the next grade level's curriculum. While I didn't necessarily skip a grade, I was continuously around other kids who were older, and I was getting that curriculum too. I don't ever remember there being a real differentiation between the two or the teacher ever saying, "Okay, now, we're going to do fifth grade things. And now, we're going to do fourth grade things." In third grade, I do remember the teacher had the class kind of divided, with the third graders on one side and the fourth graders on the other, but in the second and third grade class, we were all mixed together. I remember feeling like the lucky girl because we had to switch rooms once when our room was being painted, so we had to go down to a different room, and I got to sit next to the cute boy at the table instead of having my own desk.

By the fourth grade, my gifted classes were off site, and instead of a half day, it was a full day. We had projects, and that's where I learned about the Holocaust. I think I've always been an empathetic person, and I don't like it when people are being hurt and destroyed for who they are through no fault of their own. So, I did a report on Adolf Hitler, and for my presentation—I don't know if it's good or not—I dressed up like Hitler because we were encouraged to be creative with our presentations. I made myself a little Swastika out of construction paper, I slicked my hair back, I made myself a little construction paper mustache, and I did my presentation as if I were Hitler, which now would probably get me canceled straight out of anything. It was also a multi-genre project to some degree, so I remember one of the things I did was I wrote—not really understanding fully what a letter to the editor was or that it was supposed to be on like current events—a strongly worded letter to the editor about how awful the Holocaust was. So, out the mouth of a 10-year-old came, “How dare we do that? We can't ever let this happen again.” Now, as an adult, I'm wondering who was the poor schmuck that got that letter and said, “What the hell is this?” Because I'm sure they probably passed it around, saying, “Here's a little elementary school kid who doesn't know her butt from a hole in the ground, and she's schooling us on how horrible the Holocaust was. And it's not a current event, because she's writing this in 1982. But, by God, she wrote a letter to the editor.” At the same time, though, they gave us the freedom to do that. “You want to write a letter to the editor? All right, cool. Write it. Here's a stamp. Here's the address. Send that bad boy off and see what happens.” Other students did contact folks, and they got responses back, and that was a big deal. I remember doing a project on alcoholism, and I ended up going to the local AA chapter and picking up pamphlets. I remember

interviewing somebody at the junior college, and it might have been for my Adolf Hitler paper, because I think I might have interviewed a history professor or something like that, a historian. We did stuff like that. I remember doing a report on ballet because I wasn't a dancer and that was fascinating to me. So, it was very student driven, very student choice. I learned how to do basic programming when I was in the gifted program, and I did a report on slavery. For our projects, we had to do a presentation, so had been presenting material to my classmates since the second grade, and the fear of presenting was kind of not a big deal at that point because it started so early. Everything we did required research. My parents would drop me off at library on Saturday mornings, and I'd be in there flipping through the periodical, the Reader's Guide to Periodical Literature, and getting my microfiche requests to find articles and books I had to read in order to do these reports.

In 6th grade, we had this thing called Zoo School. They took the top two or three kids from each elementary school, and we went off campus and literally had school at the zoo for the entire 6th grade. It was really cool. We didn't have any textbooks. We had two classrooms and two teachers: one did math and science, and the other one did English and social studies. I remember I read *Animal Farm* in sixth grade, and I learned how to, in terms of math, do coordinates and basic algebra in sixth grade, so when I got to seventh grade, I thought, *Okay, we kind of already done did this*. We were outside a lot, and during the winter, the big pond in front of the zoo would freeze over, so we would ice skate out there. Then, in the spring, that's where we learned how to canoe. I learned how to do tree identification, and I learned Pythagorean theorem way before anybody else did because we used Pythagorean theorem to figure out the height of a tree. We had to do a

leaf project where we had to collect all these leaves and identify them, and we had kind of like a flow chart of leaves and things like that. We were also paired up with somebody, and we were junior zookeepers for 6 weeks the last part of the school year. So, we spent 2 weeks with three different groups. The first group, we were with the woman who did the penguins and penguins had just had babies, so we couldn't go into their enclosure too much. I also got to clean the snow leopard cage. I'm sure now people would say, "The hell are you doing letting your 11-year-old do that?" But I do remember being in this cage, just looking, and probably three or so odd feet away, there was the snow leopard. I said, "Hey, buddy." Then, near the end of the school year, we went on a week-long camping trip, and one of the nights, we basically just had a tarp and rope for tent. Our teachers basically said, "Okay, go build." We had learned how to tie knots, the advantages of keeping the tarp low to the ground, and how to start fires and all of that stuff. Then, at the end of the year, we all had a presentation about an animal we had chosen, and our parents walked around the zoo, watching each our presentations about our animals as they walked through. So, that was a big deal, and yeah, that was 6th grade.

I also read all the time. It was a way for me to escape my family, in some ways. My parents read the newspaper every night, but the only other publications we ever had in the house were *People* magazine. So, it was not a literacy-rich home, and I don't know where my love of reading came from, because to this day, I cannot recall my mother ever picking up a book and reading it. I don't recall being read to. I recall listening to stories at my grandma's house because my brother and I had a tape player, and we had stories on tape, so when you got to turn the page and the tape did the little ring sound, you turned the page to follow along with the book. I feel in a lot of ways reading was just an inherent

part of who I've always been. When I was 10, 11, and 12, I went through my Stephen King phase. Who goes through a Stephen King phase at 10? That's insane. Now, I think, *Would I buy my kids those kinds of books when they were 10?* My other favorite growing up was *Mrs. Brisby and the Rats of Nimh*, because the rats were gifted, too, and so, in a way, I was able to connect with these rats because they were smarter than their environment. I, too, was a rat in that regard. I have memories of just always bringing a book with me, even reading in the car, which is something that not all people can do because it makes them sick. My grandmother lived about an hour away, and we went to her house every other weekend, so I read a book on the way there, and I read a book on the way back. If there was nothing to watch on television, I read a book. I just read a lot growing up.

In seventh grade, I went to junior high, and if I were to go back and look at the yearbook pictures, it was mostly White, probably 75% White and 25% Black. The weird thing was, though, that the Black kids didn't live near us. They were bussed in, and that was true all through junior high and high school. I grew up with Black kids. I wasn't necessarily besties with them because I basically hung around kids I lived near, and the Black kids lived on the other side of town. Because I walked everywhere, I couldn't walk to my friend Evelyn's house because she quite literally lived on the other side of town, but she was in my Girl Scout Troop, so we grew up together in that regard. It was very strange, thinking back on it, that a lot of my close friends were White just because that's who I lived around. One of my besties was biracial; her mom was White, and her dad really wasn't in the picture. I remember her wanting to brush my hair because she couldn't brush her hair the way I could, but because her mom was White, she didn't

really necessarily know how to help her take care of it. Where I grew up was very Dutch and Dutch reformed, and very White for the most part, so, my experience was mainly with White people. The biggest thing, I think, that kind of divided us more so than race was socioeconomics. My mom didn't work, and my mom wasn't educated outside of high school. My dad worked in a paint factory, and even though he ran computers, which made him kind of special, I remember when he graduated with his associate's degree from the junior college, which was a big deal. I grew up very blue collar, very paycheck to paycheck, so I remember those things as the differences with my friends versus racial things. I never heard any negative racial things come out of my parents' mouths or out of my grandparents' mouths really, not even little microaggressions like "those people" or anything like that. I don't really recall hearing those types of things growing up from anyone other than my maternal grandmother, who, when you played eeny meeny miny moe, would say, "Catch a n-word by the toe," and she used to call macadamia nuts n-word toes. Now, I think, *Oh, sweet baby Jesus. What was wrong with you?* but she was a product of her time, so I can't fault her too much.

College Experiences. When I went to college, I ended up going to a small, private liberal arts college, and when I got there, I thought, *Where did all the Black people go? There's nobody here.* The only reason I was able to go there was because my parents were poor, and I got a buttload financial aid, which allowed me to go to a private school for the cost of a public school. They had us do a summer reading experience, so when I went to orientation, they gave us *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and told us to read it. We moved in on a Saturday, and then, on that Sunday, they put us in small groups so we could discuss it. That was the first time that I had read a book in dialect, and it was really

difficult for me at first because I didn't even read *Huck Finn* in high school. We had read very traditional kinds of things, like *The Crucible*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Great Expectations*, *The Pearl*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, and *The Scarlet Letter*—just stuff like that, very canonical stuff. So, I read *Their Eyes Were Watching God* right when there was a resurfacing of Hurston and thought, *Holy shit. Janie is cool as fuck, and her grandma's whack-a-doodle, but you can't blame her.* There were these issues, too, of Tea Cake and the dog, and I thought, *Ahhh! Why must she suffer?* Then, I started to realize that maybe these are Black women's experiences. So, that started to shape where I went from there. These Black female authors have different stories, those things are important, and I want to know more about them. When I was a junior in high school, I had been date raped by an ex-boyfriend, but reading *Their Eyes Were Watching God* became the catalyst for my speaking out. I couldn't really deal with it when I was at home because that would be admitting a lot of things, and, as far as I know, my parents still don't know. Abuse and that sexual exploitation happens in a lot of African American literature, so I think I was drawn to that common experience. It wasn't because of our skin color; it was because our femaleness or our womanhood had been taken advantage of by people who were trying to exert power and control. I found that it became very empowering to talk about it because I was in a city that nobody knew who I was and nobody knew who he was. That was really freeing for me because I was able to kind of explore and deal with that event in my life. That became the focal point or the catalyst for me to really advocate for those things. As a result, my freshman year is when I really healed a lot from that trauma, and I used that to fuel my work with SHARE. SHARE was a group on campus, and we started a safe house for people who had been sexually assaulted to provide a safe place. We did

education on campus and take-back-the-night walks. We were trained as peer counselors. and we talked to all the freshmen about the frequency with which sexually assault happened—I could rattle off statistics like nobody’s business—that consent was a big deal, and that it didn’t matter whether you had been drinking. I also remember being very influenced by the movie *The Accused* with Jodie Foster, where her character was drunk and gang raped, and I remember being very disturbed by that. Again, just the idea that people thought that they had right to put their hands on other people. So, that was a big part of my college advocacy. Every paper that I wrote had a feminist twist to it because I was just really always very interested in how women fit into all of the things.

College was also where, for the first time, I had friends who I actually knew were lesbians or bisexual. One of my mentors who ran the women’s center where I worked was a lesbian, so I hung out with her and with her wife. She came during my sophomore year, and she was always very open about how she had her daughter and was really an advocate on campus for that group of people. Because I worked for the women’s center, I did things for her and with her. We had women’s retreats, and there was even a time when I questioned my own sexuality. There were people who I met in college who I just wanted to hang out and be with. Reading Adrienne Rich and bell hooks, some of those real big feminist leaders of the third wave, really opened the possibility for me that things were not black and white. That everything, probably, and everybody, is on some sort of spectrum, that sexuality is a continuum, and that it’s okay to be attracted to people and qualities in people. I realize that that’s probably what it was for me, because I never really felt a sexual attraction to a woman. It was always very emotional or intellectual or that kind of thing. Being in college and around friends who were gay gave me an awareness

of that community, and it made me realize that not only were they being discriminated against as women, but they were also being discriminated against for the people they loved and who they were attracted to. Even for me now, there's a difference between gender, which I believe is socially constructed, versus biology or your sex, which are the parts that you're born with. So, I've always been curious and open to just how other people are, how other people live, and what kind of experiences they have that are the things that we share in common but also the things that make us uniquely different.

It wasn't until I took a constitutional law that I realized how I, too, was a product of *Brown vs. Board of Education* and that's why none of the Black kids lived around us when I was in school. We didn't ever really talk about it. It just kind of was. So, it wasn't really until I got into college that I started to connect the dots and start to make connections. We were the result of busing because I walked to school. I never had to take the bus, except for sixth grade to Zoo School. If you lived within 2 miles of the school, you didn't take the bus—you walked. Once I got into college and started reflecting back on these things, I realized 90% of the kids who rode the bus were Black because they lived literally on the other side of town. So, growing up, I always thought it felt like it was like half and half, Black and White. I'm sure it probably wasn't demographically, but that's what it felt like. It wasn't until college that I realized that's probably what had happened.

Sophomore year, I took an American literature course and read *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and that was the first time I had read it. I started to see how a White person was trying to do something to sort of advocate but not quite getting it right. I saw where biases come in, how we're really kind of products of our environment and our own

sociopolitical issues, and how people were trying to try move in the right direction but falling short a little bit. Junior year, I took a course on Richard Wright and Zora Neale Hurston. I read *Black Boy* by Wright and basically all other things Hurston had written. That was probably the first class I took where the sole focus was on Black writers, and the dude who taught it was this little old White dude who was probably a new critic and looked at it from that perspective. I remember reading *Native Son* and thought *Holy schnikes*. So, I started to get different Black voices and experiences in my head, and all those things were coinciding with each other. College was also where I rediscovered Alice Walker. When I was 12, I remember seeing the movie *The Color Purple*, and I was just transfixed by it. Then, I read the book, and, of course, the book is so much better. I thought, *Wait. They left out all this stuff!* If I had to trace it back to who the most influential person was who got me interested in not just women's literature but African American literature, it would absolutely have to be Alice Walker—she's my girl. I've read just about everything that she's published. I ended up doing my undergraduate thesis on her works and the ideas that she presents as a Black woman. So, I've always been kind of intrigued by the Black woman's experience, how that differs from mine, and the privilege that I have. I'm also very cognizant of being a White person talking about or studying people that I don't have a firsthand experience with, so I'm very aware of my privilege.

When I think about college, I think about those being very formative years of my life; learning about who I was, what I liked, and how I thought; and being around professors who encouraged me to think for myself and to come up with my own ideas. I ended up with an English degree as well as a philosophy degree mainly because I just

really liked the professors. I took every course that they offered, and by the end of it, they said, “If you take this one other class, you’ll have a major.” I joke that my philosophy degree is very lucrative, but I liked learning. Philosophy is all about thinking, how people think, and how they view the world and people’s places in the world. That was always just really fascinating to me, but you can spiral down into a pit of despair if you take it too seriously.

I met my husband in college, and right after we graduated, we got married and moved to the city to live with his grandma for a little while. I felt more racial stuff living there than I did where I had lived on the opposite side of the state. It may have been because the city was much more diverse than where I grew up. Right out of college, I got a job working in a home health care agency, and a majority of the workers that were in the department that I was in, which was mainly clerical work and that type of thing, were Black. So, I hung around with them, and they were also considerably older than I was. I was 22, and they were in their forties and fifties, so they had been doing this for a hot minute. It was boring, but it paid the bills. When I transferred offices, I was in a city that was predominantly Black, so the demographic of where I was working shifted. Once again, most of my coworkers were Black, even the nurses and home health aides. I remember that I was one of the only White people that hung out with them. I went out to dinner with them once, and then we went to go see *Waiting to Exhale* together, because we all passed the book around the office and had a little book club kind of a thing. I just remember we were supposed to meet at 6:00, so I got there at 6:00, and I was quite literally the only White person sitting in this bar. It wasn’t until 6:30, quarter to 7:00, they all started rolling in, and they said, “Girl, you know we work on CP time. I don’t even

know why you were here on time to begin with.” I said, “That really was dumb of me. I apologize.” Then, where we went and saw the movie was a predominantly Black area, and I just felt very aware of my Whiteness that evening. I tried not to act like I was nervous about it, and I wasn’t nervous in terms of feeling like something bad was going to happen or anything like that. I was just very well aware of my otherness in that situation. Reflecting back on it now, I know how some of my students feel when they’re one of the only brown-skinned people sitting in my class in a sea of White people. It’s just a nervousness of difference and a big realization that you are not it. You are not like the others. But even then, they would tease me about how I wasn’t really White, that I could hang with them, and that I wasn’t afraid to hang with them. I liked the same things that they liked, and we could talk about our differences of Whiteness and Blackness without it being defensive or anything like that. So, that was a really good job for me for the time because I really did get to know a lot of different people. Even though I was college educated, I was sitting in there with all of them, because what do you do with an English degree until you figure out what you want to do? So, I worked there for about a year and a half before I started going to grad school full time.

Becoming a Teacher. I continued my focus on Black authors in my master’s. I looked at Gloria Naylor, everything by Gloria Naylor. I read *Plum Bun* and just so many things, anything that I could really get hands on. So, I really was kind of immersed in 1930s Harlem there for a while. When I started my master’s—which is in English, not education—the plan was that I was going to teach college. I thought college offered all the things that I wanted, and I think that’s because I was so immersed in college for so long, that was what I knew, and that was what was comfortable. I enjoyed having those

conversations. So, my friend and I ended up joining the program together. She was able to become a TA for the English department, and I did not. There were two positions, and we were fully expecting that both of us would get them, but I ended up getting a grad assistantship that helped them with their accreditation instead. We became friends with one of our professors who was not too different from us in terms of age, and she said, “Y’all, the pay, not that great.” And we said, “Well, shit. We got bills to pay.” What we really wanted to do was teach English, so we looked into secondary ed programs. We found out that the pay scale was much better for secondary ed than it was for college, not realizing that they pay us that salary to deal with all the other crap that goes along with it. We went into an accelerated MAT program. I substitute taught along the way and realized that middle school was not my gig, that elementary school was even more not my gig, and that I definitely needed older kids because I did better with that age group.

I student taught at a high school in a large suburb, which, at the time, was home to one of the largest Jewish populations outside of New York City. The school was still very culturally diverse, with Jews, Chaldeans, Muslims, and I think I remember at one point they said something like over 80 languages were spoken by the students, so their ESL program was huge. What joined most of them together, though, was that they were rich as hell. So, socioeconomically they were all very well off. One girl said to me, “My birthday is coming up, and I can’t decide. Do I want an Audi? Do I want a Mercedes?” and I said, “Girl, I’m driving a Ford Escort. I don’t know what you want.” I was paying to be there and struggling to pay the bill. Education was expected of them, though, and a lot of immigrant families and/or first gens were told, “By God, you are gonna get an education. You are gonna go out and do something.” I student taught 10th grade, which was

American lit at that school, and it was called the American Dream. We had 9th grade as well. In American Dream, they had a cohort where they paired up a social studies teacher and an English teacher. We were on an AB block, and throughout the semester, there were one or two times where the kids would have us second period, and then they would have him fourth period. So, when we did things together, we could do it second and fourth because it would be an even day. There were accordion doors that would separate the two classrooms, so like we could unfold the door and join the two classrooms together so that the kids could do something together. I remember they did a muckraking paper, and they created a newspaper or something together at one point, so that was kind of cool. The department head at the time was Black, and that was the first time I had ever heard at a staff meeting or at a department meeting or something the word “differentiation.” I just remember thinking *What?* I was in the middle of this program, and nobody had ever mentioned it, but it was always there. We just never used a buzz word for it. We just made different stuff for different people depending on their abilities. So, we said, “Oh, okay, cool, like no problem.” Now, everything’s got a name.

I finished my student teaching in December of 2000, and then, probably right after Christmas, my husband and I moved to the northern part of the state. He had just graduated from orthotic school, so when he was done, he got a job. So, within a very short proximity of me finishing my teaching certificate, we moved. I did some subbing and that kind of thing at first, then I ended up getting a public-school teaching position. The northern part of that state is White. Period, but there are a lot of native tribes up there. The Ojibwa is the main one. But there’s also Cherokee. There’s also Chippewa. There’re five major ones in the state, but most native folks lived on the rez. So, they only

came into town to get groceries, and we had casinos. I think there was one biracial kid the entire time I was there. The rest is White, as White as you can possibly get, because who wants to live up where it's cold, right? It was really, really just White compared to what I've got now, which is 4% Asian, 7% Black, 21% Hispanic, 63% White, and 5% multiracial. So, definitely much more diverse than what I was introduced to. I would probably get so fired if I did this now, 23 years later, but when the Internet was just starting to be a thing, I found this lesson plan online. It was focused on Gloria Naylor, and the title of the article was "Mommy, What Does [n-word] Mean?" It's a very good article. It has since been retitled, and I can't remember what the new title is, but I had done graduate papers on Gloria Naylor, so she was my girl, just like Alice Walker was previously. I don't regret this on a pedagogical level, and I would not have done this had there been people of color in my class. So, the lesson plan, and I want to say it was from a Liberal lit website, was to write the word on the board and have it covered, so that when kids come in, they did a quick write right about what does this word mean to you? And that was the day that I got observed—unannounced. Now, 20-some-odd years later, I would never do that. I was nervous to do it, but at the same time, I was surrounded by White people who would casually use that word because there was no one around them who would be offended by it. I felt like it was my duty on some level because I had lived downstate. I wasn't a native to the northern part of the state. I had known Black people. I had been friends with them. So, that put me in a category that was not only different from my students but, in a lot of ways, different from my colleagues, because a lot of them never freaking left the area. That's where they lived. That's where they went to school. That's what they did, and that's where they stayed. If they did go downstate, it was for

vacations and very casual things. It was not to actually live. If I recall correctly, I had heard the word, or something had prompted me to. At the beginning of the article, Naylor talks about how she's sure she had had access to that word growing up, but it was used in a much different way, and she says that she recalls the time when a White boy turned around and said it to her, and it was at that point she realized he was using language as a weapon. So, she went home, and she says what every Black parent is expecting one day is to have to explain what this word means when it comes out of somebody else's mouth who is not in the community, not in the neighborhood, not in the family, and that it's meant to be used to dehumanize and degrade. That was also when the word "ghetto" was starting to become an adjective, and I remember being absolutely incensed by it as a sub hearing kids use it, saying, "A ghetto is a noun. It is not an adjective." It was, again, this reappropriation of language to describe someone or something as subpar, as lacking, as jankity, as whatever, and trying to get my students to see what felt like it was damn near impossible. I kept trying and discouraged them from using the word. The article is really good because she talks about how not only had she heard the word growing up, but she also goes into this thing about how language is actually made and that consensus is what allows us to have language. When we all agree that this is what a word means, that this symbol plus this symbol plus this symbol happens to represent this object, we have to agree upon that. Otherwise, it doesn't make sense. So, that was her lead-in to this idea that we have to agree that this word means these things, and when we no longer come to a consensus that that's what it means, then that throws everything on its head, and that we have to confront the fact that for some people in some groups, the consensus is that this word means this, but that in different groups, we can have a different consensus. Again, it

was right when the word gay, too, was being used as hateful—“You’re so gay.” So, that was the beginning because I think it was a unit on either *To Kill a Mockingbird* or *Huck Finn* or something like that where the word comes in, where we were having to discuss when people use language hatefully with the full knowledge that they are going to get a reaction out of somebody for saying certain words to certain groups of people, and that was being used maliciously and not just an “Oops, sorry, didn’t know what that meant” kind of a thing. I think I would probably still teach the piece because I think it’s an important text, but I definitely would not be writing the n-word in big, black, bold letters on the chalkboard to have them write a reaction to it because I’d probably get fired and make my students of color feel incredibly uncomfortable.

The lesson went well, actually, all things considered, once the initial shock wore off because that was the whole point of the opening to shock people into thinking, *What is gonna go on?* Once my principal saw where I was going with it, it was okay, because he did stay for the entire lesson. Some of them will bop out after 5 minutes, and you’re thinking, *No, you have to stay for the whole thing in order for this to make sense. Please don’t think that I’m this bigot that you’ve hired.* When we talked about it, I apologized to a certain degree because I would have warned him had I known he was coming. Not that I would have necessarily changed my lesson, because I’ve always been a what-you-see-is-what-you-get. Schedule it, don’t schedule it, whatever. Come in. You’re gonna see the same thing regardless, and I wouldn’t have changed the lesson. I just would have given him a little bit of a warning to let him know, “Hey, this is where we’re going with this, so please don’t jump to the wrong conclusion too early if you’re not able to stay for the whole thing.” For the kids, the whole idea that language is fluid and changing kind of

blew their mind, that words were really arbitrary, that everything's just kind of made up, and that we agree as people to what things mean in order to have both a spoken and a written language. I think it allowed them to see words differently, a little bit. I mean, that's my hope, right? That at least one or two people saw it and thought, *Oh, okay, I probably do need to watch what I say or how I say it, or make different word choices, because I don't necessarily know how these words are going to affect people.* Then, that opened up the door for us to talk about how words are used in books, when they're used, how there is a historical context, and how looking at things with 21st-century eyes wasn't always appropriate. We can still do that, but it's unfair to judge it completely by our standards now. Just like how Harriet Beecher Stowe did something big with *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and by our standards, she still fell short a little bit, but by the standards of her time, she was incredibly progressive, very edgy, very bold, and brazen in a lot of ways. So, we have to recognize it for what it is at the time that it was written. Sure, we can still criticize it and still say, "Hey, this is where they fall short, or this is why this book wouldn't be written now, or this book is still important for us to read now, even though it's hundreds of whatever years later." I think that they were fairly receptive to it. I know a lot of them were just kind of mind blown, but that's good, too. Students were different in the early 2000s. It was before phones and before social media, and I don't wanna sound like one of those old people who say, "Back in my day, we didn't have to deal with all of that," but that made teaching different, made communication different, and made what the kids knew and what they were exposed to much different. They were only exposed to what they had experienced either through film, TV shows, or their personal experience. There wasn't this global connection to a gajillion people through the Internet

like there is now. So, making kids more aware that there was a world outside of the area they lived in actually did happen, it was important, and there were bigger things out there than just this small town of 13,000 people.

When I was up there, I also remember teaching Chris Crutcher's *Whale Talk*, which was about an interesting group of kids and varied protagonists, so it was multicultural in terms of they weren't all White, they weren't all able, and they weren't all the things. I also taught *Catalyst* by Laurie Halse Anderson and because some of those kids were that character. I taught mostly short stories. I know initially I tried to teach Zora Neale Hurston. There was a lot of freedom. I taught *A Raisin in the Sun* and the American Dream. I'm sure I did more than almost what I do now, which is kind of scary, because we didn't have a textbook. So, everything that I did, I had to gather on my own. At one point, I taught *Lord of the Flies*. I taught *A Separate Piece*, and we talked about the fact that the two guys were probably gay, so that sent them into a whole other tailspin. It was multicultural not in terms of ethnically multicultural but that being gay wasn't a whole acceptable thing as it is now. People didn't talk about it as much as they do now. I felt some sort of moral or literary obligation to expose them to something different. I was, and still am very much, of the mindset, "Dead White guys? Ew." So, I try when I can to introduce different voices. Those decisions were intentional based on what we had available to us and what I saw as lacking. I also taught *Things Fall Apart*, again, as a way to expose them to things that weren't just Western and European and White. My decisions when it comes to that sort of stuff are usually pretty intentional. I taught the book *Spite Fences* and had to censor the scene when the protagonist is up in a tree and witnesses a Black kid getting his ass beat basically by some White kids. One of the things that they

do to him is that they urinate and ejaculate on him, so I had to put a big disclaimer sticker on the book, skip certain pages, and just kind of tell them, “Hey, this is what happened,” but the minute you say, “Hey, make sure you skip these pages because they might be offensive to you,” there’s nothing that will get a kid to go to a page faster than telling them not to go to that page. So, most of them ended up reading it. One dad didn’t want his son reading *Spite Fences*, so I had to find an alternate text for him, but for the most part, I don’t think kids care as much as we think they do. They just see it as “Oh, okay, it’s an assignment, whatever. I’m gonna hate it no matter what. So, does it really matter if I read this one or if I read this one?” It’s really funny because kids don’t get offended at things that adults get offended at, and it always cracks me up that they’re much more open to difference and things like that, and they don’t get their panties and a twist over things that adults get theirs into a twist over.

Pushing Back. We were there for 5 years before we moved down to the South because my husband decided he didn’t want to be an orthotic guy anymore. He is now a registered nurse, so we ended up moving down here because there were better job opportunities and so he could get a job in doing something that he liked instead of the other way around. As a teacher, I can get a job anywhere just about. I was in the first district I taught in down here for 10 years, the second district for six, and this is my third year here in my current district. During pre-planning my second year here, a grandmother and two students were kind of wandering around. I wasn’t quite sure why they were wandering around because it was during preplanning, and they shouldn’t have been in the building anyway, but I don’t think of these things until afterward. I heard one of the American lit teachers say, “Well, that’s a question for the multicultural lit teacher.” So, I

said, “What do you need to know about multicultural lit?” and the grandmother asked, “Well, I just want to know how much CRT the multicultural lit deals with.” I said, “Ma’am, if you can define what CRT is to me, I’d be happy to answer your question, because I don’t even really know what it is other than the fact that it’s a legal theory, and we don’t teach legal things. We don’t teach law in this class, so my guess is very little.” My colleagues heard “CRT” and swarmed. Then, people are pressing the buttons and asking, “Why is this person in here? Why are we having these conversations?” Whereas I’m thinking, *Let’s go, bitch. Let’s have this conversation if you wanna have it. If you can define what CRT is for me, I will be happy to let you know whether or not I teach it.* Then, the grandmother said, “Well, I’ve just heard,” and I said, “Okay, that’s great. I’m glad you’ve heard that, but it is a legal theory, and we don’t teach law in literature class. So, I guess to answer your question, the answer is no.” Finally, my department head showed up and said, “Ma’am, you’re really not supposed to be in the building.” At that point, they wanted to escort her out instead of having the conversation.

At the beginning of last year, we were given a don’t-use-these-texts kind of list, which included *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie, and the only reason is that he mentions the act of masturbating because he’s a 16-year-old boy. I think he mentions it on two pages, and I said, “Okay, so we’re going to abandon this whole book based on two pages? This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard of in my life.” So, we taught it anyway because the unit we were looking at was talking about identity, and Junior, the main character, is living in this dual world where he’s got his life on the reservation and also the opportunity to go to the White school where the education was better. So, that resonates with me, and I think that I still wanted to teach it because

kids down here aren't exposed to a lot of Native Americans, despite the fact that so many things in the South are named after tribes. There's a disconnect there. At the same time, maybe they could see themselves in Junior, and that's what I like about Alexie's books, too, is these books are real and kids like to read them because they can relate to it. To say we're gonna toss this whole book and all these really deep issues of things that I know our students are going through because of one paragraph? For real? It's so asinine that it just boggles my mind, but that's how I feel with censorship 99% of the time. I feel like we're throwing the baby out with the bath water. Then, if I say we're gonna skip this paragraph because he talks about an "inappropriate" thing, I'm just perpetuating this idea of what's appropriate and what's not appropriate. People are just trying to shelter kids from things they already know about. That's what I don't understand. Your kid knows about masturbation. I hate to break the news to you, you might not think that they do, or you might not want to acknowledge that they do, but they do. So, I wasn't going to throw out Junior's whole story because he jacked off once or twice in the book or talked about the fact that he did or wanted to or something. So, we still chose to read chapters out of it that really kind of fit with what we were going for with regard to the overall theme of assimilation.

Last year, I taught honors multicultural lit, and we read *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. I had completely forgotten about the five or six pages of really uncomfortable stuff. To me, that was just a part of the book, and those experiences were very influential in who these two women became. Most of the kids really liked it. They were very angry, but in a good way, and also very sad. Because honors classes are made up of majority females, for them to see how females in different parts of the world are treated by their

spouse made them very upset in addition to just the story and the characters themselves. There's a section in the book where Miriam sees that her husband is reading pornography, and it's not really a description that I would consider super juicy or racy or anything like that. There's also her first sexual experience when they consummate their marriage. Unfortunately, these two things happen at the beginning of the book, and I had a student who's one of nine kids from a very conservative Christian home, which is fine. His mom sent me an email. She was very nice about it and wasn't ugly about it. She didn't say, "Oh, no child should be reading this." She just said, "For our family and for what our family values, I would just request that you allow him to read a different book, because this is a little bit too explicit for what we usually allow." So, I had to find something else for him to read.

I am very much a rule follower because I don't like getting in trouble. I don't like getting reprimanded. I don't like adults that I respect, or even sometimes that I don't care if they respect me or not, being disappointed in me. But representation matters. When kids can see their own culture in their books and can see things they do being legitimized through the story, I think that reaffirms their place in the world and their importance in the world. That tells them their stories are worthy of being told, and not just worthy of being told but also worthy of other people reading them so that they, too, can experience and learn about other people, other cultures, and things that aren't like them through the stuff that we read. Over my career, I think my attitude has become more about how we can incorporate more things that are representative of the people who are in my class versus how we can expose White people to other things besides those things that are just White to make them better people. So, that's what motivates my decisions to incorporate

multicultural lit. It's reaffirming. It's a nod to them. Everybody wants to see themselves represented in what they read because then that connection is stronger and better, and they can criticize things and say, "No, that's really not an accurate depiction of what goes on, at least in my family." If we don't have that personal experience, then we have a tendency to read with the acceptance that what people are telling us is true. We need somebody there to say, "No, that's not really how it happens" or "This is an exaggerated version of what goes on" because that helps put the literature as a text into perspective as well. My students need to know that I value them, and one way I can show you that I value you is to read literature of your culture, or your people, or things that you can resonate with to validate that your experiences are worthy of the rest of us reading. Students need to see that their culture has a literature, uses words, and tells stories, and those stories are important. Everybody else needs to hear those stories, too, so that maybe they understand you or maybe you understand yourself a little bit better. Maybe you don't know why your family does things a certain way, so when you read somebody else's experience that has enough similarity, you can see yourself in them. I want my students to be able to see themselves in the stories that we read too.

My Reflection: Alice

After conducting "an in-depth study of" Alice's life (Kim, 2016, p. 303), I found that her "experiences taken collectively are temporal" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 19). From attending zoo school and surviving sexual assault to working in a mostly Black office and teaching an all-White class, Alice's past experiences continue to influence the choices she makes in her curriculum and classroom, a crucial element of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because narrative inquiry is situated within "a three-

dimensional space with temporality, sociality, and place,” I also looked at how Alice’s “cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic” conditions impacted her life (Clandinin, 2016, pp. 39-40). I found that growing up with diversity and a love for reading and learning led Alice to be “curious and open to . . . how other people are, and how other people live, and what kind of experiences they have that . . . we share in common, but also the things that make us uniquely different.” By living in both the North and the South, Alice has been impacted by “topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes,” particularly regarding views on race (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 51).

Alice has taken “an activist stance” numerous times in her life, from working to defend abused women in college and “change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful” (Patton, 2015, p. 692) to teaching multicultural literature because she believes she has “an obligation to . . . help those whose voices are ignored.” Her decision to teach the lesson on the n-word and intentionally bringing in books that would “expose White people to other things besides those things that are just White” demonstrates critical theory’s “need to develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society” (Kim, 2016, p. 36). Furthermore, her feeling of a “moral . . . obligation to expose” White students to multicultural literature aligns with the “moral imperative” of critical theory (Kim, 2016, p. 36). Likewise, by still teaching *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, a book her district banned, Alice exhibited the fifth tenet of CRT: voice. She argued that students in the South “aren’t exposed to a lot of Native American” literature, which corresponds with CRT’s goal of presenting authors the opportunity “to communicate to their [W]hite counterparts matters that the [W]hites are unlikely to know” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11). Alice’s actions also align with queer theory’s

goal “to challenge normative knowledges and identities” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 43-44) with her efforts to “plant the seed” when reading texts, such as whether or not Jay Gatsby was gay when teaching *The Great Gatsby* or that Truman Capote was bisexual when teaching *In Cold Blood*.

Like Alice, Evelyn also came to an awareness of having White privilege. Alice noted that she is aware of “the privilege and power that I have as an educated, middle-class White person,” while Evelyn discussed knowing she has “White privilege.” Alice argued that “whatever privilege we have, I feel like we have an obligation to use that to help those whose voices are ignored or who are stifled.” Likewise, Evelyn has told students whose parents may not have the language skills to help them that “I will be your White privilege.” Both Alice and Evelyn mentioned using their privilege to advocate bring awareness to other cultures in their classrooms, with Alice continuing to teach *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, despite being banned in her district, and Evelyn refusing to “hang up the Ten Commandments” without also representing other religions.

Evelyn

Evelyn has spent her entire life in the same southern state. She was raised by outwardly racist parents and lived a sheltered life until attending college. She has been in education for 15 years, first as a paraprofessional and now as a teacher. In that time, she has taught a variety of English courses and levels, including American literature, British literature, and oral interpretation, in addition to coaching speech and debate.

Evelyn's Life Story

I got in trouble a lot as a kid because I have ADHD. With ADHD, I was constantly getting trouble for going off. One of the earliest times I remember really getting in trouble and getting a spanking was for hiding and refusing to come out when I was being looked for, and my mom got really upset. I remember hiding under my bed. I remember hiding in the closet when I was little. I got into a lot of stuff just because I was curious. I plundered a lot and had a wild imagination. I can get lost in my own mind for hours and was like that even as a child.

I was also curious, very curious, very bright, very skeptical. I could read by the time I was 5 years old, and we had a set of encyclopedias, so the first thing I looked up was Santa Claus, kind of out of skepticism. The first line was “Santa is a mythical old man.” I remember asking my mom about it, and she knew where I was getting at, so she refused to tell me. I knew something was up, so I went to my grandmother, and without giving her any backstory, I asked, “What does the word ‘mythical’ mean?” And she said, “Well, not true or not real.” I said, “I knew it! Santa Claus is not real.” My mom still tells that story to this day, but I clearly remember I just knew something was up. I was mischievous in that aspect; I never took things, for the most part, at face value.

As a kid, I was always trying to find out why something was like it was, trying to uncover something, so I read a lot of informational texts. Because my mom was a reading teacher, we’d spend a lot of the time in the summer at the library. I always checked out stuff on mummies, and my mom thought I had just this weird obsession with death. It was really, I think, more of an obsession with culture—they buried their pets while they were still living with them and all their possessions. I also remember being really

intrigued by all the concentration camp stuff and with human nature, specifically what motivates people. I've always been fascinated with African American culture. I remember as a kid loving going into how different cultures celebrated Christmas, Halloween, *Dia de los Muertos*. I found out knowing that my grandmother's parents immigrated from France, I remember reading that in France, Santa Claus was called Pere Noel, or Father Christmas. That sort of thing always just fascinated me. Just knowing that there was different stuff out there has always been fascinating to me. I would just down these different rabbit holes as a kid. One thing would lead to another.

As far back as I can remember, I remember going to church, especially during the years when my mom was a stay-at-home mom. We were at Sunday School. We were at Sunday night church. We were at Wednesday night church. I went to Bible school and did all the things. I was told people that went to church were better. They're better people. Those are the good people, the ones that worship God, and you'll go to hell if you don't, so you've gotta get saved, because once saved, always saved. I was raised Southern Baptist, but my dad was raised in a Catholic home, so he never attended. My dad was very passive. He didn't have too much to say about anything. But things he said in passing were racist. The n-word was common vernacular in our home. I was taught that Black people were lazy, unintelligent, and inarticulate. I was taught Black people did not go to college or have a job but were into crime. I was told Black women were on welfare with 25 kids.

Most of my educational experience was very negative. I remember clearly getting licks in first grade, but when I got to second grade, my teacher was Black, and Miss Cooper was everything my parents told me she was not supposed to be. She wasn't any

of the things that I had been told was reflective of African American culture. She was just a normal person that was actually better to me than a lot of the White people in my life. She loved me. She told me I was sweet. She told me I was smart. She was the first teacher who ever did that. Before, I'd gotten licks for not doing what I was supposed to be doing at the time. She was the first person that actually took time to redirect me or kind of try to figure out what motivated me, what it was that I liked. We had a reading program, and I remember having to go get these colored cards. She would always go and pick out my cards, saying, "Hey, I want you to do this one." It was always like she knew what would pique my interest and what would make me do better. She would always ask for my opinion on something. She just saw that I saw things differently, or she knew what I was interested in instead of, "Well, this is what we're doing. This is how you're supposed to be doing that. This is what you're going to be doing it, regardless of whether or not you like it." She kind of tried to find things that I would like. Even during reading time or when we went to the library, she would come with me and pick out things that she thought would interest me. She taught me that poetry was like a puzzle and I had to figure out what they really meant. I was a second grader, but I remember she said, "Sometimes, it's not really what they're saying. You have to kind of look for what they're really trying to say." Being a kid with ADHD, I could get through a few poems where I couldn't get through books. She just took time with me, but I suppose she did that with all of her students. But to me, it just sticks out because I was a different kid that spent a lot of time getting in trouble. She understood that I was impulsive and that if I said I needed to go to the restroom, it meant that I needed to go then, not wait. She just understood me as a kid. She didn't treat me like there was something wrong with me. She

never got on to me. She never yelled at me. She never spanked me. She never hit me, pinched me. She was just always calm, and I can't ever remember a time being in trouble with her. To this day, she will always be one of the biggest saints in my life. After having Miss Cooper, I started to question if Black people were as bad as I had been taught. It just takes one little thing to get me to start questioning, and then, it just kind of propelled me to look into whether there were other good Black people in the world. I started looking into things that were supposed to be stereotypical, and I thought, *They're not so stereotypical.*

Growing up, I watched *Sesame Street* and *Mr. Rogers*, but when *Reading Rainbow* came on with Lavar Burton, I couldn't watch it. My parents would not say it was because he was Black, but they definitely called him the n-word. If I shuffled my feet, my parents would say, "Pick your feet up, you're not a lazy n-word." If I used certain slang as a kid, I would be told, "Stop talking like a n-word." I couldn't wear certain clothing, braid my hair, eat watermelon, or tap dance without being told those were "n-word" things. In third grade, I made a poster about things that I liked, and I put my favorite food was fried chicken and watermelon, which I'd been taught was a Black thing, and I liked tap dancing and wanted to take tap, but I was told, "No, that's for n-word people." Music was another thing. I remember figuring out quickly that music was a lot like poetry; there was a lot more to it than what you just heard. But if I listened to certain music, I heard, "That's n-word music." I also wanted curly hair, so I got my hair permed, but then, they started making fun of me for having kinky hair like a Black person. It was just always something, and my parents would call me an "n-word lover." They would make it very clear that I wasn't allowed to mix with another race because it just wasn't natural. They

told me we weren't meant to mix with other races and mixed kids were half-breeds—that's how they would refer to them. Sometimes, they would come at me with, "Imagine being a child that's mixed, and everybody hates you, and you're confused because you're not White, but you're not Black. I would never want to do that to a child. I would never want to bring a child like that into this world." They said White women who married Black men were trashy. If my mom didn't like somebody, she'd say, "Yeah, she's White trash with her little half-breed kids." From an early age, I was specifically told that I would never be allowed to date another race and that I'd be disowned.

In fifth grade, I remember being so fascinated with a Black boy named Richard, because when we were doing gymnastics in PE, he could tumble even though he'd never been taught to tumble. He just learned how to do it, and I remember because I loved gymnastics, and I just remember being so fascinated with him. He was the only Black boy in fifth grade, and Daylene Bowers was the only Black girl. There were only two Black kids in the entire grade. I don't remember any Black kids in third or fourth. It wasn't until fifth grade. Richard wasn't even in my class; we had PE at the same time, and I remember being so fascinated that he could tumble, he could do a back handspring.

In sixth grade, we moved halfway through the year because my mom started teaching at a school that was, at the time, predominantly Black and Hispanic. I started going to another school just outside of town, and because it was February, they had already started a Black History Month project. But my mom didn't let me do anything on Martin Luther King Jr. because she said he was a radical who brought chaos and that he was not a peaceful man even though he was portrayed as one. She used the excuse with my teacher that I was new so I wasn't going to do the project because I was already

behind, but at home, she said, “No, we’re not we’re not focusing all of our time on doing that because we don’t have a White history month.” She did not want the reason that I failed the class to be because they didn’t do White history.

At my new school, I was introduced to more people of color. I also started listening to more music around the sixth grade, and one of the groups that I was first interested in was The Jets, and they were a Hispanic group. The Hispanic population wasn’t as predominant when I was a kid as it is now, but everything I knew about them came from my parents, who thought they were illegal. At that age, I knew every derogatory term based on what I learned at home about people of color. I had a black cat and named him Spade because we found him when we were playing spades a lot. My parents were quick to tell me that’s a derogatory term toward Black people, and they thought it was so funny I had named my cat that.

After my mom started teaching more students of color, I did see her start to ease up some in that time. She loved some of her Black students very genuinely, but she would make fun of their families being drug dealers and she’d make fun of their names. She would say, “I love the kids, but their parents are worthless.” She eventually started teaching Black history, and I remember being totally shocked by that. She held firm that Martin Luther King was a bad person and would not put up the Martin Luther King poster, but she had up Bill Cosby, Frederick Douglass, and O. J. Simpson. The Bill Cosby and O. J. Simpson are the ones that I find ironic now, looking back. So, I saw that she actually hung up those posters in February, but I think that was more because she wanted to tell Black kids, “Oh, you can be better than.” Even though she eased up, I still wouldn’t have been allowed to date or that sort of thing outside of my race. She still said

one of my Black teachers was stupid and made fun of her for using some sort of AAVE. She would make fun of Black people and call them stupid, saying, “They’re not even smart enough to speak properly,” and that sort of thing.

When I was in the sixth grade, I was also pressured into to being saved at Youth Camp. I remember not really understanding it but understanding all my friends were doing it and I should probably do it, too, so I didn’t go to hell. I had been taught that if you didn’t go to church, you just weren’t that good of a person. But those teaching kind of fell to the wayside whenever my mom started working 5 days a week. Suddenly, we were not going to church because she was tired or had grades due, that kind of thing. So, that was kind of contradictory.

Finding My Place. I did not have another great teacher until eighth grade with Mrs. Harris. She was one who had me tested for gifted and talented (GT). What I didn’t know before that was in sixth grade, I’d been tested for ADHD and was diagnosed with ADHD. I just didn’t know it until I was an adult and found it in medical records. My parents, essentially my mom, kept it from me. So, my teacher had me tested for GT. She’s also the one that entered me in a speech contest. She’s the one that kind of introduced me to the high school theater teacher she was friends with, and that’s kind of where I finally found my place. I stayed close to Mrs. Harris throughout my time as a young adult and ended up working with her as an adult.

Finding speech and debate really forced me open my eyes. I think my eyes were already always looking, but it forced them open. In speech and debate, you do not get a choice of what you want to debate. Say you get a resolution. The resolution is the resolution, so resolved. If you drew “Aff.,” you would have to say, regardless of how you

felt about it, that your topic was a good thing. You're forced to look at both sides, whether you believe it or not. That was when my eyes were opened to a plethora of things: gay rights, separation of Church and State. How are we using Judeo Christian beliefs, when we were founded on the principles of separation of Church and State, to dictate who gets married? We basically came here to get away from the oppression of the Church, but we're still using the church to oppress people? I started looking at all these things because I had to debate autonomy, had to debate from an ethical standpoint on autonomy and equality and all of these things. I started to get that there's so many things are wrong with our government, especially in the South. So, speech and debate really got me to look at both sides of a topic.

I was still a member of the young Republicans my at the start of my freshman year of college. I tried to stay in my lane, where my parents wanted me to be. I was on Bob Dole's campaign, and I sat in the atrium at my college, urging people to vote for him, saying, "Abortion is wrong, and gay marriage is wrong." That didn't last long, though, because that would have been in my first semester at college, and after spending some time in speech and debate at the college level, that flipped. I started to really understand what it meant about a woman having bodily autonomy and gay rights. Early on in the semester, I learned my best friend since high school had an abortion prior to starting college, but she didn't tell me about it then because she didn't want me to hate her, judge her, try to convince her not to do it, that sort of thing. We were all together one night, and it was one of those nights where you all start spilling your deepest, darkest secrets. She told me, and I said, "Why didn't you tell me? I would have supported you." That was kind of an eye opener for me because I never want anyone to think I would hate

them or judge their circumstances, regardless of my beliefs. It also turned out that some of my best friends from high school were gay, but they weren't out in high school. Once they told me, I realized I was cool with that almost immediately. My parents, of course, would make fun of it. They said theater was for "queers" and the "homo" kids, that the only boys that did theater were gay, and I'd say, "That's not true." They told me all gay people had AIDS and that's where that's where AIDS came from was gay people. But I had a number of gay friends and even went to a gay club for the first time. What I saw was just people being happy and themselves and nice. For a demographic that's treated so ugly, they're not ugly, hateful people. It was just fun. It was lively, it was entertaining. It was interesting. It was just happy. I can't explain in any other way; the world came to life in that in that little room.

By the end of my freshman year of college, I was definitely left leaning, definitely. It was a huge, huge change for me. This was also a time when I was getting to experience other parts of the country. So, I was getting to kind of see people from all walks of life. I became really introduced to other cultures and other people who were more comfortable in their skin, with their identity, that sort of thing. The college had a study abroad program, I guess that just brought over a lot of kids I now had classes with people who spoke differently. I went to a night club that was predominantly African American for the first time with a friend. I also went to a deaf community near the area where I'm from. I had started learning American Sign Language (ASL) early on in elementary school because my mom would always drop me off early, so they would get me to assist with the deaf children in the morning getting their breakfast. Then, I was in theater at college, ASL was a new program they were starting. So, when I came off of

stage from a play, and I don't know why, but the head of the department approached me and said, "Hey, would you be interested in learning ASL?" And I said, "Sure," so that's kind of when I switched my major to ASL. I took 2 years of ASL, and it just kind of stuck with me. I guess because of my theater background, it was something I took to naturally. I was also involved in teaching at small old church close to my house. It was a very, very small church. The nursery and Sunday school were together, and I had kids from other cultures there, too.

My parents had very distinct thoughts about who people were, what they did, and how they were, so I grew up very sheltered. In high school, I literally went home and to school, home and to school; I had not been allowed to do much of anything else because my parents believed the world was bad, so bad things could happen to me. That's the way it was explained to me, that "Oh, you could get hurt. You could get hurt. It's not safe," that sort of thing. So, I didn't get to do a lot of things that my peers got to do in high school. I wasn't allowed to date in high school or work a job. I knew I had to pick somebody they would agree upon if I was ever going to get out of the house with that person. I thought that if I acted like I was supposed to and portrayed that I was what they wanted me to be, I'd get a little bit more freedom. That was one of the things that pushed me into marrying the first person I ever dated because I wanted to get out of the house, even though he was a staunch conservative who hated gay people. We got married, and I had my son 2 years later. We worked at a children's home with up to seven kids, children from different backgrounds, in the home at one time. All my girls were African American. The oldest one used to love doing my hair, and she toted my son around on her hip like he was hers. A few years later, I found out my husband was having an affair, but I still

stayed with him because we lived in the children's home as parents. Then, I found out he was messing around with his best friend's wife, both of whom went to our church. What really got to me was our church pastor took him out to lunch and gave *him* permission to divorce *me*, when he was the one who'd had multiple affairs, including one with another member of our church. They gave him permission to divorce me because infidelity was a forgivable sin, but they thought my abandoning the marriage when we separated was the ultimate sin. That's pretty much when I became a feminist, because it was this whole idea of being able to control me because he made more than me and that sort of thing. When we got divorced, one of my gay best friends went off on a tangent about how "we hated him." I always knew they didn't like him, but they wanted to throw a big celebration party.

A few years later, I remarried and had my two daughters. When my youngest was about to turn 4, my sister, who was a school administrator, suggested, "Hey, you ought to start subbing for a little extra money." So, I started subbing, and within a month of being hired as a sub, they found out that I knew sign language. I was offered a paraprofessional position working with a student that had autism and was deaf. So, that was my first real experience with the special education world, and I was with her for several years. But in that time, I started working with gen. ed. kids, getting them to come in and work with our life skills kids, and doing that, I just realized there's a lot of kids like me out there with ADHD and stuff. I realized, wow, this really could be for me. Basically, I was determined to become that teacher—I don't know, it sounds very cliché—but the one that I needed when I was a kid.

The beginning of my 8th year as a para, I went back to finish my degree. I was also working with culinary and ran a student-led café at the school. All my student leaders were Hispanic females, and they were independent, intelligent, so smart, so business driven. But they knew that that was where it was gonna stop, because they were going to marry a Hispanic man, have Hispanic babies. If they worked outside of the home, it would be something they did from inside the home. We had kids who had taken our standardized testing, and they had scored high enough on the test that they could automatically go into dual-credit English, so college. I said, “You need to go into dual credit. They’re free. The classes are free here. You get some of your college classes out of the way. You’ve got to do this.” They said, “I’m not smart enough for that,” and I said, “Your score says you’re smart enough for that. You’re getting the same score as your White peers. Just because you speak Spanish in your home does not mean you are less than.” But they said, “What? I’m smart enough to do this?” And then, they’d come back, and they’d say, “Well, my parents said I didn’t need this,” and I said, “What!” So, we talked about it; we would talk about each generation, especially within the Hispanic culture, the Mexican American culture, each generation—from grandmother to mother to you—and how things have gotten, that it lies with you to make that change. So, that became a huge thing for me.

We could be passing up kids who are the ones that are going to change the world, that are going to inspire change and difference. But those kids are getting silenced and pushed aside. I couldn’t understand why a counselor couldn’t look at those test scores and go, “Okay, this is my list of students that automatically get into dual-credit English. It’s free. I’m going to speak to every one of those students and tell them to get into dual-

credit English.” You could have done it in one big group. You wouldn’t even have to gone one by one by one, but nobody said anything. But they’ve reached out to my children, but not one of my Hispanic kids, not one of my Hispanic girls. There were three of them at the time helping in my life skills class on a regular basis, and nobody had said, “These are your scores. You can take these classes for free.” There are barriers, though; sometimes, we can’t talk to parents because of the language barrier, and girls specifically get left behind. I just want to see the best for every kid, and I can’t stand the thought of the color of their skin being the thing that holds them back. It just doesn’t seem right. They are intelligent, and that contradicts everything that I’d been taught as a child that the vernacular made them less intelligent, and the fact they didn’t speak English fluently made them less intelligent. Now, I say, “They speak two freaking languages!” One of my girls was held back a year, and they assumed it was either her non-English-speaking, or she was special ed. The child literally gets into fourth grade, and they find out she can’t see, but she did not know how to communicate that it was her vision. She didn’t know, because she was seeing with the same two eyes that she’d always seen with, and her parents didn’t know. That was all it was. Her senior year, that kid is doing dual-credit classes, but she was held back way back when all because she couldn’t communicate that she had vision problems.

I remember when DACA [Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals] was at risk for being repealed the first time; I guess that was when Trump was first elected. I had a family of three Hispanic girls, and only the youngest was legal, and I told the other two, “I will hide you in my house. I will take care of you.” Because I super loved those girls—still do to this day. My sister was an elementary school counselor at the time, and when

he got elected, kids in kindergarten, first, second, and third grade were crying hysterically because they thought it meant that ICE [Immigration and Customs Enforcement] was going to come pick up their parents. I had Hispanic students who would not fill out the FAFSA [Free Application for Federal Student Aid] because they thought it was going to give the government their address, and they were going to come and take their parents. These are legitimate fears that these kids experience every day. Hispanics are under attack because they're "illegal." It just infuriates me. I don't know in what teachings of Christ you think that Jesus would be okay with building a wall and denying refuge. What part of that makes sense? That's why it was around this time that I last attempted to go to church. I was sitting there with my kids, three of them—my oldest was in high school at the time, and the two girls were late elementary. They went straight to Leviticus and started preaching about how if you're friends with gay people, you're condoning the behavior and subject to going to hell, too, because if you're not telling them that it's wrong and participating in any friendship with them, you're equally as bad. I got up with my kids and walked out. That was the last time that I attempted. Because it just went against everything I was teaching my kids about being kind to others. I thought, *Wow, I'm such a hypocrite for sitting here*. In that moment, I felt like I was more of a sinner by allowing them to sit there and listen to that, that we gotta be ugly to people who are gay because if we don't, we're going to go to hell, too. To me, that's religion in nutshell; it comes down to just being mean to people and using that freaking book as a justification for being mean to people. I'd say it's more about organized religion. It's just hateful. It's hateful. I just can't do it. That was a defining moment in my life.

Becoming a Teacher. After 9 years of working as a para, I finally finished my degree in communication. The school where I was working had an English position open, and they asked me to go take the certification test just to see if I would pass it. I didn't think I would because I'm not an English major. I'm a communication major. But I got in there, and I passed it the first time. I only took the test because the school said, "Hey, go take it, and if you pass it, then we'll put you in this English position full time. Otherwise, we're gonna put you in there as the long-term sub making peanuts." Then, I was actually recruited by another school to teach culinary arts because they found out about my involvement with culinary arts at our school. The school I'm at now called me and said, "Hey, we've heard about you in culinary. Would you come take this position?" I took it because it was a full-time teaching position as opposed to sub pay or para pay, and I'd already taken my test by then, so I got the scores while I was there. I was in that job for a month when they found out I'd passed my certification to be an English teacher, and they said, "Hey, we've had to shift some people around. This person's moving to admin. Would you take this English position?" I never really considered being an English teacher. I always thought that I would go into speech or special education because of my background in life skills, but I ended up in English. I really like it because it's a combination of theater and communication and then, of course, all the grammar and stuff that I've always been strong at. But that is where I have been the last 5 years, teaching at a charter school. When the owners created this charter, they created it because they had grandkids that were neurodivergent, ADHD, and dyslexic, and the school system was not meeting their needs. So, that is originally why they opened the school. Now, it's just become this place where, when kids are being bullied or made fun of at another school,

their parents—because it’s a public charter and a free option—bring them here. Kids that are kind of, maybe been outcast, a little bit different. We focus a lot on fine arts, which draws kids who are a little bit more cultured and liberal, to an extent. I think we just evolved into that. I’ve had more trans students at this school than I ever would have had in just typical public school. It just kind of happened naturally over time.

Since I started teaching English, I have taught from a sociological standpoint. Before we ever dive into a text, I want my students to understand the author. I want them to understand the time in which it was written. I want them to understand that everything they encounter, even if it’s a Meg Thee Stallion song, and that’s the example I will use, that it has a message to it. So, that is one of the things that I like to get across to students. First, we learn about the author, then the time period and that sort of thing. I want kids to understand that it wasn’t just written to entertain you. It’s not just about the mood and the motifs and the themes; it’s greater than all that. They usually really get into it. When I was teaching American literature my first year, we got into *The Crucible*, and they all said, “Ughhhh,” and I said, “You know what? *The Crucible* really isn’t about the Salem witch trials. It’s not about that at all.” So, we started talking about McCarthyism, and we started talking about how the media, politicians, the government, and society used fear to control people and get them to do what they wanted them to do. We talked about how that was also what was going on during Salem witch trials and how they used fear to control people. I had Muslim students in my class at that time, and they were talking about the connection to post-9/11. I also had Mexican students in my class, and one—I still remember it clear as day—said, “Like when Trump said that all illegals are rapists and thugs?” He repeated the exact wording. I said, “Yeah, like that. Are they all rapists and

thugs?” He said, “No, lots of my people are here undocumented.” So, getting kids—without me saying it—to make those connections is what I enjoy. They seem to enjoy that, too.

When I began teaching British literature, I started with *Beowulf*. I really started teaching it because it was almost like a rite of passage, like reading *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *1984*, and all the other things that are pretty standard. When I was a student, I didn’t really connect to it, but when I really dove into the text, I learned it was an oral tradition passed down from generation to generation, it used kennings, which made it easier to memorize, and it was translated for the first time and written down by three Christian monks. So, in that time, we were moving from paganism into Christianity. They were actually using the text of *Beowulf* to kind of scare people and interest people into becoming Christians, telling them what God could provide with the light and how God took care of Beowulf when there was no chance survival, that sort of thing. So, I decided to teach from that from that standpoint. I also decided to focus on translations of texts. With *Beowulf*, I’ll push the truth that there are many translations available, and each of these translations had their own agenda. I also tell them there are other texts throughout history that have different translations. For instance, we know the King James Bible, but that really isn’t the version. I tell my students, “Hey, you should really read up about King James I. He’s pretty interesting guy,” but without going into it, and then, they find out how Leviticus was changed. So, that is kind of the way I decided teach.

I get to choose which texts I teach, and I quickly learned the things I can get away with. When I became the department head, I had to start telling my department, “Any text

that you're going to cover in the syllabus, I need to be aware of, first, just because I've been doing this for a while and, I think for the most part, I have a pretty good understanding of what's going on in the movement to ban books and stuff." I just want to have my teachers aware of those things and how to head those off should they receive any feedback. And they have. We've had parents who have said, "I don't want my child doing this book" for one reason or another. We don't run into too many problems. We have a dual-credit English teacher who ran into problems with *Sappho* right off the bat, but that is a college class set by the college, so my school has very little say in what is taught in the classroom. But I know what I can get away with. If it's a text that's been there forever, I know I can get away with it. I stay away from anything that promotes LGBTQIA+ stuff specifically—that's one I know I somewhat have to steer clear of. I even have to protect Christianity to an extent. The school did a one act play for competition, and one of the teachers at my school had an absolute fit about that; she was talking about it in her class saying it was inappropriate because the play had God as a woman. Actually, the play is really Greek, and it says "gods plural." So, not the Judeo-Christian "God," capital "G" sort of thing. But when they got to competition, one of the judges, even though she loved the play, ranked them last because God was a woman. So, even though she didn't mention that specifically and was very positive about the play, the actors, and that kind of stuff, she got her dig in with that. But things that are outright LGBTQIA+ and are meant to contradict Christianity or bash Christianity in any way, those are the things I have to stay away from in my literature classes.

I did start teaching an oral interpretation class a few years ago, which is a performance-based class, and there, I get away with a lot more cause they're mostly

theater kids. For example, Dennis Smith has a poem called “Genesissy,” and it’s in the perspective of God as a gay man, how he made the world fabulous, and all this other stuff. So, we kind of threw that in there when one of my students was talking about his walk with faith and God as a gay man to point out this isn’t to make fun of mock Christianity; this is just to say, “Don’t judge my relationship with Christ.” So, we definitely do push the boundaries in that class. In the general English class, where I have 25 to 30 kids, there are taboo subjects we kinda dance around or allude to but do not mention specifically, but not in my oral interp class.

Speaking Up. Last year, I had to fire one of my English teachers. I had to take over the class, grades, and planning for those seven classes. Out of 80 students, 37 students were failing, and two-thirds of those failing were Black and Hispanic students. So, when we started doing assistant principal interviews, that’s one of the things that I’ve asked: “How would you address a teacher who has a disproportionate number of Black and Hispanic students who are failing their class, being written up for behavioral concerns, or have excessive absences in just that one class?” The very first person who answered was a Black man, and I did not like the fact that he didn’t just say, “I would listen to that student, support that student, point that out.” My principal, a White woman, said to me, “You’re a little bit hard. You’ve got to cut him some slack because he’s got to provide, and he’s looking to take on this job.” I realized he could have been thinking, “This is a White woman that’s asking me this question. This could be loaded,” so he just danced around it, but if I was sitting there, even as a White woman, and was asked that question, I would be very prepared to say, “If you don’t want to hire me, that’s your business. There’re a million teaching positions.” But I’m very adamant about that, very,

very, very adamant about that. Then, when teachers have to get their ESL certifications, they get mad because that's another test they have to pay for, take, and get added onto their certification. So, they get mad about that and say teachers say. "Well, they barely even understand Spanish. How am I gonna teach them English? I shouldn't have to. This is ridiculous. This is not what I signed up for. I've got kids that don't even speak fluent English, and now I've got to get them to pass this test, and I just don't have time for that." I don't want to say that I think teachers are racist because that is an extreme word, but I definitely think that teachers need more cultural education, especially in the South. Teachers see behaviors like being loud as being uncultured or as a lack of culture rather than seeing it as a different culture. I think a lot of them didn't grow up in with the trauma that some of these kids did, and because they don't feel safe, they're not going to reveal that to those teachers and make those connections. So, I don't think they're intentionally racist, but there definitely is some cultural bias going on.

That's why this year, we had to go look at the rosters and make sure that all of the EB kids are in my class and all of the at-risk kids who are from a different demographic. For all our "problem" students for other teachers, we looked at the rosters and switched their schedules to move them into my class, so I have them all within two class periods. In a school that's probably about 80% White, my senior English classes are about 50% Black. That's just the teacher I've become. I'm their safe place. I've had kids come out to me in their journals before they've even come out to their parents. If a student asks me to call them by their chosen name, I will call them by that name. If we've got a meeting coming up with their parent that I'm coming to, and the student says, "Please don't mention that," then I will keep that secret. I know that is part of why I will never win

teacher of the year. I was nominated for last year, and I wasn't gonna do it because I'm kind of opposed to the teacher of the year, but my principal said, "You got nominated more than anybody else." I said, "Yeah, but I won't win, because there will be people that come out and vote specifically just to vote against me because of my views on things." But I filled out the paperwork anyway, and wrote about how I let my students know that there is no problem too big or too small that I will not try to help them solve. From day one, I let my students know that I was far from being a perfect student, and I do not expect them to be. I openly celebrate that students come from different cultures, with different languages, different beliefs, different pronouns, and different gods, and in my room, respect for differences is right, and anything but is wrong. Most importantly, creating a safe and welcoming environment comes not just from loving the easy kids but from feeling no shame in loving the tough ones, in spite of the criticism it may yield. Each of them is watching how you treat the other. If they do not learn to write a better essay, I hope they learn to be better people. After all, the world needs more empathy and kindness than it does essayists.

To develop meaningful relationships with learners, I am ever-mindful of what life has already taught them. I respect boundaries but do what I can to chip away at walls. To develop meaningful relationships, I understand that I must often give respect to earn respect. They are entitled to big feelings and big dreams, to make big mistakes, and to be guided through those big things to understand better how to navigate them. Lastly, developing meaningful relationships requires me to show up for the things that give their lives meaning, whether it is an extracurricular event or even their job. And while I may not be able to do this for all 176 students on my rosters, I can try. They just need to know

I care. That's why multicultural literature matters. We live in a multicultural world. The United States is a melting pot of how many other cultures? It's important to understand and see things from outside your own cultural lens, to be responsible and responsive to the world around you. I bring in gay and Black poets and stuff because it's always been important to me for my students to represent themselves. I don't want them to feel like they have to fit inside of a box or whatever. I want them to be able to connect to it, because I think it makes them better performers and stuff, and it shows them, especially living in the Southern that there are other people that feel the way they do. They're in a marginalized group that's hit so hard with suicide, teen suicide especially, and I want them to know that just because they may feel like the odd man out here, they're not in the global scheme of things; there are other people that are out there and that are happy. There are other people that feel just as oppressed as you, that feel just as alone as you, and you're going to get beyond these walls one day and realize that there's a whole world out there of people just like you, people that are willing to stand up for you, and places that you're going to fit in and stand out because of who you are, not how you love.

So, I'm pushing back against this is absolute ridiculousness of book banning. Banning literature falls into them not wanting people to know about history. There's no way that when we teach literature, we can avoid teaching history. English teachers *are* the history teachers. We are the gatekeepers of the things that have been going on in society. We are the ones that know why the author wrote it. We know what was going on at the time. I think what we do is important because without English teachers that teach literature, you would not have an understanding of history. If they make me hang up the Ten Commandments, I'm gonna hang up portions of the Quran and whatever else up

right beside it. I will do that because I am culturally responsive, and I'm going to represent all of my kids in the classroom, not just the White ones that believe in God.

My Reflection: Evelyn

By growing up with outwardly racist parents, Evelyn's life story was truly impacted by the sociality dimension of narrative inquiry that looks at the impacts of "familial" conditions on "our emotions, our aesthetic reactions, [and] our moral responses" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40). Seeing Evelyn's life story unfold from a child to someone whose classes are 50% Black by her own intentional scheduling demonstrates the assertion that "experiences taken collectively are temporal" and continue to impact choices made in both the present and the future (Clandinin & Connelly 2000, p. 19).

Throughout Evelyn's narrative, she demonstrated a clear passion for her minority students, both BIPOC and LGBTQIA+. By refusing not to acknowledge students of non-Christian faiths, she aligned with critical theory by taking "an activist stance" in an effort to "change the balance of power in favor of those less powerful" (Patton, 2015, p. 692). By encouraging her LGBTQIA+ students to express themselves, Evelyn demonstrated queer theory's stance that English teachers, in particular, can combat efforts to "to silence and hide queer lives" (Helmsing, 2020, p. 136). Finally, by making intentional efforts to find texts that would encourage students "to see things from outside [their] own cultural lens," Evelyn supports the voice tenet of CRT that asserts the importance of BIPOC authors who can "communicate to their [W]hite counterparts matters that the [W]hites are unlikely to know" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11).

Like Evelyn, Anne also theorized that banning multicultural literature stems from the fear of Whites no longer being the dominant race in America. Evelyn mentioned “the fear of us not being a White-dominated nation” and “not wanting people to know about history” have led to the rise in censorship. Similarly, Anne noted that “a lot of White people in particular don’t feel comfortable being a minority in a group.” Anne and Evelyn also discussed not having particular books on their bookshelves that might draw negative attention; for Anne, she decided not to put *Flamer* “on my bookshelf,” while Evelyn noted the same for *Milk and Honey*.

Anne

Anne grew up in the South with parents on both ends of the political spectrum. She attended diverse schools and drawn to other cultures. She was married to a man from Japan for several years and has two children who identify as Asian American and LGBTQIA+. Before becoming a teacher, Anne worked as a nanny for several years, including for a boy with special needs. She has only been teaching for a few years but is already active in multiple endeavors to increase multicultural awareness for both students and adults.

Anne’s Life Story

I was born in the South, but we moved to another southern state when I was four. I know it was kind of a culture shock for my parents. We had lived in like a small, tight-knit community, and when we moved, we were suddenly in the middle of a place where we didn’t know anyone and had to start fresh. My mom had grown up on the West Coast and moved to the town where my dad lived when she was 13, but my dad had lived in our hometown his whole life, so it was very different to be in a place where he don’t know

everyone. At the time, though, we left because the oil industry dropped. So, when we moved, there were other families that did so also. They didn't live in the same town as us, but I remember every weekend, we'd see this one family and their kids were like my cousins, so we'd get together, have dinner, and hang out. Then, there were other families that on holidays we got together with because they were from the same place, too. So, we kind of built a little community around us with other people from our hometown.

Where I was born, a lot of people are Catholic, but a lot of people in the community where we moved were Baptists. My dad was born and raised Catholic, and my mom grew up going to Catholic school her whole life but was not Catholic. She was baptized and just a non-denominational Christian. When I was born, my parents kind of split the difference and decided to go to the Episcopal Church because it kind of felt like a combination of the two. So, I was baptized Episcopalian. Then, when we moved, at least at the time, there were no Episcopal churches, so we just kind of didn't go to church for a long time. It really felt like everyone around me was Baptist, and while there were definitely other religions, that was the predominant one. Because of that, the county where we lived didn't allow anyone to buy alcohol on Sunday, and these specific laws were usually kept due to church interaction. There were certain things in the town that I lived in where the church inferred as well. Someone wanted to open a mother's home, and they felt like it was blocked because the church thought it would push mother's rights, too, such as if you did not want to have a child, you could have an abortion. So, that was blocked. A restaurant that wanted to serve alcohol, and that was blocked. So, the Baptist church had a very negative feel in my community and from my stance because I felt like it blocked a lot of things.

Growing up, my parents were, and still are, politically very different. My mom is a Democrat and very liberal, but she's not super vocal about it, and my dad likes Republican ideals, but he votes more third party. So, the way that they look at things is very different sometimes. So, growing up, we could always talk about whatever we wanted. My dad is a lot more vocal than my mom about what he believes. My mom is very anti-guns, but my dad owns guns, and he's even bought one for my mom, which is crazy. So, in some ways, what my dad believes was very similar to how I feel someone might picture the stereo type of living in the South. For my mom, living more in the metro area of the state aligned with how she could see things, so there was almost a little bit of both for both of them, and it never was so drastic in either direction that it seemed like a conflict of their beliefs. I feel like I've always aligned more with my mom in being more liberal and feeling like I would typically vote Democrat, but when I think about my dad, I have a lot of his individualistic spirit where I don't consider myself a democrat, because if I didn't like what someone would say, I'm not going to vote for someone I don't agree with. So, I think that's more like his individual, third party aspect of how I would align, but I definitely feel like my ideologies and ethics align more with my mom and typically more with the Democratic party and just a liberal ideal. My individualistic spirit is more like my dad, though, and I'm vocal like him, too.

I grew up in a house where my mom had friends who were gay, and her best friend from high school would compete in drag shows sometimes. My mom really used to love to buy vintage clothing, so she would buy all these really cool old dresses from, I would say, the forties to sixties, and she always bought cute little hats and stuff from the forties that she would find at, antique stores and thrift stores. So, when her best friend

came to visit a couple of times, he would put them on and get dressed up. It always felt fun. He would show us all of his pictures, too, from when he was in competitions, and in the competitions, he would have on full makeup, so that was exciting to see, because the full makeup didn't happen at our house. We would have fun, and my mom would take cute pictures. Then, he moved to California, so we didn't get to see him a whole lot, but whenever he was in town, he would come and visit us.

I remember starting school and going to a private kindergarten. It was half day, but I remember not really liking it, and I don't know why. I think I could be kind of shy, so maybe I didn't like it because I didn't have close friends. After that, I went to a public elementary school. For 2 years, I went to an elementary school and really loved it, especially my second-grade teacher. She taught well, and she taught us some sign language, so it was really neat to have a teacher that wanted us to learn something that I somehow knew wasn't a part of the standards. I didn't know what standards were, but I knew that it was not something that she had to teach us. So, it felt really special because only our class got to learn that. I was, and still am, not the best speller in the world, and she knew that, but she knew that I had very good handwriting, so she would have me go up to the overhead, and I'd get to write and show how to do the letters in the right order and everything. Whenever we had a bulletin board, she knew I was very creative, and she always wanted to let students be a part of the creation, so a lot of times I got to do a lot of the artwork on it. So, it was nice to have a very collaborative class. Then, starting in third grade, I went the elementary school around the corner from our house. That elementary school was neat because it was very small, and my sister was there at the same time. I feel like my third grade teacher was not the most memorable, but she was really nice. It

was also when I was in third grade that my grandmother took me to see Bill Clinton speak. I remember my grandmother got the tickets, and she was very excited. I remember going in, and he was on this stage in the middle of the atrium before you go up the escalator. I don't remember anything that he said, but I remember listening to him talk, standing in a crowd that was really tight and dense, and feeling like it was important. I think I got to skip school to do it, too, so it felt kind of rebellious in a way, but my grandmother said, "It doesn't matter because this is too important to miss. He's going to be president." So, it felt special, but I don't think I really understood. I understood what a president was, and I understood basic stuff, but I don't think I really understood that this person, for better or worse, will one day be a historical figure. So, it's neat to know that as a young kid, I wasn't necessarily a part of history, but I was a part of witnessing something.

When my sister and I were really little, we went to my great-grandmother's house, and she lived on a farm in Arkansas. She was suffering from Alzheimer's in the early stages, so everyone knew that she was gonna have to go to a nursing home, and my family went to check on her. She said the n-word multiple times, and my sister looked at her—my sister was really little, maybe five—and she said, "Oh, no, we do not say that word." My great-grandmother looked at my sister so confused, and part of it was because she had Alzheimer's, but I think part of it was also that she didn't realize something had changed and that you shouldn't say that word. I don't know what she thought, but she said, "Oh, okay," to my sister. My dad later said, "Oh, I'm so proud of you for saying that. How did you even know that that was a word, let alone a bad word?" because it wasn't a word we ever use. My sister just said, "I don't know, but I knew we did not say

that.” I can’t remember how she knew, but I remember my dad being proud of her and telling her, “That’s such a good job.”

I also remember my dad was the first, and actually maybe the only, person to take me to a voting booth. I remember him telling me who he was voting for and why, as well as how important it is that you have the right to a private ballot and don’t have to share that. When he explained why he was voting for who he was voting for, I remember thinking, *Oh*. It’s always stuck with me because there’s Republicans, there’s Democrats, and there’s everything in between and further off in other directions, too, but there’s also the reason behind the vote, and that’s not because people have negative or positive intentions. Sometimes, it’s deeply rooted to what their job is. It’s not always tied to what you believe religiously. So, when I think about jobs in particular, that was a big reason why my dad voted the way he did. We moved here because the oil industry went down, and he ended up going back into it later in life, but if the oil industry ceased to exist, that would take away his main means to support our family. So, I feel like I was able to see more compassionately how he came from one way to another because of those conversations, and I feel like I can see more compassionately. I might agree with the person someone’s voting for even not the reason why. Sometimes I don’t know why they believe that one thing, but it could be deeply connected to something that they have done a lot of research on or a big connection to that I don’t have any connection to.

When I was in fifth grade, we read *Where the Red Fern Grows*, and when my teacher was reading it with us, she cried. I remember thinking, *Oh*, because I think that was the first time I ever saw a teacher cry, and that made me realize you could be very vulnerable when you’re reading, and even your teacher’s going to be emotional and it’s

okay. My parents never made me feel like it would be weird to cry, but that made me realize it's not weird for a teacher to cry and let me know that even adults can get upset or touched by something. I also remember loving to read the Boxcar Children books and The Babysitter's Club series. I really loved *Anne of Green Gables*, but I don't think that a teacher read *Anne of Green Gables* in the classroom. I remember TV series being out on PBS and just thinking, *Oh, my gosh, she has red hair like me*. Then, in middle school, I wasn't a huge reader. I know I read *The Outsiders*, but I can't remember which teacher I read it with. Neither of my parents are big readers, so I think that could be why. I think my mom was diagnosed as being dyslexic when she was a teenager, which is a really interesting thing because most people weren't diagnosed in her generation, but her dad was a pediatrician, and he was very thorough and ahead of his time. Because she didn't really read anything other than magazines at home, and my dad just read chess theory books, we didn't have a lot of choices in the house unless I chose to bring it in, so I just didn't really care, which is weird to think in hindsight.

Surrounded by Diversity. I grew up going to schools that had a lot of Black students and have become predominantly Black over the years. In middle school, I definitely gravitated more toward people who were Black, and I don't know if that's because that's who was predominantly in my orchestra class—and I was really into orchestra—or if that's who lived closer to me and in homes like I grew up in. I didn't have all the fancy best things, and a lot of the divide in the town was economical and overlapped with the racial. Two of my closest friends in middle school were from orchestra, and after school, they'd walk to my house because my house was near the elementary school and the middle school, so they would come and hang out until their

moms could pick them up. In middle school, I remember we could sit with our class wherever we wanted, basically like any class can, but it wasn't the whole cafeteria. It was just our class, and I always sat with all of the girls who were in orchestra with me, and it just so happened I was the only White girl at my table. One time, all the wealthy White girls at another table said, "Come sit with us, come sit with us," so I sat with them one day. There was one girl who was Jewish, and she was a friend in that friend group, and someone said something that I think hurt her. So, she made a joke about, "Oh, yeah, when Jesus comes back to forgive me for my sins." She was just trying to jokingly make it go under the rug, like, "you kind of offended me, and I'm just gonna say something jokingly back," and I kinda laughed because she was just trying to protect herself, and we were both kind of giggling about it. I remember one of the other girls looking at me, and she said, "Did you really just laugh about that? Are you not Christian? Do you not believe?" I just thought, *What the heck?* and never sat at that lunch table again. I felt like they were so mad at each other about something when someone hurt her in the first place, and I just remember thinking, *I don't want to be a part of this.* It was strange because I had just been invited to sit at the table with them, and then, I was in trouble for laughing about something, but the other person felt more connected to me. I just thought, *I don't have time for this drama.* It was weird.

When I got to high school, I loved my freshman ELA teacher's class so much. It was one of the first times that we would read something and watch the movie but not just for fun. We would actually compare it and watch different versions, even if it was just a part of it. So, when we read *Romeo and Juliet*, we'd watch parts of the Baz Luhrmann one from like the '90s and also the Zeffirelli one from the '70s. We talked about how we

either connected with different parts of them more, how it connected with the original text, and what parts were different. It was the first time that I really remember feeling like I was analyzing things in different capacities instead of, “Okay, this is just filler. We’re watching this for 2 days because I don’t want to teach for 2 days.” She really just made it fun and not a worksheet. It was more discussion based, and I felt like she was really interested in what we thought. I remember her mentioning that the woman who played Juliet in the Zeffirelli version was from Argentina, and she probably said that to push more conversation. In the ‘90s one, it’s still predominantly White and predominantly White males, but there were a few people of color in the movie, which is a lot more than some other things that you might watch from that time. I feel like conversations about race were very comfortable to have, and if stuff was talked about or said, no one said, “Oh, don’t talk about that.” I did, however, start to notice more of a divide in high school than anywhere else. My parents were never really talked about the Confederate flag or anything, and I knew a certain group of people had that flag and what it was can what it was connected to, but I didn’t realize how much of a culture there was behind it. When I would see it, I knew historically what it was connected to, but I started to see a super negative cultural connection to it in high school because it’s all the kids had a truck and that might be on it as a sticker or something. I remember feeling very kind of sad because when they were younger, they all might have been in the same friend group as Black kids.

When I was in 11th grade, my best friend was a Black guy named Kahlid, and everyone thought he was my boyfriend because we were always together. Apparently, one time when I was late to class he’d been going around saying, “Where’s Anne? Where’s

Anne?” and when I got there, someone said, “Oh, my gosh! Your boyfriend was so worried about you!” I said, “Who?” and when they said his name, I thought it was funny because I never even thought anyone would imagine that we were boyfriend and girlfriend. I just thought everyone knew we were best friends. It was really strange to me, but it was also layered weird because if I went to his house, his dad always wanted to be in the room because I was a White girl. When our friend who was a Black girl would go there, if it was just the two of them, his dad would leave them alone together. It was like he felt like if something were to happen, he’d rather it be with a Black girl. Then, one night, Kahlid told me he was gay. I remember we were talking on the phone because we hung out a lot, mostly in person, but we were talking on the phone, and I think, in hindsight, he wanted to say it over the phone because it probably felt safer and he wouldn’t see my facial reaction or something. I remember saying, “Oh, okay,” because that was never something I would judge, and I think I’d always kind of known a little bit that he could be, but I didn’t want to assume. I don’t remember what all I said, but I remember however I said it, it was like so relaxed that he said, “Oh, my gosh! I just can’t believe how easy that was. That was easier than I thought.” Then, I remember, and I don’t know if it’s the time or where we were, probably both, he told me, “Do not tell anyone.” I was only the second person he’d told. There was a boy that he had told, and the other boy was also gay. I think they had kissed, but they were never in a relationship. The summer after my junior year, that boy died. I remember Kahlid calling me and telling me, and at that point, I think only four people knew that Kahlid was gay. I remember it being sad because Kahlid couldn’t really talk about the loss that he felt in the same way as he could

if he had been able to tell everyone how he felt or how he identified. I felt protective of him and just what people would say.

My senior year, 9/11 happened, and I wouldn't say we had a high Muslim population but higher than a lot of places maybe. I remember people saying stuff like, "Oh, don't hang out with so and so" because that person was Muslim, and it always seemed very strange to me. One, I didn't grow up in a super religious family, so I didn't see that as a social barrier, and two, we were all kids. It was such a strange thing for 18-year-olds to say something like that to me, and I thought, *Why would you even think that?* That was always very strange to me. So, sometimes when people say, "After 9/11, the world came together," and I feel like in a sense it did, but there was still a lot of negative dialogue and a lot of separation, and I feel like I saw that more in a negative sense after 9/11.

When I originally went to college at 18, I started off as a math major. I'm a very practical thinker, there's always an answer in math, you can say where you will use it, and it made more sense to me. Once I started taking classes at the college level, though, I thought, *I don't like this*. I didn't feel like I was as good as it as I was in high school. I probably could have been better had I worked harder, but I just wasn't as interested. I never felt like I was a great writer or had even really enjoyed reading before, so I never really felt like an invested reader or that I wrote well. I'm not the best speller, so I always thought, *Well, I'm probably just a horrible writer*, but that doesn't always equate to the same thing. Then, when I was in college, I remember writing papers for just those comp one and two classes, and the professors that I had saying, "This is really good, and you have good ideas. You understand this." That was very shocking to me. I think it can be

difficult when you're young, if you're a very analytical person and you don't know how to hone that in, to even get started or to get started in a way that ends up with a good product, but as you get older and are in charge of your own time and how you manage it, being very analytical is helpful. So, knowing I was able to analyze things, show what I mean, and actually say something meaningful made me start to like English as a subject area but not necessarily as a content area to teach children.

Then, I met my first husband, who was from Japan, so I started taking Japanese classes so I could communicate with his parents, who, at the time, they didn't speak any English. I didn't end up getting very far, but my intention was to be able to hopefully have a bit of conversational level Japanese. We had to go through the process of him getting his green card together. We ended up getting married, and I took a break from school when I got pregnant with my son, who was born the month after my 22nd birthday. When he was 2 years old, we went to Japan for 3 weeks, so that was neat. There was a temple with this little dog that you're supposed to pet for a specific reason, but my mother-in-law didn't tell me why. It was by her house, so I would touch it every day. Then, a few weeks later, I ended up pregnant again, and my mother -in-law said, "It was all for fertility. It worked!" So, we, the kids and I joke about that how, like, okay, I got pregnant because of that little dog statue. Unfortunately, though, my first husband was not supportive of me going out to things and being supportive in scenes or marches, so a big part of my life when a lot of people might have gone to a march or been a part of a group or something like that, I didn't really have the choice. Then, as my kids got older, I got divorced, but that time of my life shaped a ton of how I feel about things and how I feel about my kids, because my kids for me are not first generation, but on their dad's

side of their family, they're first-generation Americans. So, I feel like it's really important for my kids to know that, not forget that, and know about who they are and everything. It's interesting when people move to a new country, sometimes they either want their kids to know everything, or sometimes they don't. My ex wanted our kids to have American names and be as American as possible, so he never really taught them any Japanese. Whenever his mom, who only speaks Japanese, came to visit, she'd bring all these special treats and toys that were traditional gifts, and that made my kids feel super connected to being Japanese. It's really important to me to make sure that we keep who they are and where they're from as a big focal point.

Going Back to School. When I got divorced, my kids were so young that I decided to go into nannyng so I could take my kids to work with me and still get paid. I didn't have to worry about where that extra money was going, I didn't have to pay for childcare, and it was relatively flexible; however, you work all the time because you have to work whenever they're working, so there were pros and cons to it. The last family I took care of had a lot going on in their life, and I worked with them for 5 years. I really loved it, but it was a lot. They had four kids, and some of them were in school at the time, but in the summer, I'd have all of them, and they were wonderful, but it just reached a point where I knew I couldn't give them what they needed. It was almost like they wanted a Mary Poppins, and I did as good as possible, but it was hard and weighed a lot on me. In the back of my mind, I kind of always knew I wanted to be a teacher. From the time I was really little, I always wanted to be a teacher. My mom even bought us desks that we could play with, and my sister and I always played school. My mom took care of kids and was a parapro, so we were in schools a lot. Then, when I had my kids and took a break

from school, I thought, *Well, I don't know if I even want to go back to school or if I even want to be a teacher*, but as my kids got older, I realized, *I think I wanna be in the schools forever, but I can't just volunteer in a school once my children are not there anymore*. So, I left nannying and started subbing, and I think the first sub job I took was in a special needs class because I remember thinking, *Okay, someone else will be in the classroom. I don't know if I want to substitute by myself*. My friend and I both applied to start subbing at the same time, and she said, "That actually sounds scarier. I would rather not be in a special needs class." I said, "Well, you do you." My mom always volunteered with the PTA, and she was very involved in stuff when I was a kid, like being the room parent; anything that she could help with she always wanted to help with. All through elementary school, we'd have room parents, and our school had two special needs classes. I don't know what the disability would have been labeled as at the time, but it was higher functioning. Whenever our class would have a party, my mom would always make sure that those classes were included with us as well. So, that was always really important to me. I even nannied for a boy with special needs, and I believe that friendships across ability levels have been important for my family and friends too.

Once I started subbing, I remember thinking, *I do want to teach, but I'm going to keep subbing for a while, and I will just apply to the local university. I don't know exactly what I'm going to go back for, but I'll keep subbing all the different age ranges and settings*. So, that's when I decided to sub every age range and see what I liked when no one's in the classroom but me, even though students don't really give you the best representation, good or bad, of who they are with when you're subbing. I always thought I would love elementary, and I love that age when it's a couple of kids. I knew that I

liked special ed in every age range, but the only age range I really liked for gen ed was middle grades, and I knew I could be happy in middle grades no matter the setting. So, that's kind of why I homed in on it, and when I got back into school, I thought, *Okay, middle grades it is.* I never thought that would be the case. Once I knew the age range I wanted to teach, I kind of went back and forth on what I wanted to teach, and I thought, *If I teach well, it might not matter what I teach.* Then, I thought back on the way that I felt growing up about writing when I was told I had to spell well and have perfect writing. I realized I wanted other students to feel better about their writing and be able to say, "You know, I don't spell well, but that doesn't mean I can't write."

Throughout my teacher education program, I thought, *Oh, I'm gonna go into the classroom and do all these amazing things I'm being taught,* but you can't really either do it all or do it all in the same way that they want you to. In one of my English education courses, though, the professor would show us stuff that seems so simple but is an active choice to choose that for your classroom, especially when it comes to multicultural literature. There was a strong focus on making sure that we're meeting all of our students, and I thought, *Okay, this is good. This is something that I can do in my classroom.* I also learned about the Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, and that made me think about sustainability and human rights, as well as more strategically how to incorporate stuff into lessons and do things. I felt like I had research-based strategies that could back me up if a parent were to ever question something. I was given the tools to say, "Well, this is why." The SDGs are worldwide and positive. Then, I learned about banned books, which was really important to me. As a parent first seeing the lack of books about Asian characters, unless they were in Asia, made me feel like there's almost a mental ban on

what the main character is supposed to look like or what seems distinctly American. It's jarring to know that there's lots of books about Asian kids, but they're in Asia or they came here, and it's more exotic than American. So, I decided to do a research project about banned books in particular because it was really important to me to kind of home in on what it means for a book to be banned and spreading that information to other people. I saw an infographic that said when looking at the diversity in children's books 2018, 50% of the protagonists are White and 27% are animals. That meant that Native Americans, Latinx, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Africans, and African Americans are less depicted than animals. That made me sick to my stomach. So, if you're putting out a tiny percentage of books, and those are the ones that are most likely to be banned, then there's less on the bookshelf. There are fewer books depicting what the majority of our students look like than other people. I'm really sad for kids who might never get the chance to read a book that has characters who look and sound like them. You can't make more people write books, but that's all that's being published at this point and also what's being the most banned. It really helped me realize that a lot of adults know books are being banned, but a lot of people don't know *what* books are being banned. They could say, "Oh, well, that one is about that topic," and yes, almost all the ones being banned are about LGBTQIA+ themes, but also people of color, and making sure people know that is really important to me.

Pushing Back. Once I got into the classroom, I had to decide how I would handle my classroom library. One idea I'd been taught was to always having parents sign a waiver saying they know their child is going to read a certain book. Another was to make a list of all the classroom books and tell parents, "These are the books to have on my

bookshelf. You can look at the list. Do you not want your child to have access to certain books?" but it's hard to put yourself out there and just post a list. That part makes me a little nervous in this day and age that the list would become public and not a helpful thing for parents; it'd become, "Why does this person have these on their shelf?" I ended up just keeping my books behind my desk and I don't have a ton because I haven't been teaching for long, but I have them behind my desk. One shelf is books that anyone can read, and the other one has books mixed in with my teaching books, so the students don't really know they're there, like *The Hate U Give* and *All-American Boys*. I just say, "Don't choose any from that because those are my books." There are some students, though, that once I've gotten to know their parents, I know that they can read those books if they want to. By the end of the year, I think almost everything ended up on the main bookshelf because some kids would read it, and it was fine. Where I drew the line was with language because I feel like a lot of times, I think if a student would even read about a theme, they're not gonna think much of it, but when there's a bad word in there, a kid always has to comment on it. I realized over the course of the school year that students were not commenting on the themes, so I felt like either, one, their parents don't care and they're exposed to stuff, or two, they're not going home saying, "Oh, my gosh! I can't believe I saw this," and acting like they're traumatized. The language was what they pointed out, and that could be because they're in seventh grade or they didn't expect to find it on a teacher's bookshelf. So, if someone pointed it out, I said, "I bet you use that word sometimes. And these are kids talking." Only one time did I have a kid who said, "No, I don't," and I kind of don't believe him but whatever, I just said, "Well, do you think it would be good for other kids in this classroom to read and feel like this author

gets me?” He said, “Yeah, I think it’d be good for him and him,” so I said, “Okay, then maybe you can recommend that book to them, you can put it back down, and you don’t have to read it if you don’t feel comfortable with it.” I never thought the thing that would matter the most would be the language part; I thought it was going to be the themes.

A book we read as a class at the end of the year was *The Clay Marble*, and it’s about a little girl in war-torn Cambodia. The author’s name is Minfong Ho, and she talks about how she went to a refugee camp and met a little girl that gave her clay marble, so she wanted to write a story about them. The author is Asian American, and for me, it’s really important to bring in not just a story about Asian people but Asian American stories as well. I originally wanted to read this book called *Inside Out and Back Again*. I love that book. I feel like I could still teach it, and I started to and did a couple of activities. It didn’t matter that we stopped because it’s written as little free verse poetry, so you could pick and choose different ones, but it does go over the course of a year. I liked it because she was a refugee in America. She came to the United States, and it was about her becoming American but also being American and what it meant, not necessarily talking about it in a patriotic sense but just moving. That was one that I really wanted to teach, but I ended up teaching another one because it was one that was approved by my district. In my district, if you want to teach a book that is not part of the curriculum, you have to fill out a form, rationalize why you want to teach it, and send it to the district ELA person. It’s more to say, “We’re going to do this,” typically than “Can we?” For instance, *The Giver* was not originally on our list, and another teacher got that approved. So, I decided to go through the process for the book *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds because the theme was turning points. Because the unit takes place around

Christmas, one of the books we read is *A Christmas Carol*. So, I thought teaching *Long Way Down* would be a fun way to make an old thing a little newer because in the story, the main character also encounters ghosts, that's the turning point, but it's a newer story. So, I thought, *Okay, this will be really good*, and I was able to rationalize why I wanted to teach it. So, I filled out and submitted the form, but never heard anything back. It could have been because I asked for a class set, but I was willing to turn it into a PDF, anything expose them to other things that could be more exciting and more interesting. The process just stopped, total stop, which was really sad to me, because it just would be nice to have something that I feel like is modern. I feel like kids would read more things if they weren't just reading what their parents read when they were middle school, too. That was the first time that I actually felt a personal shock within the education system. I see all these things, and some of them are still personal, but this was something I worked on. I tried hard to put stuff together, and I get if the district doesn't like it, but to not even comment on it? It was very disheartening, and I just felt kind of frustrated. It didn't make me feel like I want to give up, but I feel like I see why it's important to keep pushing in other realms.

I've kind of developed the mentality of what happens behind my door, stays behind my door. I don't do anything sneaky or anything like that, and if someone asked, I would always answer, but just some of the conversations I've had. There was one instance where a girl was looking at the books on my shelf, and she asked, "Do you have anything about gay teenagers?" I looked, and I said, "You know, I don't have a book with a gay protagonist, but the book fair's here. We'll go look!" I happened to tell another teacher across the hall, and she said, "Oh, I wouldn't do that," and I couldn't tell if she

meant it because she was scared about getting in trouble because of certain laws or if it was her personal feeling. I just thought, *Well, then, I probably won't be having these conversations with you.* Part of me feels like it's my job to educate others on what the laws are, because I think the longer it is there, the more people will water down what they're doing. I didn't feel scared helping that student find a book, which I'm glad I didn't because I think if I had a fear of something, then I would slow down. I'm not doing anything massive, just trying to help kids. When I've thought about education in the past, I knew that there were very conservative circles of people, obviously, because that's why there are conversations on both sides, but never like been a part of a circle that had those conversations and felt like they could have them comfortably in front of me, because they didn't really know where I aligned. My school as a whole is very conservative. So, even though I was very surprised that she said that, I feel like I shouldn't have been surprised based off of conversations before that. I was just helping a kid find an individual book for themselves at the book fair, not reading it out loud to a group. I just didn't even understand how that would even be offensive because I could show them any book there and not read any of them out loud to my class. So, it just kind of made me think, *Wow! People are taking a lot of steps back.* Even if they're not preventing anything in their classroom setting, that they wouldn't even help a student find a book to read privately from the book fair to me was just bizarre. I don't understand how that would be bad. I just couldn't believe that being a thing. I've found myself surrounded by teachers that kind of feel that way and say, "Oh, I wouldn't I wouldn't talk about that," or "I wouldn't have those books on my bookshelf." I guess I thought that people were more progressive, at least teachers. If you want to be a teacher, why do you want to block knowledge?

Personally, I let my actual children read whatever they want, and my daughter knows she can get on her Kindle and get whatever she wants, and I hate it that it's this mentality of, "Well, at my house we can do that because we have that privilege." So, when a student asked me if I had a certain comic book, I didn't, but I'm the type of person who will just order it, get it, and look at it later. I thought, *I think I'd remember the name being on like a banned book list.* Well, it was *Flamer*, which has been banned. So, I thought, *Well, even if I can't have it in the classroom, my kids will want it.* One night, my daughter was reading it, and she said, "Well, you would definitely want me to read it. I don't know if your students' parents would want them to read it." The only thing she said was inappropriate was when they talked about porn around the campfire, and she said, "If you walked up on me talking about porn at a campfire, you might feel uncomfortable." She knows books are banned because of LGBTQIA+ themes, but I'm glad she doesn't even think that should be a red flag for a parent. She's 15, and she knows what she's seen on the bookshelves in her classroom and what would stand out as inappropriate. I want students to have access to as much as possible, whether or not I'm allowed to teach it. So, when I saw that student again at school, I just told him, "I can give you the book, but I need your mom or your dad to reach out to me so we can have a conversation, and I can make sure it goes home with you, or they can come and get it, but I just can't have it on my bookshelf, and I can't have you walking around the school with it. You can definitely have it, but I need to hear from somebody first." Even that made me sad. I wish I could just say like, "Take this," and trust a kid to read whatever they want, but I don't want to get fired. I know it's a reality, but I'm not really scared of it happening. Every career ends, but hopefully it is not that I am fired. I don't think I'm

doing anything that is bad, and I don't know how someone would interpret it as bad, but people find ways for anything to be inappropriate. I do think that teaching with the SDGs and the UN Declaration of Human Rights, which are world contracts students have to learn in high school, helps me. I always feel like if someone were to question something I taught, showing that it is back in pedagogy (Sustainability Education and Human Rights Education) makes it valid, safe, and useful. So, I guess maybe I do have some sort of fear if I'm trying to rationalize how I would talk my way out of it if someone said something about it, but I don't really think that I would get fired. I hope not. I do think it's worth the risk, though. If I can't go in there and give something that's authentic, then they're not gonna learn, and they're not gonna appreciate it.

Growing up, I didn't really feel like a vocal advocate but more of a protective advocate. I wanted people to always feel like they could be safe around me. Being someone who grew up pretty shy and quiet, I wasn't standing up and saying stuff out loud a lot, but I wouldn't let someone say something horrible and not let them know how I felt. Now, I'm more vocal, and I wanna be an advocate. A big part of that is because of my kids but also being a teacher. I didn't become a teacher to teach a script, and I didn't become a teacher to teach just from a certain perspective. So, I really just want to push against that and for education to be something where people can be educated. I think that everybody can be an advocate but everyone might not want that. Everything I've experienced has made me more open and more excited about learning other things, but it's also made me see that sometimes I wish there was another word for some races, just because White is white. White is "pure." So, when I think about my kids, they can always be Asian. They can always be multiracial, but they can never be White, and they don't

want to be, so I don't want them to be. It's such a strange thing that we live in a world where there's something so definitive, so exclusionary, but it defines almost everything that we teach and the lens that we teach through. You're not allowed in it unless you're born that way, though, even if you're born part that way, because going back to all the way the idea that if you have one drop of any other race, you are that race. It just kind of makes me disappointed that we have to still teach through a lens that supports that and maintains it. If you look at books and every character is a White male, then you might think that's the only thing that people want to put out there and that's the only opinion that people think exists; however, if you realize that there are a lot of other people that want other things out there and a lot of people that know that I exist, then even if you know it's being banned, you know that someone cares and someone's trying to say, "You're important, and I wanna write people that look or act or think like you," instead of just it doesn't exist. Someone else might be saying it shouldn't exist, but shouldn't exist is different than doesn't exist. To me, that is the most upsetting thing. If you can't have a book of someone that's like you so you know you're normal, because maybe your family says you're not normal, or even if your family says you're normal but the community says you're not normal, you wanna know that someone else knows how you feel. I think that it's important for people to see themselves and hear themselves in the books that they read, and if I'm in trouble for that, then, I could say, one, it's not where I should be, but two, I feel like it is where I should be, and it's a statement that should be made. If I did something that was so offensive to somebody but I know I'm being a good person and it loses my job, then, hopefully, more people see that and realize how crazy that is, because there's a statement to be made that "No, this has gone too far."

My Reflection: Anne

Anne's desire to educate others on the truth about book banning aligns with critical theory's focus on "the need to develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society" (Kim, 2016, p. 36). Having children who are biracial makes the voice tenet of CRT personal for Anne as she wants her own children, as well as others, to have the opportunity "to read a book that looks like them." Growing up in a household that regularly welcomed members of the LGBTQIA+ community led Anne to be a "protective advocate" who is passionate about fighting against the efforts "to silence and hide queer lives" (Helmsing, 2020, p. 136) not only for her students but also for her children, who both identify as LGBTQIA+.

By looking at the series of events that unfolded throughout Anne's life, it is clear to see that the how the "cultural, social, institutional, familial, and linguistic" conditions of her life have impacted her "emotions, [her] aesthetic reactions, [and] [her] moral responses" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40). Growing up in the South, being raised by parents in both political parties, being friends with Black peers, attempting to learn Japanese, having biracial children, and other experiences in her life story have led Anne to become who she is today.

Both Anne and Toni stressed the importance of reading more than White authors in today's English classroom. For Toni, teaching books "that aren't just about White kids" is important. Likewise, Anne discussed trying to avoid books where "every character is a White male."

Toni

Toni grew up in the South raised by parents from the North and spent much of her childhood visiting family up North. She has witnessed the changes in American equality and civil rights over the years, from Black people being attacking for trying to vote to electing a Black president. She has been a teacher for nearly 20 years and has taught a range of English classes and levels, from on-level to AP.

Toni's Life Story

I grew up in a large southern city. We moved from up north when I was young, and in a weird way, the north is always home to me. That's where I feel the most comfortable. I always tell people I grew up in the South, but I wasn't raised Southern. As an adult, I maybe emphasize that I'm from up north, but people always say, "You've been here since you were 2." Everyone I grew up around, though, was from the North. My parents' friends weren't super Southern. They were transplants just like my parents. I grew up in a transplant community; there were some Southern people, but they weren't necessarily in our circle. My dad was transferred down in the early 70s in that wave of corporate transfers and breaking up of families. I've kind of realized as an adult that my family honestly thought we weren't going to be here for that long and we would get moved back. So, we didn't necessarily adopt a lot of the culture, especially in food, like biscuits and gravy. I don't know that my dad ever truly embraced the culture. I think my mom did better at embracing the culture than my dad did. We were able to, I think, perpetuate some of that because my parents' friends were mostly transplants. So, the North's home to me, just always has been.

My mom loved going to church. Church was important to her, and she tried to get me involved in church. I hated it, partially because you had to dress up and partially because my mom chose to go to a church in the wealthy community instead the Methodist Church in the community where we lived. I accolated. I did stuff. I've just never glammed on to it. I think because when you start looking at this book that has been transcribed so many times over the years to fit, it's never totally appealed to me. I'm just not a word-for-word kind of person. My dad was not religious, so Mom and I would do the church thing. He would go maybe on Easter or Christmas. My mom would tell you her biggest failure is that I wasn't confirmed in the church. I had friends that went to church, but I would say we were not really religious people.

I learned to read really kind of early. I was probably around three or four, and I just remember I was reading the story of Cinderella, maybe one of those Little Golden Books, and all of a sudden, the words just kind of went *shoop*, and I understood what I was reading. So, I started reading on my own versus having somebody always having to read to me. The Narnia books were a huge part of my childhood. I read those over and over. I would have books that I would just read over and over. We would go to the library a lot, and I would just check out that huge stack of books and just plow through them. My grandmother worked in the warehouse for the publishing company that did Little Golden Books, so she was always sending books. I've got books that are probably classics and could be worth a lot of money, but the covers are gone and torn and all that stuff. I think the books that she sent sometimes were Disney stories from the movies, like *Peter Pan* and *Sleeping Beauty* and all that, but if you go back and look at the books, they're meant to be read probably as an adult to a child. It's not really a picture book. It's more of a

storybook. I loved *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. I loved *James and the Giant Peach*. I have this Muppet book that I absolutely loved, and I thought I had lost it but refound it when I was 21. It wasn't so much a reading book; it was lines from the sketches that they did on the show, so like you could do your own skits if you were an enterprising little kid. I also loved the Richard Scary books, with Huckle the cat, all the vocabulary. I think those were pretty instrumental in helping me read. I was always the kid that finished reading early, and I remember in first grade, I was the first kid in my class that the teacher took over to a different shelf of library books and said, "You can start reading these books over here." So, I didn't have to read the picture books anymore. I do remember her doing that. I always liked my English classes and always did well in them.

We always read in my family. We would do Saturday lunches where my dad had his book, my mom had a newspaper, I would have my books, and we would sit and read kind of as a family during lunch. So, I feel like I was exposed to higher levels of reading at an early age. I would also say that I was one of the undiagnosed girls of the 70s and 80s that had ADD. So, I would get in trouble a lot in school because I was usually talking or not paying attention, but I could sit and read for hours—that was kind of my deal. I remember going to the Scholastic book fair at school and buying a book called *Confessions of a Teenage Alcoholic*. I read that book over and over more because I think it was there but also because I thought the story was kind of interesting. It was so different from my experiences. I also remember reading *Go Ask Alice*. It was kind of like this seminal girl-into-drugs book, but I think it was, again, just different from a life that I was going to lead. Maybe cautionary tales. I don't know, but my dad just said, "Isn't

there anything better that you could read? You need to read the classics.” So, he bought *Huckleberry Finn*, *Tom Sawyer*, and *Treasure Island*. I hated *Treasure Island*, I just didn’t like *Tom Sawyer*, and I didn’t like *Huckleberry Finn*. I could see what my dad was trying to do, but I never really bonded with those books when I was young. I thought they were boy stories, and they just didn’t appeal to me. Pirates? I don’t care, but I would read anything else that came my way. I think growing up, books were a little bit of a refuge for me. I was an only child, so I think that kind of influenced a lot of the reading. I had a pretty strict dad, so I think that coupled with not having brothers and sisters making fun of me meant I didn’t have the ability to be like “shut up” and just keep moving. I maybe took it more personally. I had friends, but I also think I always grew up feeling like I was so different from everybody just because I didn’t totally get how kids interacted at that age. That was hard for me.

We would drive up north when I was little a lot to see our family, so I would be in the back seat with a box full of books. I remember reading a lot of John Irving, and I remember reading *The Hotel New Hampshire* in the backseat laughing my head off because it’s just a funny book. My parents asked, “What’s so funny?” and I was trying to tell them, but they just didn’t get it. It’s probably hard to explain all that when you’re that young, but I just enjoyed reading. Books are like crack—you just want to read more and more stories. I just read, that’s just what I did. I just enjoyed the process. As a child, I thought it’s just what people did. Books were always, always around, and they were always interesting to me. It literally blows my mind that people don’t have books in their house. I can’t process that. For me, a book was a place to get information. I spent weekends in the library with a roll of dimes and highlighters, and that’s what I did. The

fact that I had to go out and get the information, I think, made information more important to me than now when it's just right in front of you whenever you want. My grandparents always had an almanac, and I've started to realize that was a way of starting to acquire information: through a book. I read that stupid thing over and over and over again when I was at my grandparents' house, because it was a way of absorbing information. So, I guess, I would kind of say, from early on, books were a source of information because knowledge was important in our family, so. I was encouraged to be smart. Reading was a super accepted activity. To be smart, to have knowledge, was important on my dad's side of my family. I think on my mom's side when I was younger and going through school, even though certainly I had my challenges, my cousins had a harder time in school. They're both boys, but they weren't learners. They were just more like regular kids. So, I felt like I was the smart one. I'm much closer to my dad's side of the family, though. I just loved the heck out of my grandparents. I was the only granddaughter, so I was able to get away with being able to drink Coke and stuff that I always couldn't have at home all the time. My grandfather had a bar downstairs in the basement, and as a little kid, I wanted to sit at that bar so bad, but the seats were already taken, so I had to just hang out. I always wanted to be my grandfather's barmaid, and I got to do it when I got older, but it was just a fun place for me. I felt at home with the way that people talked, the boisterousness, the conversations, and the debating.

Growing up, one of the things we liked to do in our family was to debate stuff. As I got older, my dad and I would always kind of go back and forth about a topic. There was one debate between my dad and his best friend about the Gulf War, and I remember being able to say, "Because that area is so dependent on religion, it's probably what holds

them back and creates these tensions.” I felt, at that moment, when my dad and his friend both said, “Yeah,” that I had contributed in a way that brought a new insight into the conversation. My dad was also politically conservative, and I never necessarily challenged his beliefs, or if I did, we didn’t have a knockdown, drag out fight because he was a conservative. Same with my grandfather, who I would go back and forth with, but as I got older, I started to realize I wasn’t going to change his mind. He had an idea in his head that was gonna stay there. For example, when we visited up North, I noticed there was diversity in culture, with Polish, German, and Italians, but not necessarily in race or religion. My grandparents lived in an area that didn’t allow Jewish people and certainly didn’t allow African Americans. Everybody up there used all the terms for all the ethnic groups that you would not say today, and my grandfather would use the n-word. I remember getting old enough, maybe around 10 or so, and saying, “Grandpa, that’s not cool.” I grew up knowing that wasn’t a good word to say, and I knew what it meant. I don’t really remember his reaction. He didn’t get mad or tell me to shut up or whatever, but he still said it. Eventually, he did kind of curb it a little bit so, but it didn’t still stop him from saying “Polack” for Jews or other stuff. So, I’ve always been the person that just says it. I think because my dad could be controlling, I had to learn how to stand up against that, too. I could stand up and speak my voice if I was sharing knowledge and had something in that way to contribute. If I was going against what my dad said, though, not in a political way but more in an authoritarian kind of way, he would try and silence that. I think when you grow up like that, you either turn inward or you learn how to push back.

When I started high school, I was picked to be in a cohort starting in 10th grade. So, in 10th grade, I took 11th grade literature; in 11th grade, I took British literature; and

senior year, I took AP Lit. So, I was kind of prepped for that class, and it was awesome. It was an achievement in our school because we had to get through this one teacher, and it was hard as hell. That was one of my favorite things of high school, though, was being in the cohort and, you know, I could hold my own in that class. I didn't always do as well as I thought I did, apparently, but I think the ADD was part of that. I think I got a C one quarter, but I loved the class, which I think reinforced a skill I have that made me feel valuable, and it was a formative class, for sure. I kept all my notes. I kept all my stuff. I was a nerd. My 11th grade teacher she let us go pick books. She wanted us to read some classics. I remember reading *An American Tragedy*, and it was thick. She helped us write, and I remember learning vocabulary. It was a great class. For 12th grade, the teacher would hand back papers in the order of the grades, so if you were at the bottom of the pile, you didn't necessarily fail, but nobody knew that; everybody knew you just didn't do as good. She also made us memorize the prologue to *The Canterbury Tales* in Middle English. We had to get up and perform it in front of the class. We had to read the *Once and Future King* about King Arthur, which I loved that. Again, another huge, thick book, and I remember it was during homecoming week, and we were all officers and in clubs, so that was stressful. I remember reading *Hamlet* in her class. I remember her teaching about writing. I remember in that class we were reading about the wife of Bath, and this one kid asked the teacher if she was a virgin when she got married. I remember thinking, *Oh, shit*. She answered in her polite Southern lady way, and I don't think he asked it to be an ass. My senior year, the two local high schools merged, so I did not get my British literature teacher again as my senior year teacher, which I was very disappointed in. I got the other school's teacher. We read the canon back then—White authors with a few token

authors thrown in. There was no emphasis on representation or diversity like there is now. I remember I had to read *Song of Solomon*, *Heart of Darkness*, *The Stranger*, maybe, and I remember really liking *Song of Solomon*. I read *Beloved*, too, and really liked that book. I didn't get all of it, but I really liked it.

Eye-Opening Experiences. Growing up, I lived in a White neighborhood and gone to school with mostly White students. We didn't have a lot of Black kids at our school, and I don't think we had any Black students in my English cohort. I was in high school back when they did the majority to minority busing. So, when I started college and found out that I was going to have a Black roommate, I was a little nervous. I won't lie. I didn't know if I was gonna get the stereotypical sassy Black kid or what that might mean for getting through school. I just had no clue because I'd never had that close of an interaction with Black people, unfortunately. I remember telling her when we met, "Hey, I'm an only child," and she said, "Oh, well, I am, too." So, we both kind of knew we had that same mindset. Neither of us had a car on campus, and there was one day she wanted to go to the mall, so we took the bus. I'd never taken the bus going to the mall before. It was on a Saturday, but I remember kind of thinking, *This is a whole new world for me*, you know. We would watch a lot of the same shows together. We would talk about stuff, but we didn't really hang out because we didn't have groups of friends that hung out together. She had her set of friends, and I had my set of friends. She would tell me about stuff, though, like the step teams and how she wanted to get into the Delta sorority. I remember one time, I was trying to wear something white, and she said, "Oh, you should put a black bra under that," and I said, "What? My God, that would show." It took me a while to realize Black ladies wear black bras under white shirts, so that was totally her

experience and my experience. I probably made her feel a little bad because I wasn't thinking, and she wasn't thinking either in that moment. Toward the end of the year, we were having a conversation, and I made a comment about "I don't see you as Black. I just see you as you," and it offended her greatly. At the time, I didn't understand why, but she kind of distanced herself from me after that, and I'm sad to say we didn't live together after freshman year and ended up losing touch.

I started out as an English major in college, and one of the classes I had to take because it fit my schedule, not because I wanted to, was a folklore class. It was fun, and a lot of the class consisted of the professor asking questions: "How do you guys celebrate birthdays?" We went around the room, and everybody had to tell what they did to celebrate birthdays. Then, "How do you celebrate holidays?" I think the thing that I liked about it was learning what different people do on different occasions. You know how your family celebrates a holiday or your traditions, but other people have completely different traditions. We're all still celebrating; we're just doing it in completely different ways. So, I think some of that was just starting to realize how different people do things in ordinary life. I ended up switching from an English major to an accounting major, but I was always an English nerd and minored in British romanticism poetry because I really like British lit. Brit is just one of my favorite areas. I just remember this one professor who wore, and I'm using this word on purpose, spectacles. We were studying, I think, William Blake, and apparently Alan Ginsberg of the Beat poets recorded an album either reading or singing William Blake poems. The professor shut off all the lights and made us put our heads down—it was so crazy. I loved my Shakespeare classes. The guy who taught it was an actor in the local theater, so when he would read, he would kind of get

into a theatrical thing. His class wasn't super insightful or analytic. It was more, "Here's the story. Let's talk about the story."

Junior year, I went to London and Paris for spring break, and there was a side trip where you could go to Stratford upon Avon. So, I did that, and it was just random that the driver said, "Hey, we're not far from Oxford. I'm just gonna drop you guys off." He literally stopped the bus, and we hopped off, looked around, and got back on the bus. But as soon as I put my foot on that ground, I thought, *You have to come back here. You've gotta come back here.* The university I attended had study abroad opportunities, and there was one to Oxford for literature, English, poly-sci, and history majors. When I found out some kids had dropped, I drove home that day from college and told my parents, "I have to do this. I wanna do this more than anything." They said, "Well, this would be your graduation present, and you can go." I went for 6 weeks, and I took a Chaucer class with an American professor and a Shakespeare class with a British professor. I remember there was one day somebody asked a question, and the Shakespeare professor went over to an encyclopedia set, probably some reference of all the footnotes in Shakespeare, but what he pulled out was talking about the conflict between the Turks and the Venetians, and it just blew the whole thing wide open, and I just understood that much more about the story. There were only five of us in the Shakespeare class, and each one of us really ended up clicking with a play. I really got into *Othello*. I was intrigued that Iago was so evil. It wasn't until I taught the play years later that I began to pick up on the racial tension.

Senior year of college, I began to think about being a teacher. I was doing some presentation activities on campus, and I thought, *This is fun. I like doing this.* My

university had a program where you could get your teaching certificate and a degree in English at the same time, but I was too late to get in on that. I knew, though, that I was going to become a teacher one way or another. Then, my dad passed away suddenly right after I graduated, so my plan was derailed. I got kinda tossed in a corporate world and was doing corporate training for a long time and loved it, but I kept missing opportunities to be in the classroom and help people. It wasn't until I was in my mid-thirties, when there were a lot of booms and busts going on and a big recession, that I thought, *Hey, if I were a teacher, wow, job security*. So, I decided at 34 or 35 that was it, that I was going to get my master's and start the process. I joined the TAPP program at a local university so I could get an M.Ed. and certified in secondary English education. I student taught at a metro high school, and there were a lot of rich White kids in the honors classes but a lot Black students in the on-level classes. I'm sure I walked in with an "I'm not racist" attitude. I had two mentor teachers: one was an honor's class, and one taught regular on-level classes. Both my mentor teachers were Black as well. The students didn't really give me a big problem. My mentor teacher with the on-level classes had been there forever. She was that veteran teacher who would literally turn around and call a kid's parents right there—she didn't play. The students didn't always listen to her, but they would listen to me. So, one day, I asked her about it, and she said, "Because you're White. They see that as having more authority than I do." I thought, *Damn*. Here's this woman that's been teaching forever, this good teacher, good woman, probably in her late 40s, early 50s, and I thought it was really sad for her to say that to me. I also remember teaching *The Bluest Eye* to honors 10th grade, and at one point, I went to my mentor teacher and said, "There's some deep stuff going on in here. Do you ever get any

comments or any issues?” Her reply was, “Whenever we’ve had big complaints about that book, it’s because the stuff that goes on in the book generally goes on in the family of the people protesting it. So, that usually comes out.” She had taught long enough, I guess, to see that. I enjoyed teaching that book, and that led me to try reading more Toni Morrison.

The Bubble Pops. My first teaching job was in a mostly White bubble, kind of a lot like the school I grew up in, but there were Black students there and a lot of Hispanic students there. I pretty much taught on level for my first year, but after that, I started teaching honors. For me, 10th grade honors was awesome, and at one point, I had a kid say to me at the end of the year, “I feel like attended a philosophy class, and I loved it.” That made me so happy and so sad at the same time, because not every kid gets into philosophy. I realized why some kids if they were in, they were in, and some kids weren’t. In one year, we taught *Lord of the Flies*, *Catcher in the Rye*, *Columbine*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*, and *Unbroken*, and we could pull in things organically. If we were reading *Unbroken*, there was a point in there that really related to “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner,” so you could pull that in and talk about it. Our units were definitely more thematic, and nobody really got on us for what we pulled in and taught, and that’s sad we just don’t have that anymore. I just felt like I had a curriculum that the kids really grew with, learned from, and could talk about. It was really good for them, and they loved it.

I had been at the school for maybe 2 years when Obama became president. The day after the election, I was sitting on one side of the classroom talking with some students. There were kids that were not happy that he got elected, and I was saying

something like, “You know, in my lifetime, going from seeing people being hosed down in the streets and attacked by dogs for trying to vote and seeing somebody vote for a Black president, that’s a pretty big deal in my lifetime.” I was being complimentary, but I think I used the phrase “those people,” and a Black student heard it across the room. So, I was at home later on that night, and this email comes from this mom, CCing my principal and basically calling me a racist. I was pissed because I was actually saying something appropriate, and that’s when the little speaker me came out. So, I called the mom, and I remember the kid answered and said, “Well, she’s in the shower,” and I said, “I will wait.” So, the mom comes on, and I’m sure I was a little huffy, but I was trying to tell her I know what “you people” means, and I do not use it in my classroom. I’m not a bright, 22-year-old teacher fresh out of school. I’ve been in the workforce. I’ve had diversity training, so you’re kind of calling the wrong person the thing here. We got to a point where we decided to have a meeting, and I was super stressed about it and super anxious about it. One of the things I said to the mom and the daughter was I used to teach communication skills, and one of the things that I found was the messenger can spend all kinds of time creating this message and how it’s supposed to be, but it’s also the receiver’s job to see if they really received it in the way that it was meant. It’s not all on the messenger. I said, “Maybe I said ‘those people,’ but I’m telling you, I was saying something complimentary. I voted for Obama!” So, in that moment, I just remember being pissed for being called out as racist, and I said, “If I gave you that understanding, ma’am, I’m sorry, but this was a big misunderstanding.” I felt like it was a successful because I think the mom was kind of on my side. I think the mom did realize I didn’t really mean that way, that I said “those people” as in that group of people, not “you

people.” When I look back on it, I think I probably I would have gone back at that mom with a little less fire and said, “Hey, I completely understand.” Now, I understand that to hear a teacher say “those people” can affect a kid, but I didn’t at the time. I was still in my bubble.

I remember another conversation that happened right after Obama was elected. I don’t recall what we were talking about, but White kid sitting there said, “Well, racism is over. We elected Obama,” and the Black kid sitting behind him rolled his eyes so hard I thought he was gonna have a problem. It was one of those moments as a teacher where I couldn’t let my face show, but I said, “Okay, well, thanks for that comment.” I remember looking at the White kid, and in that moment, I wanted to be able to kind of reach out to him and tell him, “I can’t disagree with you in front of the class, but no.” I was, however, able to disagree in front of my family. At Thanksgiving or Christmas after the election, my aunt made a comment about Michelle Obama wearing khakis or something, and I said, “I would much rather have a first lady who has—my gosh—a college degree. She’s so much more than somebody whose big goal was to pick out plates. She’s my kind of first lady.”

I was also still teaching at my first school when the movie *12 Years a Slave* came out, and I saw it. I was talking to my kids about it, and I had some Black kids in the classroom. At one point, this kid kind of mouthed off and said, “Oh, that movie that lets you know how racist you are?” I said, “Excuse me, what? I’m not racist,” and we kind of had a moment. I think we just kind of shut the conversation down, but later on, he and I sat down, and I said, “Why do you think I’m racist? Why would you say that?” I was super offended, but it was one of those formative moments. One of the things that

conversation revealed to me was he was talking about going to see a barber and this barber was talking to him about stuff. It made me realize that as much as my family had stories about Black people and what Black people are about or what they did, Black people have a whole background of stories about what White people have done and how we have acted. As I sat there, I started to think, *How do we change those stories?* I remember walking away from the conversation thinking it was good and helped me understand his position a little bit more.

It took me a long time to realize it, but I think White people around my generation took Martin Luther King Jr.'s whole "I want to be judged by the content of my character and not as my skin" out of context. So, when a White person says, "Oh, I don't see you as Black," they think that's a compliment, but it's not. Things we say as White people are totally taken differently, and even though we mean them with good intentions, they are what we now call microaggressions. When I was a kid, I remember going to the liquor store, and my dad would say stuff like, "You always go to the liquor store where the Black people go because it'll have the best prices." I don't think my dad thought about that as racist, and nobody ever called him out on it because nobody else in that bubble had that awareness either, but it was racist. There was also one day I said something in class, and it was one of those, "Well, hold on, they might have really meant," and I just stopped. I said, "Oh, I was about to just explain," and one girl said, "Yes, you were." I realized I can't defend people because people *do* say things that are racist, and we don't see it that way, but it is. Those formative conversations with my students really helped shape my perspective. I started to change my perspective, and I realized that's why my freshman roommate was so upset when I said, "I don't see you as Black." I've seen her

on Facebook in recent years, and I've thought about sending her a message and saying, "I want you to know that conversation was pivotal for me. I don't want to put the onus on you that were my teacher, but I need for you to know that did impact my life and that did make a change. I understand that it caused you some trauma, and I deeply, deeply apologize for it. I just want you thank you for helping me realize that, and I want you to know that it came for good. So, thank you for doing that." I've also seen the student who said I was racist pop up on Facebook every once in a while, and I've thought about reaching out to him and saying, "I need for you to know having that talk was something that started to shift my perspective, and I get what you're saying now." I might still do it one day. We'll see.

After a few years, I started teaching at a different high school, and my department head wanted us to teach *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I was aware that when I taught it at my previous school, I hadn't done it the service that it deserved. I remember giving the kids a handout that talked about dialect I had used with the book before, and a Black kid looked at me and said, "You realize you don't have to do this with us." I said, "Okay, well," and I think just I said I had to do it at my other school, so I just stuck with it. I feel like I'm an old-school teacher in that I'm gonna research a lot of stuff about the novel. I'm gonna give background information. I'm gonna pull in historical stuff. I'm not as versed in the Harlem Renaissance, and I'm certainly not as versed in being Black. Where you might read something in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that really does speak to maybe the male/female dynamics in an African American culture, I feel like I may be missing out on that or not able to point that out to the students, and they may not share it with me. If they want to read it out loud, they're welcome to, but I will tell them I am not

going to read this because I don't feel like I would do the language justice and I don't want seem like I'm trying to sound Black either. There has been pushback against *Their Eyes Were Watching God* because of the whole under the tree scene, but I have fought for teaching it.

I did not teach *Othello* until I got to my current high school, and we would do *Othello* with seniors. For the first time, I started picking up on the racial tension a little bit more. I think there are some classics you read when you're a teenager that you don't fully grasp, but when you read it again when you're older, woah. That was *Othello* for me. The more I taught *Othello*, the more racism became inherent. I started pointing out some of the things like "thick lips," "big ram," and that kind of stuff, and some kids gasp when he says that. So, I've started asking them more like, "Is Iago racist? Is he doing this because it's a race thing? Is Desdemona marrying the Black guy to piss her dad off?" So, we talk a little bit more about it, and I think some kids realize Iago is racist. I don't think a lot of them are comfortable talking about it.

Because I was teaching seniors, I was also involved in senior projects. We would pull in community judges from all over, and a lot of them were White judging a population of mostly Black students, which was a change from my previous school that had been mostly White. A lot of times kids would get comments about their hair or how they were dressed. The kids would say, "Well, the judges are racist," and I know a few times I tried to say, "I've been in the corporate world, and people are gonna judge you on your appearance," but I realized I was trying to explain and then thought, *Maybe I should shut up*. Why are they commenting on somebody's hair? Why are they commenting on somebody's appearance when they don't know if that kid used the clothing closet? Why

are they talking about their speech? I stepped back, and if a kid says, “Hey, they’re racist,” I now say, “Tell me about that. What’s going on? Thank you for bringing that up. I’m certainly gonna tell people.” I think they think they’re being helpful, but they have that colorblind thing going on in their head, and they don’t realize that what they’re saying is racist. I don’t know if it’s my place to say “Well, how would you address that?” or “How would you change that?” or “What would you like a White person to know?” Maybe that’s the question: “What would you like a White person to know?” I’m still trying to figure it out sometimes because I don’t want to say things in the wrong way. I’m also learning how to say, “Alright y’all, I’m gonna say this, and I’m saying it with good intentions. So, if I’m saying it in the wrong way, let me know.” So, I let them know I’m still learning.

The Fight Begins. Before all hell broke loose with censorship, we would do an American Dream unit in 11th grade American lit. We would read poems about the American Dream, and I pulled in the gay perspective to discuss whether or not gay people feel the American dream is achievable. I brought it in last minute and totally didn’t vet the article, and there was something about polyamory in it. Of course, the kids said, “What’s polyamory?” and I said, “Oh, well, it’s somebody who has multiple partners.” I don’t know how it all came out, but it started a conversation, and one of my students ended up coming up and explaining it to everybody. She got into how sexual orientation was not the same thing as gender orientation, but she did it so well that the kids got into it. She explained it matter of fact, not sexually. It was a great moment for teaching, but if I did that now, I would be fired. Same with social media. I post things on Facebook, but I have to be careful. I’ve gone after people on Facebook, but I know I’m

not gonna change somebody's mind. If there were a way I could write about it or go to a Moms for Liberty meeting, I would, but the problem is I would get in trouble! I would get fired if I went there and started some shit, but I'm just fanatical about it. It drives me crazy. I have a "read banned books" shirt, and I'll wear it. I speak up for gay people in class, but I can't overdo it. I have a little ally sticker on the corner of my desk, and I think if someone saw it, they'd know what it's about. I want kids to know they can come to me. I do want kids to know I support them. I have a sign that says, "Black minds change lives" on the back of my classroom door. So, if the kids are lined up, they can see it. There are little subtle things I want them to see, but I've almost done it in a way of, "Oh, that was there? That's always been on my desk. I just didn't think about it." I just want them to know that they have support. I want kids to know certainly that they are welcome in my class.

In the past few years, there are so many things I've had to stop teaching. We've had to get rid of all our No Fear! Shakespeare because the modern English translation is too divisive. My district will not provide a definitive list of books we can teach and can't teach. They also make it kind of at the school level, like the principal has the say. So, what could fly in one school could not fly in another, depending on how much your principal feels like fielding the problems. So, it has affected it a lot. When I was teaching honors British lit, I was so excited to do *Brave New World* because I love bejesus out of that book. The day before I was gonna teach it, that's when it started getting out that we were gonna have this ban, and we couldn't do it. I literally was writing my principal and my admin, saying, "I'm about to teach this novel tomorrow, and I'm here to tell you there's some stuff in it, I don't have to point it out." So, they said, "You can do it this

year, but probably not next year.” We can’t teach more high-interest stories because some of it could be construed as sexually explicit or divisive ideas. It’s one thing for the kids to go to the library and pick out books, but our librarians have been working so hard to pull books. Unfortunately, the books they are pulling are some of the more interesting young adult novels. Now, everything we want to do has to go through the process of vetting. They’re making it so prohibitively annoying that you just don’t have time to do it. So, I think that’s part of it as well. I knew *Brave New World* would not get vetted. I even had an honors student ask me, “Are there books that we would have read this year that we can’t read?” and I said, “Yeah.” He asked, “Can you name any of them?” and I said, “Well, like *Brave New World*.” He ended up reading it and said he really liked it, and I thought, *Yeah, I got one!* I think the honors kids are picking up on censorship a little bit more.

I’ve spent tons of money buying books for my classroom I thought kids would relate to, and now I’ve had to put up signs that say, “These books are not available.” During open house, there were parents asking, “What’s that about?” and I said, “Well, I don’t know what to do with these yet. I’m not prepared to box them all up.” I did take about five books out that I thought really might get me in trouble if somebody saw it, but it’s killing me. I feel like we’re at the point where you even so much as say “Toni Morrison,” somebody’s gonna lose their mind, so I pulled *The Bluest Eye*, and I pulled *Beloved*, although I have that book out and kind of just had it on my chalkboard. I would hands down teach *Beloved* 100% and talk about the generational trauma of slavery and that kind of stuff. Hands freaking down. I think it’s important. I didn’t pull *Maus*, though, but I did have *Maus* when that whole thing was going down in Tennessee. I told my

students, “Y’all, it’s a good book. You need to read this book. It’s good.” We would talk about it. I pulled a Chris Bohjalian book, and I love it because it literally had me convinced that *The Great Gatsby* was real, but there’s the c-word is in the book and the woman is sexually assaulted and has her breast cut off, and I thought, *Well, no one needs that*. There is a book that I wanted to do for British lit, and it was called *Girl, Woman, Other*. I was trying to find contemporary Black British women, but it has a lesbian story in it. They’re just all sitting in my cabinet right now because they’re wonderful books, but they got named somehow in the list. So, those are tucked away for safekeeping. I would love to find *Gender Queer* or something, just put it on the shelf, and say, “I don’t know how it got there. Wasn’t mine,” but I could see still getting nailed because it was in my room. I will still give books to certain kids and would say, “Oh, this must have fallen in your backpack in my class,” kind of thing if anyone said anything.

When we pull books, we’re losing a story. It’s just good literature. I just feel like we are losing a chance to talk about hard things and make sense about it. After lot of the books that we read, I will say to the kids, “I want you to go back and read this when you’re in your 30s, because you’re gonna have a whole different understanding of what’s going on.” I just feel like we’re pulling the good books. *Beloved* gets into the trauma of slavery in a way that is more than “Slavery is bad.” In *Brave New World* the sex part is incidental to it; the focus is the whole idea of society and drugs and the casualness. People aren’t happy, and we’re kind of headed there. There are things that we see in our society. When we pull books, I think we also lose a chance of normalizing. If we pull *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*, we’re not able to normalize those feelings, and I think that’s important, too. Students aren’t getting stories that are for real, for real. They’re not

getting the peer pressure. Maybe a story has racism in it, like *The Hate U Give*, but somebody's fighting against it, and they see it. They don't get as many stories that completely relate to what they're going through. *Lord of the Flies* is an awesome book, but I can't stand up in class and go, "Okay, well, how do you think this would go down if it was all Black guys or all Latino guys? How do you think that might go down?" It might be a fair question, but I could see somebody taking it totally the wrong way. So, I think they want stories that are about drugs and racism and teenage kids hanging out, being stupid, and maybe doing something that has larger consequences for them that aren't just about White kids, but when we ban those books, they don't get the stuff that that I think really relates to them or appeals to them. A lot of my students are not close with literature, and they haven't seen themselves in literature a whole lot. I want my on-level kids especially to see themselves in literature. I need to show that I know there's more than one story. We've got a lot of different perspectives, and reading is a chance for us to learn a little bit more about each other—that's the important thing. I think knowledge is power. A lot of kids come in, and because they're teenagers, they're so centered on how "It's my issue. Nobody else is having to deal with this," and I want to say, "Dude, there's so many other people that are literally going through what you're going through." I have a quote on the classroom wall that says, "We read to know we're not alone," and I think, especially in this fractured time, it's important to read from different perspectives. It's important that we do read different stories. If you're able to see yourself in a story, that is hopefully going to resonate with you. I think the challenge is we want to have high-interest reading material for our students, and that is going to involve what their lives

reflect. So, if you're gonna ban stuff, unfortunately, you're banning some books that are high interest and that they want to read.

Last year, I started teaching multicultural literature, and we have been trying to think of ways to still bring in diverse stories. One person on my team suggested reading books by Ayn Rand. He said, "We can get free books. This is great," and I said, "You can't. You can't do Ayn Rand with multicultural, dude. No. The Ayn Rand Institute has a position paper against multiculturalism." I even sent him the paper to read. I think it came down to, "You can do it if you want. I am not teaching that. I will not teach Ayn Rand." We talked about revamping our curriculum in other ways and trying to make it more focused on short stories. So, I've been in charge of making a short story unit with more Asian American, Latinx, and African American stories, and I think I found really good ones that we can work with. I don't think it's right, however, and I don't know how to advocate for this, but everybody except one person on the multicultural literature team is White. So, they want a multicultural class, but it's taught by all White people. Our department chair is Black, and I'm not as good about finessing things to be diplomatic. Most of our staff in the English department is White, and I think we have three teachers who are African American. So, I don't wanna make it as cut and dry to say, "Why don't the Black people teach multicultural? If it was so important for us to have this class, why is it all White people teaching it? I don't think we're hitting the message that we're supposed to hit." I don't know how to frame it up in that nice way without kind of saying, "What are we doing?" It's still enforcing a hierarchy and the White view of the world. I'm gonna teach it, I can get into a story, I can give background, and I can do stuff, but there are stories where I'm just rattling off facts and historical context. I'm not seeing it

the same way that our students do. I think the way that we grow up in the community that we grow up in is definitely formative. I think it takes a while to kind of break down the norms that you see the world with. It's taken a while, but I've learned more. I know that I have privilege, and I feel like I'm so much more sensitive to stuff now. I know there are still things that my Black kids or Latinx kids are not going to talk about with me because I'm a White lady, and that's okay. I've had classes where I'm the only White person in the room, but I don't want to be the White authority person. I want to just to teach.

My Reflection: Toni

Toni's realization that she had misinterpreted Martin Luther King Jr.'s desire for his children not to be judged by the color of their skin led her to overcome the idea that being colorblind is a good thing (Ottwein & Mun, 2023; Style, 1988). Her efforts to create a unit that focuses on "Asian American, Latinx, and African American stories" demonstrates her desire to promote the voices of minorities in her classroom in alignment with CRT. Toni's determination to let those in power know the multicultural literature course at her school not be taught by only White teachers corresponds with critical theory's tenet to "explain what is wrong with current social reality" (Bohman, 2005, para. 3).

By learning about Toni's life and seeing how her beliefs and practices have transformed over the years, I could clearly see the sociality dimension of narrative inquiry and "the conditions under which people's experiences and events are unfolding" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40). Toni's life represents how we can "[honor] lived experience as a source of important knowledge and understanding" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 17) by learning

along with her story that we can come a new way of thinking by reflecting upon our experiences.

Like Toni, Celeste also discussed the importance of representation in book selections. Celeste noted she will “make sure that I have different representation in that texts that I give” students, while Toni also mentioned that when “you’re able to see yourself in a story, that is hopefully going to resonate with you.” Furthermore, they both noted the importance of multicultural literature for White students as well. Celeste argued for the importance of “students who are in the majority demographics . . . to see other experiences and other types of people.” Toni also discussed the importance of learning “a little bit more about each other” and “about different people.” Thus, both women have come to the realization that representation and diversity are essential in the classroom for minority students to not only see themselves but for White students to learn about cultures outside of their own.

Celeste

Celeste grew up in the North, but spent a year of her childhood living in the Caribbean. Her family had several foreign exchange students throughout her adolescence, many of whom she is still in contact with today. She attended college in the South and has taught in the South for more than 20 years. She has taught various levels of high school English and has faced pushback from parents for topics that were too “divisive.”

Celeste’s Life Story

Growing up, my family went to United Methodist churches. My mom was in the choir, and both my parents were involved in Sunday school. Most of the families around us also went to church on Sunday. That’s just what you did. If somebody else’s family

didn't go to church, it would be weird because it was unusual but not in the sense of pointing fingers at them. Our community was mostly farming and some former factory areas. There were a couple of factories still open, but it was not the booming business that it had been. It was very much small town. My mom has been a teacher, but once there were kids to take care of, she decided to stay home. I have an older brother and sister who are significantly older, so they got to leave the house and go to school while I was at home all day. I was very insistent in general as a child, and when I was four, apparently there was a day that I just wouldn't stop marching around the kitchen table saying, "I want to go to school, and I want to go to a real school. I want to go to school and not to a play school." Part of wanting to go to school was wanting to get to leave the house and be away. The bus stop was right across the street from our house, but I was stuck inside and wanted to ride the big yellow bus. Because I was four and there was still another year before I should have started kindergarten, in addition to being apparently very annoying to be around as a young one, my mom took me over to the school to see if there was some way I could be enrolled. They said it wasn't typical, but they took me off to be tested and said, "Oh, yeah, she'll be fine." I could already read sight words, so I started early, even though it was only half day. I didn't realize it at the time, but I was in the gifted program by first grade. Different small groups got pulled out at various times, and apparently the gifted group was the group that I went with.

When I was in third or fourth grade, we had an exchange student come and live with us for a few months. He was with the American Field Service. His name was Alberto, and he was from Paraguay. I think we were the first family he stayed with, and when he came to stay with us, he could say only really basic stuff in English, like

“yes,” “no,” “pizza” and “Coca-Cola.” I remember we went to Chuck E. Cheese, which was a big deal because you have all these games and stuff around, and it was more expensive than some of the lower-end pizza places. They had a pizza buffet, and Alberto was not familiar with the concept of an all-you-can-eat buffet. At one point, we said, “Yes, you can go get more. No, it’s not going to cost us anything more. You can get as much as you want.” So, here was this teenage boy, he liked pizza, and he could eat all the pizza he wanted. My mom said they stopped counting at eight trips to the buffet, and he wasn’t just getting one piece each time. That experience was, I think, the first big experience having somebody who we had to struggle to find a way to express ourselves.

My dad’s older sister was a missionary, so my dad took a sabbatical when I was in sixth grade, and we spent the year in the Caribbean. Because he was on Sabbatical, my dad could only work one day a week so he would be under a certain amount or wasn’t allowed to have a paying job at all—I don’t remember the reasoning—so, my mom was the one who was working as a teacher. It was a two-room schoolhouse, and one room was elementary school, and the room I was in was sixth, seventh, and ninth grades because we didn’t have anybody in eighth grade. It was just really small and not a lot of students but a lot going on. Everybody was doing something different. The drive every day was on a bumpy road, maybe 5 miles, but the roads were so bad! The roads were not paved where we were. We would go to market once a week to pick up our basic supplies, but to buy any major products, we would need to go to the capital city to get. I think we did that about once a month, and about halfway there, we would get to the nice road, the one that was actually paved. It was so much nicer because then you weren’t bouncing up and down, so it was a more comfortable ride. The cars had air conditioning, but the buildings

did not. There were fans, and that was great, but the fans just kind of blew around the hot air. So, it was just it was always hot.

The Mission also had a church across the street from the compound where we lived. I'm not a patient person, and I can't have been at 10 either. I just had to wait for church to be over every week because I didn't understand what they were saying. The service was in the island's native language, so I just had to wait. I could pick up a word or two here and there, but I wasn't fluent. I sat there and daydreamed for an hour, then played with the kids outside. What kept me separate from the islanders, though, was the language barrier more so than culture or anything like that. It's harder to play with somebody when you don't speak the same language, so when there's somebody that you do understand and somebody you don't understand, you're going to gravitate the person you can talk to. That's kind of how it was. When we went to school, we had to wear skirts, and they had to be like knee length. I don't know how much of that was out of respect for the local culture and how much of that was because it was all like a church-based thing. We were allowed to like play in pants and shorts, though. So, that was very much an experience of racial difference and cultural difference and things being very different.

When I started junior high in seventh grade, the gifted program did some extension type stuff, but I didn't really feel like it was particularly helpful or that I was being stretched in any way. I was just sort of doing it because that's what I was told to do. So, I asked to be excused from the program, and the school and my parents said, "Okay." Instead, I doubled up all my classes, so I wasn't doing anything different that wasn't already offered by the school, but it let me explore some classes that I was

interested in. My schedule was full with my academic classes, band, chorus, journalism, and French, but I wanted to take Spanish. So, I asked if I could, as my “gifted program,” go to the Spanish one class during my French three period. I said, “Can I just go there on Thursdays and Fridays and see what I can learn? And then, if I pass final, go on to Spanish 2?” and they said, “Well, as long as your French teacher’s okay with it, and you’re keeping up in there, sure.” So, I did that, and I was able to keep my grades up and keep up with the work. Then, in high school, I ran cross country and track in ninth grade but just cross country in 10th grade. I decided I didn’t want go out for track again, and my mom said, “Well, why not?” I said, “I don’t want to, and you can’t make me.” I wasn’t saying it to be hateful, but I realized, *Wow! She really can’t, and these are choices that I have to make for myself.* That’s something that I’ve kind of carried with me.

We had more exchange students live with us when I was in high school: one from Venezuela and one from Finland. Just like with Alberto, what I noticed was that language is the biggest external change, but the people that you’re living with and the family situation is the biggest change. Living with a group of people that are complete strangers to you is a big deal, so having a supportive host family is absolutely crucial. I think that once the exchange student staying here is comfortable talking with us, then it’s a little bit easier to navigate the community, because anything they have difficulty with, they can come back to the host family. So, having kind of a home base that you can build a foundation from is super important. I think that concept applies in a broader context, too. The summer before my senior year, we had two girls from the Netherlands who were daughters of one of my dad’s friends come to visit. When my dad was younger, he backpacked around the world, and he spent some time in Europe. One of his cousins

married a man who's from the Netherlands, so my understanding is he met his friends in the Netherlands through his cousin's husband. So, they had known each other for years when his daughters came over to stay with us for the summer. I think they were a little older than me and were sort of in between high school and college. That summer, we took a road trip out to Utah to visit family out there. So, there were seven of us in a seven-passenger minivan going from my home state up North to Utah. When we would cross a state border, my dad would honk the horn and we would say, "Yay! We crossed the state border." The girls asked, "Are we almost there?" We tried to explain, so we showed them a map of the United States. They sighed, and one of them said, "In our country, you can't drive for 4 hours. You'll be in another country, or you'll be in the sea." It's just so different.

Eye-Opening Experiences. When it came time to go to college, I chose to attend a state university in the South. A big part of it was that her family still lived there, so I would have extended family nearby. They were close enough that if I wanted to get away for the weekend, I could go stay with my aunts and uncles, but they were far enough away that nobody would drop in and surprise me with a visit when I was at college. I joined the university marching band, which was a really good experience for someone coming in not really knowing anybody else there. It sort of felt very much like rushing one of the fraternities or sororities with that instant community, and you have that community because you have something in common. So, that was really helpful for me and really helped me get my footing there. There was a lot more opportunity to just sort of be around and talk to a lot of different people. For the first time, some of the people

that I got to know, either in the marching band or some of the clubs that I got involved with, were gay, bisexual, or sort of exploring their gender identity or their sexuality.

I was a declared English education major from the beginning. Even though my mom had left teaching other than sometimes subbing, my dad was a teacher as well. So, I grew up just hanging out at my dad's school and in the school community, which is very much a part of becoming a teacher. It was something I was familiar with, and also something I felt not just that I was comfortable with, but I also knew enough about the system itself that I could make it work. I knew that there would be a lot of work outside of just the school day. I knew the importance of the janitors and front office staff—they keep the school running, so stay on their good side. I knew that administration can really make or break your job satisfaction and job environment. I knew the challenge that can put on you but that you won't be with one administrator for your whole career, because they tend to come and go a lot more than some teachers will. I chose English because I like language, but mostly I've just always liked stories. While I knew that some people don't enjoy reading, at the same time, I knew that literacy is kind of a fundamental skill. So, there was definitely a sense that I felt like I would be doing something that is useful, necessary, and meaningful, both in a practical sense of helping students develop the skills needed to function effectively as a member of society but also in a more elevated/aesthetic sense. I could help students develop an understanding of what they enjoy as far as story goes as a reader and, as far as writing goes, develop their own sense of style and their own sense of identity as a writer. I knew teaching English would allow me to do all of that.

The fall semester of my junior year, I had some medical issues, so when I went home for Thanksgiving, the doctor suggested a biopsy. I remember saying, “Can I talk to my mom about this?” After he left the room, Mom said, “What do you want to talk about? What’s there to talk about?” and I said, “Well, should I really get a biopsy? Do we know if our insurance will cover this?” I could see how much of an effort it was taking for her to be restrained, but she chewed me the hell out. She said, “First of all, yes, you are getting a biopsy. This is medically necessary. Our insurance will cover it, and even if they wouldn’t, it doesn’t matter if we lose the house. Your health comes first.” Seeing the way that affected her really radicalized me because I realized no parent should hear that from their child. That individual experience pushed me to support public health care and relatively progressive policies. The interaction with my mom and her reacting so supportively, forcefully, and protectively just made me realize there are people who, even if they mortgage the house, until you get to the ER, your care can be denied, even if it’s actually medically necessary. That’s not okay. Then, when I went home for Christmas, they said—this is one of those things that’s gonna stick with me—“Well, this isn’t the news we hope to hear.” They told me I was positive for ductal carcinoma in C2, which is really, really, really early-stage breast cancer. So, I had a mastectomy in January, so I took the semester off. Once I finished recovering from the surgery, I got a part-time job at a nearby school district in their central office. One of my clerical responsibilities was going through and making sure the teacher applications that came in had all the things that they needed. I got to look at all those teacher applications as I was about to continue my coursework to be a teacher, so that was helpful, and I also got paid.

I ended up basically having a second junior year, and the summer before my senior year, I interned at a small publishing house in a nearby city. Not long after I started working there, I told a racist joke, and I didn't know it was racist. I was with the other interns in our cubicle, and I heard, "Celeste? Will you come over here to my office, please?" from the editor. My boss. I sat in his office, and he said, "Did you just tell a racist joke in my earshot?" I thought, *Okay, so I know the answer to this is, yes, apparently so.* He said, "Can you tell me why you thought this was funny?" It was an OJ Simpson joke, and I explained to him, "This is a play on words. It has nothing to do with race. It's because he's gone to jail, and raccoons are, you know, the symbol for a criminal because they have the bandit mask and the prison stripes on the tail." I thought that was the point of the joke, but he said, "So, this is a racist slur," and I said, "Okay, thanks for letting me know. I'm sorry, and I won't ever tell that joke again." So, that was an experience of somebody correcting me, and it was so uncomfortable for me.

The final semester of my senior year, I did my student teaching, and it was tough. I didn't have a lot of instruction in curriculum development, so sort of what I thought was, *Okay, here are the things that are being taught. Here are the things that I remember having been taught at this grade level. We'll go with some of a mix of those.* I was sort of teaching in a way that I thought, *This is what you're expected to teach.* I was more teaching from a mindset of this is what the unit is, so this is what we do. So, when the students would ask me, "Why do we have to learn this?" and I would respond, "Well, why do students have to learn a lot of what we're doing?" It would have been helpful to have learned the answers to those questions earlier on in the theory classes, so that I would have been a little bit more prepared for being in front of students with those

questions. One of the things that I was butting heads with the students was on the Shakespeare unit and iambic pentameter. It was part of the unit, so that's what we do, but my mentor teacher said, "Is this really what you think they should be spending time on?" I said, "This is what the unit is. It's not up to me," and she said, "Well, yes, it is. It is up to you." I just didn't have the confidence that I understood the standards. I knew what was developmentally appropriate for students. I knew the public chooses these legislators who have then selected these people to say this is what our state standards are, but I didn't really understand all of that process and how it worked to say this is what we expect from these students. So, I was more focused on the nuts and bolts of it rather than looking at it from a big picture, and I really struggled with that. It wasn't until years later that I found understanding by design and the idea of backwards design starting with standards to look at where students are supposed to be, how we figure out students have mastered that, and how we get students ready for that assessment. That's the instruction. So, that was an absolute game changer for me.

Because I didn't feel particularly successful as a student teacher, after I graduated, I actually didn't start teaching for several years. Instead, I worked in insurance billing for a doctor. Next, I did one year of Pre-K. Then, I worked as a group home coordinator at a couple of different places. I moved back up north near where I'd grown up, and when I did that, I was essentially live-in staff at the group home. I would work there on the weekends, and that left my day times free, so I started teaching distance learning, which, at the time, was very different from what we think of it now; it was all through the mail. So, I did that for a couple of years and would work at the group home on the weekends, and then I was just the overnight staff. I was still working with teens and young adults

because these were these were homes for pregnant women who didn't have anywhere else to go. Usually, that meant a lot of teen moms who'd been kicked out of the house, kind of thing. I wasn't teaching them necessarily anything, but I was just there to make sure they were safe and their physical needs were met. They kind of took care of themselves. Then, I started substitute teaching because my mom said, "Look are you gonna do this or not?" and I said, "Okay, fine." So, I started substituting just doing day-to-day stuff. I was subbing and teaching distance learning during the day and staying at the group home at night. When my now husband and I decided to get married, I wasn't able to keep living at the group home. I loved working at the group home, but they said, "This is probably about the best reason that we've had to let somebody go because it's a women's home. He can't live here, and we don't want you to live as live-in staff; you should live with your new husband." So, it was a good parting, and I started looking for a permanent teaching position. I had met him on a visit back to the South, where he was from, so I told him I would look for a position both where he's from and where we were living up North at the time. We had come down south to visit his family, so I went around to a couple of the schools to sort of see what the facilities were like, and when I went into that one, I said, "Hey, I'm just here to sort of get an idea of the layout of the school," and they said, "Well, the principal's here, you want to talk to him?" I said, "Sure." So, he took me around the school, and that was my interview.

I got the job, we moved, and that's where I've been ever since. I started out teaching ninth grade, so *The Odyssey* and *Romeo and Juliet* were the longer form texts we read. Typically, ninth has been genre studies, so *The Odyssey* is sort of long-form epic, *Romeo and Juliet* is drama, and then we also do short stories and a novel study.

Then, I started teaching 10th grade, and I pulled in *The Giver* for my lower readers, but I did literature circles for a novel unit. I think it had been a donor's choose project, so I got copies of *The City of Ember* by Jeanne DuPrau and *Uglies* by Scott Westerfeld. We had copies of *1984*, I think I got copies of *Little Brother* by Cory Doctorow. So, I did dystopian lit circles for the novel unit, so we were able to talk about the features of the books, plot structures, and all those sorts of things, but they were working with their smaller groups based on which text they were interested in. We also did short stories and poetry. It was helpful having that structure, I feel, as a beginning teacher because this was still as I was developing my understanding of what we teach at different levels and why, as well as what we do if students aren't necessarily at the levels where we think they should be and how to respond to that.

Early in my career as a teacher, there was a blogger I followed. This before social media got started and blog rings and web rings were still kind of a thing. I don't even remember what she was writing about, but she was writing about something that she felt really strongly about and was passionate about what she was saying, but at the same time, she expressed her points so that both the clarity and the reasoning came through and yet still also conveyed that passion and that just very firm conviction. So, I wrote to her, and I said, "This is amazing. I am just so impressed with how articulate you are." I didn't know at the time, but "articulate" is a word that often gets used, especially for Black women, to say, "I didn't know a Black woman would be that smart." In her response, she told me that, and I was mortified. I said, "No, that's not what I meant. I just think that as a writer, being able to do both of those things is really hard, and you not only did it, but you did it really well. I'm just impressed, and I wish I could write that good." She told

me, “Okay, here’s what you need to know,” and explained how coming from someone in the dominant demographic group, that’s a microaggression. It’s not intentional, but it still puts extra work on nondominant demographic to deal with the situation gently and take the other person’s feelings into consideration when you’ve just been insulted or attacked, even if inadvertently. Not long after that experience, I had a conversation with a student where I dropped the ball. It was still early in my teaching career, when I was trying to build my classroom library, so didn’t have a whole lot and trying to include books that were more diverse and featured not just the canon. I remembered in my college coursework learning that the canon is important and does still have relevance, but there was also some sense of moving past the dead White men and a focus on looking for work that’s “relevant” to readers. I also recalled reading Rita Sims Bishop’s article on mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. So, I gave a student one of the Bluford series books, which are hi-lo readers, and they feature primarily Black characters and take place in the inner city. When I offered her the book, I said, “Well, what about this?” She looked at it, looked at me, and said, “Did you give me this because I’m Black?” I was just speechless and didn’t yet have the language to say, partially, yes, I wanted her to know that those books were there, because it wasn’t something that was similar to what she’d read before, and I would often give students something that was a little bit different to try to stretch them as readers, whether it’s in terms of genre or style, or just a graphic novel when they’ve been reading fiction, or switching between fiction and nonfiction to stretch them as readers. Mostly, I wanted her to know that not all books are like this. She was a strong reader, so she didn’t need the hi-lo skinny book. Then, she just kind of walked away, and I thought, *Okay, didn’t go well, don’t know what to say*. Even now, just the emotional

tone of the situation is still hard. I think a better answer would be “In part, but that’s not the only part.” Those were both situations, along with the racist joke I told in college, that were uncomfortable experiences but ones that I accepted and learned from.

Pushing Back. After I had been teaching for several years, I decided I wanted to find new books to teach. I have read *Nickel and Dimed* and loved it, so I wrote to the author and said, “I would love to teach this with my class. Do you have any materials that I could use with it?” and she sent me a box of 40 books. So, I talked to somebody at the school about getting it approved, and they said, “Well, we have a committee that will read this book and discuss it,” so I said, “Oh, okay, great.” I passed out copies of the books, and when I met with the committee, one of the assistant principals pointed out a passage where she discusses cleaning the bathroom, and she do not use the word excrement. The assistant principal said, “Do you think that is appropriate for 10th graders?” and I remember thinking, *Okay, so I know what the correct answer is. But I also know that I think this is perfectly fine for 10th graders. Yes, this is what people say.* Instead, I just said, “Okay, well, all right, then. So, I’ll just not teach this.” I was just absolutely mortified. First of all, why is this a problem? It shouldn’t be a problem. Second, all right, fine, though how the hell would I miss that? I wasn’t thinking of that so much in terms of diverse literature because she’s still a White lady, but I was thinking more in the sense of a number of our students don’t go to college, so here’s a depiction of the things they may see in their life, as well as the challenges that people face in different areas and in different types of careers. I also remember the assistant principal said, “Is this the best that we have to offer our students?” and I could have said, “Yes,” but I also

had the perspective that this was not the only good thing that we have to offer our students. There are plenty of other materials that are incredible.

One of the other teachers at my school requested *The Other Wes Moore*, and that was approved, so we began teaching that. I started off with a Likert scale, and I would take out the middle one because you don't get to pick neutral. You gotta take a side. So, the options were strongly agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree. Some of the questions dealt with education; a lot of them dealt with money; some of them dealt with gender, which was a little bit of a stretch; and some of them deal with race, especially with policing, because of the characters ends up in jail. One of the questions was something like, "Black Americans receive harsher sentences than White Americans for similar crimes," and I had students call me out on it, saying, "You know, this isn't an opinion statement. This is just a statistic, whether or not it's accurate." So, I said, "That's okay, it is. Do you agree with this statement or not? You're absolutely right. That is an observational, observable, calculatable, measurable fact." The gender questions tended to invite more conversation because we would typically have a bit more of a balance split in the classroom based on gender more than anything to do with race, and the classroom was predominantly White. Then, we would also discuss these ideas and how they showed up in the book in a Socratic discussion. Of course, I had a parent complain because she did not think it was appropriate to have students talking about what they thought about racial matters in the English classroom. Eventually, I met with the parent and the principal to see if we could make any progress on this, and the parent said, "I don't think it is appropriate to have students share their ideas in the English classroom." I thought,

What are you thinking English class is for if students aren't supposed to share their ideas verbally? You're just wrong. So, I knew I wasn't going to get anywhere with that parent.

So, I decided to try suggesting a book again. As we were looking at 10th grade for world literature, I suggested *I Am Malala* as a memoir that we could take a look at. They approved it, but I knew we would have some pushback from Christian families who don't want their kids reading about something that is explicitly not Christian. Even though there were plenty of things we read that weren't explicitly Christian, and they're fine with that, but I knew a first-person account of someone who is not a Christian and it's presented as completely okay would bring out parents who were not okay with that. Of course, I had some students say, "Well, my mom and daddy, they don't want me to read about some or Muslim girl." So, I said, "Okay, you can read this one instead," and gave them *The Other Wes Moore* as an alternate. I didn't really get any parent push back about *I Am Malala* since they had an option whether or not to read. They didn't object to somebody else in the class reading the book. Their kid had an option, so I didn't have any pushback in terms of "you should not be teaching this book at all." So, we kept *The Other Wes Moore* as an alternate text and said, "Okay, you can read this one, you can read that one, and we'll discuss both." They're both memoirs, so we looked at how they both tell the story. I really think that made them have to do the work of explaining what's going on, because they're talking to somebody who has read something different. So, the questions are very authentic, genuine questions: "Wait! Who was that? What's her dad's name? How do you say that?" stuff like that. In the entire time I was at that school, *I Am Malala* was only book I asked them to purchase for me.

After 18 years at the same school, I switched schools from the high school at the south end of the county to the high school at the north end of the county. It's much closer to where we live, which is really nice. Last year was my first year there, and I had the lower-level sophomores. So, I wanted to teach *Persepolis* and *A Bigger Picture* because I think we should use more modern texts that reflect current cultural understandings and things like that. When I went to admin about getting Vanessa Nakate's memoir *A Bigger Picture*, I said, "I'd really like this," and they said, "Okay, we'll get it for you." I was shocked. I thought I was gonna have to make an expense report and justify the purchase like I had to at my previous school, but they just purchased the books for me. *A Bigger Picture* is a memoir by a climate activist from Uganda, and she went to speak in Davos with a number of other climate activists, including Greta Thunberg. When they gave a press conference and had their picture taken as a group, Nakate was cropped out from one side of the photo. Her posting about that on social media got a lot of traction, but before we read her book, I teach the short story "The Gold Cadillac," which is set in the United States in either during the Civil Rights era or just after in the post-Civil Rights era. The dad buys a gold Cadillac, and Mom is not happy about this because they were saving up for a down payment on a house. He is so proud of this car that he wants to go down and show his family in Alabama. While they're in the South, they get pulled over, and this cop is essentially insinuating that the car is stolen. It's a great opportunity to talk about why the cop says what he says, and if you ask the students, "Is he being racist?" obviously, the answer is yes, but we take a deeper look at that. We talk about how, in that time period, how often would he have seen somebody who's Black driving an expensive, new, nice car, and if he's never seen that, what should his reaction have been? Is that

racist? So, when the whole conversation about CRT came up and people were saying, “CRT is not taught in K-12.” Well, that’s CRT. That’s looking at the way the system perpetuates itself, specifically with regard to race. Because the police officer is not targeting this man specifically because he hates Black people. I mean, maybe he is, but the narrative doesn’t frame it that way. The narrative doesn’t frame the officer as a good guy or a bad guy. It’s just “this is what happened.”

Looking at “The Gold Cadillac” provides a similar framework for understanding what happened to Vanessa Nakate in Davos. She was one out of a group of five or six, and she was the only one who’s not from Europe in that entire group. She points out repeatedly through the book that climate change is affecting geographic areas close to the equator in terms of weather patterns. They are getting more severe weather patterns than geographic areas that are further from the equator. So, they’re seeing more of an effect, but financially, more wealth and power is in the global north, meaning the countries with power are seeing less of an effect. So, it is understandable that people around here are climate change deniers because they don’t see it. They’re not seeing a significant effect. It’s not part of their life. So, when they hear somebody else saying, “Oh, you need to worry about this,” it seems like they’re just talking bullshit. It’s difficult to know how to get people to do anything about it when the problem doesn’t affect them, but they’re the ones with the power to do the most that will be helpful and effective about it. Then, the discussion becomes, was it a deliberate attempt to exclude her from that photograph? There were probably other groups giving press conferences at the same place and time. She was on the edge. She wasn’t in the center of the photo. Had she been in the middle, they couldn’t have cropped her out so like. There’re all sorts of factors that intersect and

intertwine. She doesn't use the word, but that's intersectionality. She's a Black woman, and those elements factor in. So, we do talk about those things, and they are presented in a text. She talks about her own concerns as a young woman protesting for anything, that people will say she's just trying to get people to notice her so she can get a husband, or they'll say she's attracting attention for the wrong reasons, so she'll never gonna get a husband. So, all this plays in, but it's also from her own personal lived experience, and that's super helpful for a couple of reasons. She doesn't say this is true for women or this is true for Black people. It's not like taking a stand, but it allows me to introduce that idea without being as divisive about it. I've loved working with this book because it deals with multiple issues and talks about different events in her life. So, it doesn't feel like she's banging exact same drum the whole way through. She looks at different things, and her last chapter is about what you can do. She invites the reader to think about what matters to them and it very clear about how that may not be climate change. There are lots of things to care about. So, as a teacher that provides an excellent defense for me to say, "I'm not teaching climate change," because factually I am not. I'm teaching about our role in society, thinking about ways that we can be intentional, how we can pursue our own passions, and how we can make a difference in the world.

The fact, though, that I need a defense at all shows that we as teachers have reached the point where we have to think about not only to what extent we want to risk being accused of transgressing that law, but also how far we think we should go to avoid those accusations. Self-censorship among teachers is an issue, but I'm not seriously worried about getting in trouble for it, especially now that I'm at a school where I feel much more supported, and not just in terms of the administration supporting me. We're

closer to the city, and there's less scrutiny from the school board. The parents tend to still be conservative, but fewer of them are as controlling. It's just a different community, really, as much as feeling supported from the administration, so I'm not worried about losing my job and losing the house. Teaching multicultural lit is important for students who don't fit the majority demographic to see themselves represented; however, it is also incredibly important for students who are in the majority demographic—maybe even more important. I don't know. They're both really important—to see other experiences and other types of people represented. I also think there are enough of us that they can't fire us all. I do have some books that I've chosen not to put out in my classroom library, but I do have a quote on my wall that says, "Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today"; I did not, however, attribute the quote, which was said by Malcolm X. I've got a pair of yellow rainboots that lace up, and when the laces wore out, I replaced them with a just a length of rainbow ribbon. I have a couple of earrings that have rainbows on them. I have a rainbow poster that says, "choose kindness" in all caps. It's not particularly subtle, and it's a little petty, because the implication, of course, is that if you're not accepting, it's unkind. It's really little stuff, but it's deliberate.

My Reflection: Celeste

Being corrected by three people of color, including a student, in her adult life led Celeste to realize she had been "color oblivious." These experiences were emblematic of the sociality dimension of narrative inquiry as Celeste engaged in self-reflection after each incident, impacting her "emotions . . . [and] moral responses" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 40). As a result, she began asking students to consider statements such as "Black

Americans receive harsher sentences than White Americans for similar crimes,” drawing their attention to the CRT tenet that racism is so common in the U.S., it “is difficult to address or cure because it is not acknowledged” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 8).

Celeste’s choice to teach *A Bigger Picture* also demonstrates her own understanding of the importance of stories and how they have the power to “make a difference in society by planting a seed for social justice” (Kim, 2016, p. 237), which her own story has the power to do as well.

Furthermore, by choosing to request copies of *I Am Malala* knowing it would push the buttons of certain parents, Celeste exhibited critical theory’s determination to deflect efforts to enforce “Christian dominance” (Kincheloe, 2006, p. 221). Celeste’s decision to display rainbows and a “choose kindness” poster in her classroom demonstrates her efforts to create a classroom environment that is welcoming for all, where no student would feel the need to hide their “queer lives” (Helmsing, 2020, p. 136).

Narrative Conclusion

I chose to present my participant’s life stories through narrative inquiry as it is “designed to tell of participants’ storied experiences and to represent their voices” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 147). Preserving their voices as much as possible by using their own words (Seidman, 2013) allowed me present their life stories and gain “an in-depth study of one’s individual life as a whole” (Kim, 2016, p. 303). Moreover, the context of each participant’s life is paramount to understand prior to examining the thematic connections between participants. Having conducted the interviews as the

researcher, I had a solid grasp of their life stories before, so I chose to present the above narratives prior to the thematic connections, which I discuss in the following chapter.

Chapter V

THEMATIC RESPONSES TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

According to Maxwell (2013), understanding the context of participants' lives is a crucial element of qualitative research. Mishler (1979) also noted the need for "context to understand the behavior and speech of others" (p. 2). Furthermore, Patton (2015) noted the importance of "interpreting interviews . . . to find substantively meaningful patterns and themes" (p. 5). Thus, I chose to present the narrative life stories constructed from the transcripts of Seidman's (2013) three-interview series in Chapter 4 prior to presenting the themes that allowed me to "connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others" for similarity and difference as the difference is where you find the unique (p. 27). I applied Maxwell and Miller's (2008) suggestion to both categorize and connect the data "as complementary and mutually supporting" strategies during thematic analysis (p. 474), which I present in this chapter.

After transcribing the interviews, I coded the transcripts using *in vivo*, emotion, values, process, and concept codes (Saldaña, 2016). I then "[linked] the codes to create a unit or a category" (Kim, 2016, p. 189) before identifying the patterns between categories (Kim, 2016; Maxwell & Miller, 2008). From the patterns, I "[created] a theme that represent[ed] similar patterns" (Kim, 2016, p. 189). Next, I returned to the coded transcripts and conducted thematic narrative analysis to identify "thematic meanings and

points” in the data (Kim, 2016, p. 213). When returning to the data, I also noted the “actual connections between things” (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 462). To “[preserve] the chronological order” of my participants’ lives while making connections (Maxwell & Miller, 2008, p. 473), I combined the transcripts into chronological order using the timelines I created with the participants (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Finally, I organized the themes by research question, as seen in Table 4.

Table 4

Focus of Themes by Research Question

Research Questions	Themes
RQ 1: How do past experiences of six English teachers who identify as White women shape their current beliefs and practices regarding race and culture?	Unique experiences and phases in life opened participants’ eyes to race and/or culture as influential, important constructs in the world and made them aware that biases, both their own and others’, are detrimental to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives.
RQ 2: How did six English teachers who identify as White women begin to use multicultural literature in the classroom?	By understanding the need for minority students to feel represented in the classroom, these English teachers intentionally chose multicultural texts that embraced the cultures of all students.
RQ 3: Why did six English teachers who identify as White women decide to continue using multicultural literature in the classroom within a climate of censorship?	When teachers used their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature, they not only confronted their own fears but those of others as well.

Research Question 1: Learning from Past Experiences

My first research question asked how past experiences of teachers impact their current beliefs and practices on race and culture. After I coded the transcripts, I identified a major theme regarding the influence of past experiences within the context of my

participants' narratives. Each participant noted *unique experiences and phases in life that opened participants' eyes to race and/or culture as influential, important constructs in the world and made them aware that biases, both their own and others', were detrimental to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives*. Though no participant self-identified as intentionally racist at any point in her life, some participants did describe themselves as previously being colorblind, a mindset Ladson-Billings (2021) argued stems from erroneously interpreting Martin Luther King Jr.'s desire for his children's skin color not to influence how others would judge them as not seeing the color of their skin at all. I detail the connections between my participants in the thematic presentations that follow, as well as how these connections relate to my conceptual framework, by discussing the two major components that came together to clarify the theme separately before reconnecting them in a concluding paragraph.

Eye-Opening Experiences

All six participants noted having moments in their pasts, from childhood to adulthood, they would now consider eye-opening experiences that, in some way, influenced how they currently believe and engage in practices regarding race and culture. For Dorothy and Alice, learning about history was an eye-opening experience. Dorothy, who grew up attending a school with both Whites and Blacks, never considered that schools were, not all that long ago, segregated. She recalled the experience of meeting her friend's racist father as "the first time I ever had to think about Blacks and Whites being together." Until that moment, she "thought we were just a society together." Like Dorothy, Alice also attended a school with a diverse student population that she "felt like it was half and half, Black and White." Alice also did not learn until later how integration

impacted her schools' demographics. She explained that she did not realize until college that she was "a product of *Brown vs. Board of Education*." Though she knew the majority of Black students rode the bus to school, she did not realize that was because "none of the Black kids lived around us." Alice further noted that when she first learned about slavery and the Holocaust, she could not understand how someone could think "You know what? I think I should own them." Even as a child, she "could never understand how another people could treat another person like that."

For Anne and Celeste, hosting foreign exchange students during their adolescence opened their eyes to other cultures. Anne discussed how her family hosted "Japanese exchange students" when she was growing up, which laid an important foundation for when she later married a man from Japan and had Asian American children. Celeste also talked about how her family hosted several foreign exchange students throughout her childhood and teenage years. She said the first "exchange student [to] come and live with us" was when she was in elementary school. Then, when she was in high school, "we had a couple of girls come stay with us: one from Venezuela and one from Finland." Celeste also had the opportunity to live abroad as a child, when her family lived in the Caribbean for a year on a mission trip. She described that year of her life as an "experience of racial difference and cultural difference and things being very different." However, she credits this experience as making her "more sympathetic than I would otherwise be," especially with "the language barrier" she faced living in a country where English was not the main language.

Several participants also noted how attending college opened their eyes to the world around them. Dorothy pointed out that college as a whole was "an eye-opening

experience from all of these different perspectives” and “to the world beyond.” Those perspectives included having a roommate from Vietnam and suitemates from Brazil, whose presence, Dorothy explained, “expanded my worldview, my understanding of the world, of how different it is.” She further noted the importance of taking the history course with the professor who “taught us history from the loser’s perspective” as an experience that opened her eyes to other perspectives. Toni also began to consider other perspectives in college with her freshman roommate. She discussed how she was “a little nervous” when she found out she would have a Black roommate, but that their conversations during that “did impact my life, and that did make a change.” Toni also mentioned the time in a folklore course when the professor asked the students to discuss how their families celebrate birthdays. She discussed how, because of that discussion, as well as those with her freshman roommate, she was “starting to realize how different people do things in ordinary life.”

Alice, Evelyn, and Celeste all discussed how college was where they became more aware of the LGBTQIA+ community. Alice noted that it was not until college that she “had friends who, for the first time, that I actually knew who were lesbians or bisexual.” For Evelyn, going to college “was a huge, huge change” and where she “became introduced to what homosexuality was.” She even “went to a gay club for the first time” and loved the joy she felt from the people there, despite, she noted, how much hate they often face from society. Evelyn emphasized it was not until she attended college that she met “people who were more comfortable in their skin, with their identity.” Celeste also said “going to college and being in a more demographically mixed area” presented her with opportunities to meet different people. College was also where

Celeste noted she “became aware” of the LGBTQIA community through her friends in band. Unlike Alice, Evelyn, and Celeste, Anne grew up well aware of the LGBTQIA+ community. She fondly described childhood memories of her mom’s gay best friend, who also performed in drag shows. Interestingly, her own best friend in high school was gay. She found it odd that people often mistook them for a couple, noting that she “thought everyone knew we were best friends.”

For each of the participants, their past experiences opened their eyes to races and cultures beyond their own, which was a precursor to the next stage of moving toward advocating for multicultural literature. Just as they had eye-opening experiences, all participants also became aware of biases toward different races and cultures at various points in their lives, which is the theme component I discuss next.

Becoming Aware of Biases

Becoming aware of bias was part of all six participants’ life experiences. For some participants, this awareness was of their own biases; for other participants, becoming aware of bias meant realizing others have bias or that bias exists in the first place. Evelyn, Toni, Alice, and Anne became aware of bias through their families. Evelyn grew up with parents who frequently said the n-word and criticized “African American culture.” She did not know differently until she had a Black teacher for second grade, whom Evelyn described as being none of “the things I had been told” and “everything she wasn’t supposed to be” from what her parents taught her. This awareness led her to start asking “questions,” such as “are there other good Black people in the world?” Becoming aware of the bias her parents were teaching her led Evelyn to become “fascinated with African American culture” and other cultures in general.

Toni, like Evelyn, also grew up with a family that would make racist comments, though she was not aware of it at the time. Her dad said he only bought alcohol “where the Black people go because it’ll have the best prices,” while her grandfather used the n-word. Alice also grew up with a grandparent who made racist comments. Her great-grandmother who would play eeny, meeny, miny, moe—a childhood rhyme—and say, “Catch a n-word by the toe,” but her parents made sure to teach her that “discrimination is stupid.” Like Toni and Alice, Anne also had a grandparent known to make racist comments, discussing how she had a great-grandmother who “said the n-word multiple times.”

Anne also overheard racist comments at school. She discussed a time when a group of girls she did not normally hang out with asked her to join them for lunch. Almost immediately, she witnessed antisemitism for the first time when the girls at the table made a comment to a Jewish girl in the group. Anne remembered thinking, “I don’t want to be a part of this,” so she never sat with them again. She also recalled that when 9/11 happened, people would make comments about the Muslim students, telling her, “Don’t hang out with so and so,” which she found “a strange thing for 18-year-olds to say.” School was also where Celeste became “aware of stereotypes.” She discussed noticing how two “all-star athletes”—one White and one bi-racial—were not treated the same. The White student was in “college pre classes,” while the bi-racial student was not, leading Celeste to wonder “to what extent” race was a factor.

For Dorothy, however, going home with a friend after school was when she first became aware of bias. At dinner, she met her friend’s father and listened to him complain about “the Blacks in town and how they were the downfall.” Beforehand, Dorothy never

considered “the idea that someone’s skin color or country where they grew up made them other.” Once she became aware of bias, Dorothy began to “notice it with other people more.”

Despite becoming aware of bias during their adolescences, the participants still had lessons to learn regarding bias as adults. Alice became aware of bias toward the LGBTQIA+ community in college, where she learned that “not only were they being discriminated as women, they were being discriminated against for the people who they loved and who they were attracted to.” But it was also during college the Alice had to confront her own bias. She recalled an uncomfortable time in class when she was telling a story where she described a kid as “little Black boy.” It was not until a classmate asked, “Why did he have to be Black in your description?” that Alice began to “recognize part of my privilege.” Evelyn also became more aware of bias when she was in college. She realized that having established herself as a Republican Christian during freshman year led others “to think that I would hate them or . . . judge their circumstances” because of “my beliefs,” which she decided she never wanted anyone to think. Her participation in speech and debate further helped her to “look at both sides of a topic” and have the uncomfortable realization that her beliefs had created biases toward others. Celeste also had an uncomfortable experience that allowed her to gain awareness of bias. She was interning at a publishing house one summer when she told “a racist joke, and I didn’t know it was racist.” Her boss overheard the joke and explained to her how the joke was biased toward Black people. Though Celeste discussed how the “experience of somebody correcting me” was “so uncomfortable,” she learned a lesson.

For Dorothy and Toni, becoming aware of bias meant confronting their own colorblind mindset. Dorothy recalled a time in her life when, “if someone asked me to describe a student, I deliberately described characteristics and did not say race.” Eventually, however, as her students started to come from a “greater variety of places,” Dorothy became “more sensitive to it” and realized the importance of acknowledging students’ race. Toni also became more sensitive after realizing she grew up surrounded by the idea that “I want to be judged by the content of my character and not as my skin” led her to not see someone’s color at all. This colorblind mentality eventually led to an uncomfortable situation with her freshman roommate. Toni recalled a time when she told her roommate, “I don’t see you as Black. I just see you as you,” but soon realized just how offensive that was. Looking back, she recognizes how White people often says racist things and “don’t see it that way. But it is.” Toni also recalled that when she began student teaching, she “walked in with that ‘I’m not racist’” mentality; however, years later, after a conversation with a student where he called her a racist, she realized “my viewpoint was still that the Martin Luther King Jr. version of being colorblind and not really understanding.” Now, Toni has reached a pointed where she is “more aware of the dynamics” and “more sensitive to stuff.”

Southern states not only tend to be “a less hospitable climate for” the LGBTQIA+ community” (Frey et al., 2021, p. 3) but also retain “some level of ‘racial resentment’” (Acharya et al., 2016, p. 621). Thus, the unique experiences and phases of these participants’ lives opened their eyes to race and/or culture as influential, important constructs in the world and made them aware that biases, including colorblindness (Ladson-Billings, 2021), are detrimental to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives, which supports

the need for teachers to engage in self-reflection to avoid potential biases toward minority students (Almager, 2018; Boyd et al., 2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Greytak et al., 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020). To answer my first research question, the participants' past experiences contributed to their beliefs and practice of respecting and teaching respect in matters related to race and culture they have today. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss the theme I identified regarding how participants began to use multicultural literature in their classrooms after both experiencing eye-opening lessons and gaining an awareness of bias.

Research Question 2: Using Multicultural Literature

My second question asked how teachers began to teach multicultural literature. After coding the transcripts, I again identified key components of a single theme that came together to explain how participants started teaching multicultural literature: *by understanding the need for minority students to feel represented in the classroom, these English teachers intentionally chose multicultural texts that embraced the cultures of all students.* The participants discussed how they realized not only the benefit of multicultural literature for minority students but students in the majority as well, which connects to a concept both Style (1988) and Bishop (1990) noted when discussing the need for books to serve as mirrors and windows. As Bishop argued, “classrooms need to be places where all the children from all the cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors” at the same time that other students can find “windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange” (p. 1). In the sections that follow, I detail the connections between my participants in the thematic presentations and how these connections relate to my conceptual framework by

discussing the two major components that came together to clarify the theme separately before reconnecting them in a concluding paragraph.

Understanding the Need for Representation

For Dorothy, Alice, and Evelyn, the journey to using multicultural literature involved realizing the importance of representing students in the classroom. Dorothy credited attending a College Board training as opening her eyes to the importance of representation and diversity in the classroom, leading her to “first [get] into” thinking about how classroom texts “should reflect the population of our schools.” As Dorothy’s student population has continued to diversify over the years, with students from all over the world who represent at least “65 different languages,” she tries to “match” the books she teaches to her students and make “sure that literature kind of fit the students around [me] and what they needed.” Like Dorothy, Alice also realized the importance of thinking about how teachers can “incorporate more things that are representative of the people who are in our class.” Evelyn also pointed out the need for representation, saying she came to understand the need “to represent all of my kids in my classroom.” Celeste also looked around her classroom and realized the importance “for students who don’t fit the majority demographic to see themselves represented.” For Toni, understanding the need for representation also came by looking around her classroom and understanding that minority students “don’t get as many stories that completely relate to what they’re going through.” Anne, however, did not have to look around her classroom but at her own children, who are Asian American; she noted that “being a parent first and seeing the lack” of representation made her realize the importance of representing not only biracial students like her children but students who represent other minorities as well.

All participants also discussed how understanding the need for representation led them to realize books can allow students to see their cultures in the books they read, also aligns with Bishop's (1990) argument for books that allow students to "find their mirrors" (p. 1). Alice repeated multiple times that "representation matters." She discussed how she believes reading literature that not only allows students "to see themselves in the stories that we read" but also "reaffirms their place . . . and their importance in the world." Like Alice, Anne also discussed the need for students "to see themselves and hear themselves in the books that they read." Evelyn talked about the importance of encouraging students to "look at your culture through your own cultural lens," while Celeste discussed how she will "make sure that I have different representation in that texts that I give" students. Toni also mentioned how she wants her students "to see themselves in literature," arguing that when "you're able to see yourself in a story, that is hopefully going to resonate with you." Likewise, Dorothy noted the need for allowing students "to see themselves" in classroom literature.

Understanding the need for representation in the classroom, however, impacts more than just minority students. As Celeste argued, "it is also incredibly important for students who are in the majority demographics . . . to see other experiences and other types of people." Likewise, Dorothy noted, "if we want a society that weaves together, we do it by reading other societies." By learning about cultures and societies outside of their own, Alice argued students can "look at life through other people's eyes and to understand that their experience isn't the only one." Evelyn agreed, noting the importance of being able "to see things from outside your own cultural lens." Toni also discussed the importance of learning "a little bit more about each other" and "about different people."

The importance of representation also connects to book banning because, as Anne pointed out, the books most often banned are not representative of what “the majority of our students look like.” As Celeste noted, “it’s important to think about who has not been included,” as well as who is “being excluded.” As 40% of the 1,648 books banned from 2021 to 2022 feature people of color and 41% depict the LGBTQIA+ community, minorities are disproportionately impacted by censorship. Dorothy argued that “when we say that these books and these lifestyles are obscene or pornographic, our students are hearing ‘I’m obscene. I’m pornographic. I’m shameful.’” Furthermore, Toni discussed the issue as well, noting that minority students “haven’t seen themselves in literature a whole lot,” as well as that book banning prevents us from being “able to normalize” the experiences minorities often face. When bringing in different American perspectives, Toni made sure she “pulled in something about gay Americans.” Anne argued that when we ban books, “we’re blocking so much from kids, especially from those groups and LGBTQIA themes.” She pointed out how the lack of diverse books available not only means minority students have “fewer books about them than other people” but also “might never get the chance to read a book that looks like them.

For the participants, understanding the need for representation led them to realize the importance of literature and the harm that comes with book bans. Just as the participants came to understand the representation of and education about culture that books can provide students, all participants also began to intentionally choose multicultural texts for their classrooms, the theme component I discuss next.

Intentionally Choosing Multicultural Texts

After understanding the need for representation, the participants began intentionally choosing multicultural texts for their classrooms. Alice mentioned how her goal to “introduce different voices” is “what motivates my decision to incorporate multicultural lit.” Similarly, Dorothy discussed the “deliberateness in my choices” in her classroom, particularly when referring to “deliberately choosing texts” and “looking at other voices.” Anne also noted the intentionality that comes with multicultural literature, saying that “it’s an active choice to choose that for your classroom.” Likewise, Celeste mentioned intentionally “trying to include books that were more diverse.”

The participants also discussed how multicultural literature allows them to talk about various perspectives and cultures in their classrooms. For Toni, the decision comes from believing “it’s important to read from different perspectives.” Evelyn noted that multicultural literature is important because “the United States is a melting pot of . . . other cultures.” Likewise, for Alice, multicultural literature allows students to learn about “other people’s cultures that are surrounding them,” while Anne discussed how “it’s important to think of all these other stories you can tell.” The participants further noted the types of multicultural literature they intentionally choose to bring in cultures and perspectives. Evelyn noted choosing to “cover people from different cultures,” while Toni discussed intentionally seeking out “Asian American, Latina, . . . [and] African American stories.” Dorothy discussed that she tries to “get contemporary short stories from around the world” for both the texts she teaches and the books in her classroom library, which she noted are “very diverse.” Celeste also mentioned she believes “we should use more modern texts that reflect current cultural understandings,” and she

pointed out how she thought about her classroom library as well, intentionally making sure to “have a more diverse classroom library.”

Another reason why the participants noted intentionally choosing multicultural texts was, as Alice explained, to expose students “to things that weren’t just Western and European and White” and, as Evelyn noted, to “not Whitewash” the past. Celeste mentioned how she believes English teachers should focus on “moving past the dead White men,” while Dorothy also discussed purposefully staying away from texts that are just by “a lot of dead White men.” For Toni, teaching books “that aren’t just about White kids” is important.” Likewise, Anne tries to avoid books where “every character is a White male.”

By intentionally choosing multicultural literature for their classrooms, some of the participants have faced push back. When teaching *I Am Malala*, Celeste dealt with “pushback from Christian families who don’t want their kids reading about something that is explicitly not Christian.” Alice had a parent who “didn’t want his son reading *Fences*,” as well as a parent who did not want her son to read *A Thousand Splendid Suns*. Anne tried to teach *Long Way Down* but “never heard anything back” from the district regarding her request.

Minority students need multicultural literature in the classroom because, as Bishop (1990) argued, “when children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, . . . they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (p. 1). Bishop further noted that White students also need to read multicultural literature to become more accepting of those who are different from them, while Gay (2000) argued multicultural literature is “a powerful way to expose students to

ethnic groups, cultures, and experiences different from their own to which they may not have access in their daily life” (p. 118). The idea of literature as a window into other cultures also relates to the fifth tenet of critical race theory, which emphasizes the importance of minority authors who can share stories “[W]hites are unlikely to know” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 11). As the population continues to diversify, with 55% of students in the U.S. schools identifying as BIPOC, multicultural literature is more important now than ever (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Furthermore, acknowledging the need to represent the LGBTQIA+ community in their classrooms connects to queer theory’s criticism of “normalizing, privileging, compulsory, and dominant modes of social organization that characterize historically heterosexist and normalizing cultures” (O’Malley et al., 2018, p. 572). Unfortunately, multicultural literature is at risk, with 40% of the 1,648 books banned from 2021 to 2022 including people of color and 41% featuring the LGBTQIA+ community, which is why by understanding the need for minority students to feel represented in the classroom, English teachers can intentionally choose multicultural texts that embrace the cultures of all students. Thus, in the following section of this chapter, I discuss the theme I identified regarding how participants decided to continue using multicultural literature in the classroom within a climate of censorship.

Research Question 3: Pushing Back Against Censorship

My final question addressed how teachers are continuing to use multicultural literature in their classroom despite the climate of censorship. I coded the transcripts and identified the theme that *when teachers used their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature, they not*

only confronted their own fears but those of others as well. All the participants noted various levels of advocacy, which connects to critical theory's efforts to "take an activist stance" (Patton, 2015, p. 692) and "develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society" (Kim, 2016, p. 36). Furthermore, the participants noted realizing how "the selection of classroom texts is a professional, even moral responsibility that is not to be taken lightly" (Martin & Spencer, 2020, p. 395), leading them to take advantage of their place of privilege as a way to "challenge institutional norms" (Ginsburg & Glenn, 2019, p. 191). The participants also noted, however, confronting various levels of fear, especially given the consequences other teachers have faced for their advocacy (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023). Thus, in the following sections, I detail the connections between my participants in the thematic presentations and how these connections relate to my conceptual framework by discussing the two major components that came together to clarify the theme separately before reconnecting them in a concluding paragraph.

Advocacy and Privilege

Advocacy, as well as privilege, looks different for each participant, with efforts ranging from speaking publicly to flying under the radar. Dorothy, who has worked for years in and made herself useful to the district as a whole by leading training and participating in exam scoring, realized that she could use her "little bit of credibility" and "speak up for others who couldn't." She posted in a teacher Facebook group, asking if there was "anyone interested in challenging any of these books" the district had banned. She then spoke "in front of the school board" and "appealed these removals." While she

does not anticipate that everyone has the same level of privilege within their district as she does, Dorothy discussed the importance of being “able to show teachers that they can speak up, that they don’t have to just put up with this.” While she did not speak to the school board, Anne did present to fellow teachers on book banning at a conference because “it’s really important to me to kind of hone in on what it means for a book to be banned and spreading that information to other people.” She pointed out that while “a lot of adults know books are being banned,” they do not always know “what books are being banned” or that “almost all of the ones that are being banned are mostly LGBTQIA themes but also people of color.” She discussed “a big part” of why she wants to be an advocate are her own kids, who are Asian American and identify as LGBTQIA+; they have the “privilege” at home to read whatever they want, but she knows not all kids have the same option. Even though she does not “do anything sneaky” or “massive,” Anne mentioned she is “just trying to help kids,” such as by helping them find books they are interested in at book fairs.

Though none of the other participants have spoken in front of the school board or presented at conferences, they are still speaking up and advocating in their own ways. For example, Alice mentioned she is aware of “the privilege and power that I have as an educated, middle-class White person,” further noting she believes “it’s our duty . . . whatever privilege we have, I feel like we have an obligation to use that to help those whose voices are ignored.” This duty led her to “feel like I can challenge some of the decisions,” which is why she still taught a book her district had banned, *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian*, for mentioning masturbation. She argued that students in the South “aren’t exposed to a lot of Native American” stories, so she was not going to

“toss that out because of one paragraph.” Likewise, Toni discussed how she “fought for teaching *Their Eyes Were Watching God*,” which is often censored due to two characters having sex “under the tree,” because she believes “young Black women” can benefit from reading a book focused on an inspiring Black female. Toni also mentioned how she does not “want to be the White savior” or “White authority person,” but she is aware that she does “have privilege.” She noted that her district’s book banning efforts clearly “have this anti-gay agenda” that “pisses me off,” and because she wants “kids to know I support them,” especially students who identify as LGBTQIA+, she has “a little ally sticker on the corner of my desk.” Toni also tries “to find subversive ways” to advocate for multicultural literature, which is why she will often give “books to certain kids.”

Other participants also noted being subversive but subtle and, as Evelyn said, trying “to fly under the radar.” She mentioned that while she would not “go to a school board and say something,” she would say something “if a school board member were to come up and ask me about something.” Evelyn also discussed how she “will fight for” her minority students to ensure they have the same opportunities as their White peers, even going so far as to tell them, “I will be your White privilege” when a language barrier prevents their parents from being able to step in. Celeste also mentioned the importance of advocating for students in the minority and teaching them they “have the right to be heard.” She discussed the importance of needing to “achieve justice for marginalized people who are in the minority and prevent people who are in the majority from being oppressive,” especially when referring to book bans. She mentioned the difficulty that comes with getting those “with the power to do something,” or the privileged, “to do anything about it when the problem doesn’t affect them.” Celeste also noted that she tries

“to push back on a lot” though “subtle” means, such as having multicultural literature, including LGBTQIA+ books, in her classroom library so “they’re there” without necessarily trying to “promote them.” She also wears rainbow earring and shoelaces to show she’s an ally, which students have picked up on. Celeste mentioned overhearing a student telling a new classmate not to worry because she is “cool about those things.”

For the participants, understanding how they can use their place of privilege to advocate for multicultural texts and the people they depict. Just as these women realized advocating is one of the ways they can push back against the censorship multicultural literature, they also had to confront the fears that come with teaching multicultural literature, which is the theme component I discuss next.

Confronting Fears

Even though the participants all noted various ways they are using their privilege and advocating, they still have to confront their fears of losing their jobs for their advocacy efforts like other teachers across the South (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023). This fear has led the participants to alter the books they teach or have available in their classrooms. Dorothy discussed how she “edited my list” in her syllabus and “took out *Half of a Yellow Sun*” along with other novels, short stories, and plays. Toni mentioned how she pulled books including *The Color Purple*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *Beloved* from her classroom library, while Celeste also noted there are “some books that I have pulled or that I’ve chosen not to put out in my classroom library.” Anne noted that although she has not pulled any books from her classroom library, she did buy *Flamer* for her classroom but decided she “can’t have it on my bookshelf.” Evelyn mentioned a

similar experience with *Milk and Honey*, which she has for her classroom “but will not put . . . out on my shelf.” While Alice has not pulled any books from her shelves or syllabus, the possibility is on her radar as she mentioned a situation where a teacher bought a book, “put it on her bookshelf, and then, ended up getting sued.”

While the participants may have pulled books or removed texts from their syllabus, that does not mean they are not still advocating; they just have to confront the fear of the consequences they could face. Dorothy noted that when she first started talking to a local reporter about her district boxing up books, “I remained anonymous,” though her name later became public and has been since then. She also mentioned that most “teachers are scared of saying anything.” Likewise, Alice discussed how she is “worried about having to come home and tell my husband that I’ve been fired because I said something.” Toni also mentioned how she has “to be careful” with what she says. Being careful for Evelyn means avoiding “things that are outright LGBTQIA+” or “meant to contradict Christianity” to avoid parent complaints. Celeste noted having to be “aware of the legalities” to avoid “being accused of transgressing that law”; otherwise, she pointed out, “you can lose your job.” Anne also mentioned having “some sort of fear,” which led her to discuss how she would “talk my way out of it if someone said something.”

The participants’ fear of potentially facing the consequences stems from the current climate of censorship, which has risen in recent years. The participants discussed how they believe this climate came to fruition do to the fear of diversity. Dorothy noted that as the “population shifts” and becomes more diverse, White people may experience “a fear of loss, a fear of this change, and they’re pushing back with the literature”; she

argued that the more diverse books are “to match kind of what’s around” could be “new and uncomfortable.” Evelyn addressed this as well, theorizing that “banning literature” relates to “not wanting people to know about history,” as well as “the fear of us not being a White-dominated nation.” Toni argued that “a bunch of old White people . . . are just concerned about the way the world’s changing” and fear the “loss of control,” while Celeste mentioned people are “afraid of loss of power.” Toni addressed this as well, mentioning that “people are seeing change” and fear “loss of control,” which has led to “a rise in promoting Christian values.” Anne discussed how “a lot of White people in particular don’t feel comfortable being a minority in a group.” Likewise, Alice mentioned that “people don’t like to be uncomfortable,” even though, as Dorothy pointed out, reading is “a means of being uncomfortable in a safe way.”

Therefore, even though teachers are at risk of losing their jobs depending on state laws, by facing their fears, teachers can not only to use their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature but also overcome their own fears confront the fears of others. Although I presented my narratives to establish the context of each participant’s life prior to these thematic connections, I coded and memoed on the themes before narrative analysis and smoothing. This decision was based on Maxwell and Miller’s (2008) suggestion that coding the data allows the researcher to “[break] . . . out of the fixed contextual frameworks” and “see other relationships” between the participants and their “separate contexts” (p. 469). In the following chapter, I present my findings and final thoughts on this study, as well as my suggestions for future research.

Chapter VI

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Though the student population in U.S. schools continues to diversify (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023), the overwhelming majority of public-school teachers remain White women (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Culturally relevant teaching has, to me, become more essential now than ever, making multicultural literature and its numerous benefits (Bennett et al., 2017; Bishop, 1990; Boucher, 2016; Clark & Fleming, 2019; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Gay, 2018; Gultekin & May, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022; McNair, 2011; Rempala, 2006) crucial to success of all students, including White, BIPOC, and LGBTQIA+. The participants in this study are not only aware of the benefits that come from multicultural literature but also continue to use it within their classrooms, regardless of the climate of censorship that began in the U.S. in 2020.

Even though the participants in this study—Dorothy, Alice, Anne, Evelyn, Toni, and Celeste—all use multicultural literature now, many of them were not always unbiased toward minorities. Some White teachers enter the classroom with biases (Almager, 2018; Boyd et al., 2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Greytak et al., 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020), whether intentional or not. Overcoming biases is helpful to be effective teachers for all students and, ideally, should

be reflected upon before entering the classroom. Evelyn “had been told” and taught biases from her parents starting from a young age, but she recalled becoming aware of these biases after having a Black teacher in the second grade who was “everything she wasn’t supposed to be” according to what she’d been taught. Alice began to recognize her bias and privilege when a college classmate asked why she had described a little boy as Black when his race had no influence on the story. Dorothy realized she was exhibiting a colorblind mentality toward her students when she would describe them only by their “characteristics and did not say race.” Likewise, Toni had an “I’m not racist” and colorblind mentality that led her to tell her freshman roommate, “I don’t see you as Black. I just see you as you.”

Although the participants overcame their biases, most of them were not taught to use multicultural literature before entering the classroom. Despite Style (1988) and Bishop (1990) advocating for curriculum to include mirrors and windows more than 30 years ago, many teachers enter the field who are unaware of the benefits of multicultural literature (Chen & Browne, 2021; Hoppe, 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021). Ginsberg and Glenn (2019) noted this issue could be a result of teacher preparation and graduate degree programs not teaching future and current educators the culturally relevant teaching skills needed to teach diverse students. Dorothy noted that she did not learn about bringing diverse texts into the classroom until attending a College Board training to teach an AP course, which was furthered by her coursework for her master’s. Celeste recalled reading Bishop’s article but did not gain much from her teacher education program regarding diversity in the classroom. Toni mentioned the focus was “more about meeting the students at their level but not specifically diversity,” while Evelyn pursued

degrees in communication rather than education. Alice originally intended to teach college, so she focused on the Harlem Renaissance by choice, but she noted that she would be taking a course on multicultural literature for her doctoral program. Out of the participants, only Anne attended an undergrad program that intentionally focused on diverse learners and multicultural literature. As Ishii-Jordan (2010) argued, teacher preparation programs need to produce and prepare culturally relevant teachers not only so they can become advocates for inclusive learning, but so they can also ensure minority students have equal educational opportunities. Unfortunately, those who have come to understand the importance of teaching with multicultural literature may fear the potential consequences they could face within the current political climate of censorship.

With at least 20 states banning public schools from teaching critical race theory (Alexander et. al, 2023) and, as a result, classroom discussions that some could consider “divisive” (Saul, 2023, p. 1313), there has been a surge in censorship specifically targeting multicultural literature. As a result, some teachers now fear (Leland & Bangert, 2019; Martin & Spencer, 2020; Saul, 2023) they will face repercussions as other teachers have (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023) if their curricula include multicultural literature deemed divisive (Saul, 2023). While the participants in this study did express varying levels of fear for consequences they could face, all vehemently noted the importance of continuing to teach multicultural literature in spite of the fear. Dorothy explained that she is “fighting for the freedom of thoughts, that someone needs to be able to read and think these with books as their freedom.” Anne noted that she is continuing to teach multicultural literature because “it’s important for people to see themselves and

hear themselves in the books that they read,” while Toni also noted the need for students “to see themselves in literature” and “read from different perspectives.” Celeste argued for still using multicultural texts in her class because “students who don’t fit the majority demographic to see themselves represented,” and Evelyn also pointed out the need “to understand and see things from outside your own cultural lens.” Finally, Alice continues to teach using multicultural literature because “students need to know that I value them, and one way I can show you that I value you is to read literature of your culture, or your people, or things that you can resonate with to validate that your experiences are worthy of the rest of us reading.”

Educational researchers have studied the benefits of multicultural literature (Bennett et al., 2017; Bishop, 1990; Boucher, 2016; Clark & Fleming, 2019; Diamond & Moore, 1995; Gay, 2018; Gultekin & May, 2019; Kosciw et al., 2022; McNair, 2011; Rempala, 2006), how teachers often enter the classroom with biases (Almager, 2018; Boyd et al., 2023; Douglas et al., 2008; Greytak et al., 2016; Hall & Rodgers, 2018; Kosciw et al., 2022; Ramsay-Jordan, 2020), and how multicultural literature inspires self-reflection of biases (Amos & Nelson, 2020; Chen & Browne, 2021; Gay, 2018; Hoppe, 2022; Senyshyn & Martinelli, 2021); however, little research has yet to focus on why teachers are continuing to teach multicultural literature, regardless of the risks they may face for doing so. This study helps to fill that gap and inspire further research toward addressing the problem.

Problem

Despite the significant lack of diversity in literature when compared to the White heterosexual norm (Gay, 2018), at least 30% to 41% of the books banned from 2021 to

2022 were representative of multicultural literature (Friedman & Johnson, 2022; Meehan & Friedman, 2023). Multicultural literature has been defined as literature that “embraces all marginalized groups,” such as those that go against the “normative conceptualizations of (dis)ability, ethnicity, gender, immigration, race, social class, and sexual orientation” (Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019, p. 1). Regardless of multicultural literature’s inherent inclusivity, those who use multicultural literature in the current climate of censorship are putting their careers at risk in the process. The current climate of censorship began with former president Donald Trump’s executive order against critical race theory in 2020 and his “refusal to denounce White supremacy,” actions which have “clearly exacerbated the racial divisions that have risen to the surface of our society since his election” (Ladson-Billings, 2021, p. 2). Trump’s actions, as Ladson-Billings argued and with which I wholeheartedly agree, “clearly exacerbated the racial divisions that have risen to the surface of our society since his election” (p. 2). Thus, since 2021, at least 20 states have banned K-12 schools from teaching critical race theory (Alexander et. al, 2023), prohibiting classroom discussions of race (Saul, 2023). As multiple states have taken steps to silence minorities and censor diverse voices in the classroom by removing teachers who use multicultural literature (Connolly, 2023; Natanson, 2023; Pendharkar, 2021; Rahman, 2023; Rosales & Garcia, 2023; Sachs, 2023; Sonnenburg, 2023), I wondered that past experiences inspired White women educators to not only begin teaching multicultural literature but also continue to do so within the climate of censorship, which led me to write several research questions for my dissertation work.

Research Questions

The research questions I developed for this study were:

1. How do past experiences of six English teachers who identify as White women shape their current beliefs and practices regarding race and culture?
2. How did six English teachers who identify as White women begin to use multicultural literature in the classroom?
3. Why did six English teachers who identify as White women decide to continue using multicultural literature in the classroom within a climate of censorship?

With these research questions in mind, I constructed a conceptual framework framed through critical theory, critical race theory, and queer theory.

Conceptual Framework

As Maxwell (2013) argued, the conceptual framework of a study is built to encompass the researcher's individual "ideas and beliefs" on the phenomena of interest; what is currently "going on with these things and why"; what is already known and theorized about the topic; and how these elements connect cohesively around the study (p. 39). For this study, my identity as a Southern White woman raised in a conservative Christian family, the experiences I've had as a classroom teacher, and my positionality regarding the importance of multicultural literature led to my desire to achieve social change. As such, I used three theories to construct a theoretical framework that I believe best ties my passion with my proposed research.

Critical theory's "moral imperative" and "need to develop critical consciousness in people as well as the need to change society" (Kim, 2016, p. 36) acknowledged the moral compass driving teachers to teach multicultural literature in a society attempting to ban it. Critical race theory, which stems from critical theory, "contains an activist dimension" that also seeks to "not only to ascertain how society organizes itself along

racial lines and hierarchies but to transform it for the better” (Delgado & Stefancic, 2023, p. 8). Queer theory, another offshoot of critical theory, asserts the “potential to challenge normative knowledges and identities” (Sullivan, 2003, p. 43-44). Therefore, as English teachers have an “ethical and professional responsibility to learn from people of color, queer people, and queer people of color through reading, listening, and reflecting so that we can collectively transform our sociocultural worlds” (Schey, 2020, p. 114), I chose to root this study’s conceptual framework in critical theory, CRT, and queer theory, acknowledging the problem with participants who identified as White women English educators.

As seen through the conceptual framework, the purposes of this research were to attempt to better understand how experiences lead educators to overcome their biases, confront the current political climate, and make the decision to teach with multicultural literature in the classroom. From being aware of the biases that stem from my identity, experiences, and positionality to choosing theories that inspire pushing back against the societal norm, the concepts represented in this framework further influenced the decisions I made regarding the methods I used to conduct my research.

Methods

I conducted interviews with six participants who volunteered to share their life stories to understand how their past experiences have led them to their current beliefs and practices regarding race and culture, which has further influenced their decision to teach multicultural literature, especially in the climate of censorship. I interviewed each participant three times for approximately 90 minutes during each session, culminating in a total of 4 and 1/2 hours. I worked with each participant to construct a timeline of her

life, per the advice of Clandinin and Connelly (2000), which I then used to guide the process of writing each participant's first-person narrative using their own words, per Seidman's (2013) suggestion. Because narrative inquiry is situated within "a three-dimensional space with temporality, sociality, and place" (Clandinin, 2016, p. 39) and "narratives are context-sensitive" (Kim, 2016, p. 191), I presented each participant's life stories from as far back in their childhood as they could recall up to the present day. I presented each participant's life story narrative in chapter 4, along with a reflective memo following each narrative. By following Saldaña's (2016) suggestions on how to code the interview transcripts using in vivo, emotion, values, process, and concept coding methods, I established qualitative themes connecting the participants' experiences. I presented these themes in chapter 5, immediately following the life story narratives.

Themes and Assertions

After transcribing the interviews, coding the transcripts (Saldaña, 2016), and identifying the patterns between categories (Kim, 2016; Maxwell & Miller, 2008), I created three themes and conducted thematic narrative analysis, which led to identifying several "thematic meanings and points" in the data (Kim, 2016, p. 213). For my first research question, I identified a theme regarding the influence of past experiences within the context of my participants' narratives: Unique experiences and phases in life opened participants' eyes to race and/or culture as influential, important constructs in the world and made them aware that biases, both their own and others', are detrimental to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives.

All six participants noted having eye-opening experiences that influenced how they currently believe and engage in practices regarding race and culture. Dorothy

recalled meeting her friend's racist father as "the first time I ever had to think about Blacks and Whites being together." Alice discussed a project in school that led her to first learn about slavery and the Holocaust, noting she "could never understand how another people could treat another person like that." Anne's family hosting "Japanese exchange students" when she was growing up opened her eyes to other cultures, while Celeste recalled living in the Caribbean for a year as an "experience of racial difference and cultural difference and things being very different." One of Toni's eye-opening experiences was rooming as a freshman with a Black student, with whom she had conversations that "did impact my life, and that did make a change." For Evelyn, college as a whole "was a huge, huge change" that opened her eyes for the first time "to what homosexuality was" and "people who were more comfortable in their skin, with their identity."

Becoming aware of bias was part of all six participants' life experiences as well. For Evelyn, who grew up with parents who frequently said the n-word and criticized "African American culture," becoming aware of bias meant realizing what she "had been told" was not true. Toni became more aware once she realized "my viewpoint was still that the Martin Luther King Jr. version of being colorblind and not really understanding," while Dorothy realized she never said a student's race, which also indicated a colorblind mentality. Alice confronted her biases when she told a story describing a kid as "little Black boy," and a classmate asked, "Why did he have to be Black in your description?" Anne discussed the comments people made about Muslim students post-9/11, such as, "Don't hang out with so and so" because of their faith, and Celeste noted becoming "aware of stereotypes" when comparing the treatment two athletes—one White, one bi-

racial—received in school. Thus, the participants’ past experiences did contribute to their beliefs and practice of respecting and teaching respect in matters related to race and culture they have today.

The theme I identified for my second question was by understanding the need for students to feel represented in the classroom, these English teachers intentionally chose multicultural texts that embraced the cultures of all students. When Dorothy attended a College Board training, she began to think about how classroom texts “should reflect the population of our schools.” Alice discussed how reading multicultural literature not only allows students “to see themselves in the stories that we read” but also “reaffirms their place . . . and their importance in the world.” Toni noted that understanding the need for representation came from looking around her classroom and realizing minority students “don’t get as many stories that completely relate to what they’re going through.” Likewise, Celeste realized the importance “for students who don’t fit the majority demographic to see themselves represented,” while Evelyn mentioned she came to understand the need “to represent all of my kids in my classroom.” Anne, however, did not have to look far to understand the importance of representation as a parent of biracial children led her to quickly “[see] the lack” of minority representation.

Once the participants understood the need for representation, they began to intentionally choose multicultural texts for their classrooms. Anne expressed how important it is to “think of all these other stories you can tell,” while Celeste mentioned intentionally “trying to include books that were more diverse.” Likewise, Dorothy said she “deliberately [chooses] texts” that include “contemporary short stories from around the world.” Alice discussed how her motivation “to incorporate multicultural lit” stems

from wanting to expose students “to things that weren’t just Western and European and White” and “introduce different voices.” Toni expressed the importance of “read[ing] from different perspectives” and intentionally seeking out “Asian American, Latina, . . . [and] African American stories.” Evelyn noted that multicultural literature is important because “the United States is a melting pot of . . . other cultures,” leading her to intentionally “cover people from different cultures.” Therefore, when teachers understand the need for minority students to feel represented in the classroom, they begin to intentionally choose multicultural texts that embrace the cultures of all students.

For my final question, I identified the theme that when teachers used their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature, they not only confronted their own fears but those of others as well. All the participants noted exhibiting various levels of advocacy. Dorothy took her advocacy efforts to the highest level and spoke “in front of the school board” in an effort to “[appeal] these removals.” Anne presented at a teacher conference because “it’s really important to me to kind of hone in on what it means for a book to be banned and spreading that information to other people.” Alice continued to teach a book banned by her district and expressed her belief that “it’s our duty . . . whatever privilege we have, I feel like we have an obligation to use that to help those whose voices are ignored.” Toni recalled finding “subversive ways” to advocate for multicultural literature and often gives “books to certain kids”; she noted that while despite knowing she does “have privilege,” she never wants to be the “White authority person” or “savior.” Evelyn discussed trying “to fly under the radar” while still “fight[ing] for” her minority students to ensure they have the same opportunities as their White peers, even going so far as to tell them, “I will

be your White privilege.” Celeste said she also tries “to push back on a lot” though “subtle” means, such as having LGBTQIA+ books in her classroom library so “they’re there” without necessarily trying to “promote them.”

Even though these women advocate for multicultural literature, that does not mean they did not have to confront the fears that now come with doing so in a climate of censorship. Dorothy initially “remained anonymous” when she began speaking to a local reporter about the book bans in her district, though her name became public after speaking to the school board. Anne mentioned she must have “some sort of fear” because she knows how she would “talk my way out of it if someone said something.” Celeste noted the importance of being “aware of the legalities” to avoid “being accused of transgressing that law. Evelyn pointed out she has to avoid “things that are outright LGBTQIA+” to avoid parent complaints. Toni mentioned how she has “to be careful” with what she says, while Alice discussed how she is “worried about having to come home and tell my husband that I’ve been fired because I said something.” Thus, by facing their fears, teachers can not only to use their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature but also overcome their own fears confront the fears of others.

After analyzing these themes, I came to several assertions. First, by conducting this study, I learned the unique experiences and phases in my participants’ lives opened their eyes to race and/or culture as influential, important constructs in the world and made them aware that biases, both their own and others’, are detrimental to BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ lives. From this theme, I came to the following assertion: teacher preparation programs and school districts need to foster experiences that will lead future and current

educators to self-reflect on their biases and become advocates for both multicultural literature and minority students. Next, I learned that by understanding the need for minority students to feel represented in the classroom, these English teachers intentionally chose multicultural texts that embraced the cultures of all students. This theme led me to assert that all English teachers need to learn the culturally relevant teaching skills to confidently choose and teach texts that will not only embrace the cultures and stories of minority students but also allow students in the majority to open their eyes to the experiences of others with the hope of producing students who are welcoming and respectful of all. Finally, I learned that when teachers used their privilege to advocate for minority students to feel represented and appreciated through multicultural literature, they not only confronted their own fears but those of others as well. From this theme, I assert that until such time that White privilege is eradicated, we as White teachers must use our place in society to foster spaces where minority students are seen, inspire students to rid themselves of biases, and hold ourselves to ethics that supersede racist laws. These themes and assertions bring me back to the variety of personal, intellectual, and practical goals I set for this study.

Goals

By amplifying these teachers' voices, I hope that others will know that although I identify as a straight White woman, I am an ally to both the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities, and I am trying to make a difference, even though it may be small. Furthermore, not only did I hope to learn how past experiences play a part in the current beliefs and practices toward race and culture that White women educators have, but I also wanted to learn how teachers began teaching with multicultural literature, how they

choose which books to teach in their classrooms, and why they are pushing back against censorship efforts. I also hoped teachers who have never used multicultural literature in the classroom would read the stories of those who do, realize the power of multicultural literature, and be inspired both in their own teaching practices and in the fight against censorship. My ultimate goal, however, was that the policymakers who are attempting, and succeeding, to censor multicultural literature would realize their censorship efforts will not be tolerated without pushback; begin to self-reflect upon their beliefs and biases that led them to engage in those efforts; and come to realize there is nothing to fear of powerful stories just because they are different from their own. When I began this study, I thought I would find teachers who share my passion for multicultural literature, but I was shocked by some of the experiences these teachers have gone through to become the women they are today. Teaching literature in the South, whether born here or not, is becoming more difficult by the day as laws are passed and new members of school boards or government, at all levels, come to power with agendas against the BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ communities. Positive changes are necessary in the U.S. to truly make this nation a place where the “cultures that make up the salad bowl of American society can find their mirrors” (Bishop, 1990, p. 1), rather than the negative changes in recent years that have set this country back not only in education but also in equality. Thus, after reflecting upon my goals for this study, I came to several findings.

Findings

From the research I conducted, I found that while all six participants had different past experiences, those experiences continue to influence not only their current beliefs but also the practices they make regarding race and culture in their classroom curricula. I

also learned that while each teacher had a different journey that led her to begin using multicultural literature in the classroom, all six women came to the same conclusion that representation matters. Finally, all six women not only understand the consequences they could face for teaching multicultural literature but also are continuing to willingly do so because they know their students deserve for their cultures to be seen and heard. After reflecting on these findings, I came to both conclusions and suggestions for future research.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

The narratives I presented in the study further confirmed the power of storytelling and the importance of listening to others. Dorothy's story demonstrates the importance of speaking up and defending what you believe to be right, regardless of the consequences. Her dedication to defending banned books and freedom of thought is both inspirational and moving, even if speaking in front of the school board is not an option for everyone. Toni's story shows the importance of always being willing to learn from your mistakes and from others. From the experiences with her freshman roommate to discussions with her students, Toni came to realize that what she thought was truth—"I'm not racist"—was actually a colorblind mentality she had to both confront and overcome. Alice's story emphasizes the risks that teachers are willing to take to ensure multicultural literature is kept in the classroom. Furthermore, her willingness to teach a banned book because the story mattered more is not only brave but emblematic of her passion as well. Anne's story represents how growing up with an open mind leads to others to see you as a safe person they can be around and talk to. Her desire to be an advocate and bring others to advocacy is a mentality to replicate. Celeste's story provides an example of how being corrected by

others, while embarrassing, serves as a learning opportunity. Her story shows how everyone has room to learn and improve. Evelyn’s story demonstrates the ability to turn away from erroneous teachings and stand up against the very ideas learned from childhood. Her story is a prime example of becoming the teacher your students need most.

Because I hoped that other educators reading this study would be inspired by these stories, I asked each participant to reflect upon their involvement in this study and what they gained. Their responses are shown in Figure 17.

Figure 17

Participant Reflections

Name	Reflection on Participating in Interview Series
Dorothy	<p>“It’s made me kind of go back and think and evaluate what it is that I’m choosing to do and why, especially in the context of all the books and the other things going on, kind of making those choices.”</p> <p>“I have raised to multiple teachers just this summer because of our conversations my deliberateness in my choices. Then, the question, ‘So what are you doing?’ and making them think about their choices of texts and how are they bringing these in, or other voices that we might be able to hear, because we all can kind of get stuck in the ruts that we know.”</p>
Celeste	<p>“I really like talking about this sort of thing with other teachers and, but most of that is through just sort of passing people in the hall or before class type conversations with my colleagues or through social media kind of here and there, and so, being able to get into it with this kind of depth is a pretty unique experience and really enjoyable. So, it’s fun to think about these kinds of things.”</p>
Anne	<p>“It was nice to see that anyone can be someone that’s interested in changing something, and it could have happened halfway through my timeline. It could have happened in the beginning. But whatever the case is, it can happen at any moment, and your timeline starts. So, that makes me feel excited for my students and my kids and even other teachers next to me. I feel maybe one day they’ll have a conversation, and then they’ll be on a similar path, or maybe they already are, but they’re on a different stage of it.”</p>

- Toni “It’s made me reflect a lot, where it’s maybe made me be more purposeful, or really think more about what I stand for as a teacher, and what I think is important for my kids and what they have access to.”
- Evelyn “I hope I get to read your stuff overall. Some of my friends want to read it. I want to read it because I want to know that I’m not alone because it’s hard, even on social media. I know an English teacher that posted on social media something about she knows English teachers that have classroom books that she would not be okay with, and I know she’s referring to me.”
- Alice “It’s meant a lot, because it’s made me think about things that I haven’t thought about in a long time or things that just kind of happened that I didn’t necessarily think were unique to me, or influential to me, or formative in some sort of way were.”
“It’s just made me very grateful for the experiences that I’ve had and for the people in my life who have encouraged me to be who I am and who’ve allowed me to be who I am. And the same way that I hope, when people think about me, that I’ve had that kind of influence on somebody else.”
-

Before presenting my final thoughts on this study, I urge researchers to study how book bans are impacting the education profession in other ways, including teacher retention, teacher preparation program enrollment, teachers switching fields, and teacher mental health. I also encourage studies on how censorship is affecting students, from their academics to mental health.

Final Thoughts

The passion that led me to begin the research has only become stronger as a result of completing this study. I came into this project with many hopes and assumptions: that other educators are as angry as I am about the current political efforts to stifle diverse voices; that teachers who have never used multicultural literature in the classroom will read the stories of those who do and be inspired in their own teaching practices; and that policymakers who are attempting, and succeeding, to censor multicultural literature will have a change of heart and mind. While I do not yet know if the latter two will come to fruition, I am thankful to have found women who were willing to share their stories in the

hopes of inspiring others to join the fight against censorship. I feel privileged to have been given the opportunity to amplify their voices for others to hear.

As we find ourselves in another Trump presidency, I fear book banning and the mistreatment of minorities will not only continue but worsen as well. Now, more than ever, we as educators must stand up and raise our voices for the silenced.

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APPENDIX A:
Interview Guide

[Note: Each interview and corresponding questions will be specific to individual participants based on their responses. The questions I pose here provide a general idea of questions I will ask to learn more about and work together to make meaning of each participant's experiences.]

Interview One: Past Experiences and Life History

I would like to have a thorough understanding of your life history, as far back as you can recall.

- What were you like as a child?
- What was your family like?
- What values did your family instill in you as a child?
- How would you describe the community where you grew up?
- What are some of your most vivid memories from school as a child?
- What is culture to you, and how would you describe your cultural identity?

Possibilities for exploration:

- Books read as a child
- Friendships/friend groups
- School
- Religion
- Politics

Probe possibilities:

- You mentioned . . . Would you elaborate on that?
- Earlier you said . . . Would you explain what you meant by that?

Interview Two: Experiences as an Educator

I would like to understand your experiences as an educator, starting with what led you to enter the field of education.

- How did you decide to become an educator?
- What courses do you recall most from your teacher preparation program?
- What has been your best experience as an educator?
- What has been your worst experience as an educator?
- How do you select which books to teach?
- What is your favorite novel to teach and why?
- How would you describe your teaching philosophy?
- What are your thoughts on censorship?

Possibilities for exploration:

- Student teaching
- Classroom culture
- Diversity
- Advocacy
- Culture
- Student relationships
- Politics

Probe possibilities:

- You described an experience when . . . How did that make you feel?
- You briefly touched on . . . Would you tell me more about that?

Interview Three: Making Meaning of Experiences

I would like to work together to understand the meaning of your past experiences and how you have become the teacher you are today by asking some follow-up questions.

- In our first interview, you discussed . . . What did that experience mean to you?
- In our second interview, you talked about . . . How did that impact your decision to . . . ?
- If there were one thing that someone could learn from your story, what would you want it to be and why?
- You mentioned . . . What did you learn from that experience?
- Earlier, you noted . . . How does that still impact you today?

APPENDIX B:
IRB Approval Letter



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

EXPEDITED PROTOCOL APPROVAL REPORT

Protocol Number: 04459-2023

Responsible Researcher: Brooke Payne

Co-Investigator: n/a

Project Title: *Telling Their Stories: White Women Educators Teaching Multicultural Literature.*

Level of Risk: Minimal More than Minimal
Type of Review: Expedited Convened (Full Board)
Approval Categories: 6 & 7
Approval Date: 11.29.2023
Expiration Date: 11.29.2023

Consent Requirements:

- Adult Participants – Written informed consent with documentation (signature)
- Adult Participants – Written informed consent with waiver of documentation (signature)
- Adult Participants – Verbal informed consent (Research Statement)
- Adult Participants – Waiver of informed consent
- Minor Participants – Written parent/guardian permission with documentation (signature)
- Minor Participants – Written parent/guardian permission with waiver of documentation (signature)
- Minor Participants – Verbal parent/guardian permission
- Minor Participants – Waiver of parent/guardian permission
- Minor Participants – Written assent with documentation (signature)
- Minor Participants – Written assent with waiver of documentation (signature)
- Minor Participants – Verbal assent
- Minor Participants – Waiver of assent
- Waiver of some elements of consent/permission/assent

Comments: *The IRB approved consent statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of the recorded interview session.*

Approval:

This research protocol is approved. The consent statement must be read aloud to each participant at the start of the recorded interview session.

Elizabeth Ann Olphie

Elizabeth Ann Olphie, IRB Administrator

11.29.2023

Date

Thank you for submitting an IRB application.

Please direct questions to irb@valdosta.edu or 229-253-2947.

Form Revised: 05.02.16

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION FOR RESEARCHERS:

If your protocol received expedited approval, it was reviewed by a two-member team, or, in extraordinary circumstances, the IRB Administrator, the Chair, or Vice-Chair of the IRB. Although the expeditors may approve protocols, they are required by federal regulation to report expedited approvals at the next IRB meeting. At that time, other IRB members may express any concerns and may occasionally request minor modifications to the protocol. In rare instances, the IRB may request that research activities involving participants be halted until such modifications are implemented. Should this situation arise, you will receive an explanatory communiqué from the IRB.

Protocol approvals are valid for three years unless otherwise noted. In rare instances, when a protocol is determined to place participants at more than minimal risk, the IRB may shorten the approval period so that protocols are reviewed more frequently, allowing the IRB to reassess the potential risks and benefits to participants. The expiration date of your protocol approval is noted on the approval form. You will be contacted no less than one month before this expiration date and will be asked to either submit a final report if the research is concluded or to apply for a continuation of approval. It is your responsibility to submit a continuation request in sufficient time for IRB review before the expiration date. If you do not secure a protocol approval extension prior to the expiration date, you must stop all activities involving participants (including interaction, intervention, data collection, and data analysis) until approval is reinstated.

Please be reminded that you are required to seek approval of the IRB before amending or altering the scope of the project or the research protocol or implementing changes in the approved consent process/forms. You are also required to report to the IRB, through the Office of Sponsored Programs & Research Administration, any unanticipated problems or adverse events that become apparent during the course or as a result of the research and the actions you have taken.

Please refer to the IRB website (<https://www.valdosta.edu/academics/graduate-school/research/office-of-sponsored-programs-research-administration/institutional-review-board-irb-for-the-protection-of-human-research-participants.php>) for additional information about Valdosta State University's human protection program and your responsibilities as a researcher.

APPENDIX C:
Qualtrics Survey

Name (first and last)

Best contact email (preferably a personal email)

Best contact number

Which of the following best describes your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender

Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity?

- Black
- White
- Latinx
- Asian
- Native American
- Two or more races
- Other

How old are you?

- 22-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-45
- 46-50
- 51-55
- 56-60
- 60+

List the school, district, and state where you work:

School

District

State

How many years have you been teaching?

What grade(s) have you taught?

What grade(s) do you currently teach?

Name (first and last)

Best contact email (preferably a personal email)

Best contact number

Which of the following best describes your gender?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender

Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity?

- Black
- White
- Latinx
- Asian
- Native American
- Two or more races
- Other

How old are you?

- 22-25
- 26-30
- 31-35
- 36-40
- 41-45
- 46-50
- 51-55
- 56-60
- 60+

List the school, district, and state where you work:

School

District

State

How many years have you been teaching?

What grade(s) have you taught?

What grade(s) do you currently teach?

What course(s) do you currently teach, and in which do you use multicultural literature?

Select all races and ethnicities represented in your classroom:

- Black
- White
- Latinx
- Asian
- Native American
- Two or more races
- Other

Please provide 3-5 examples of multicultural literature you teach.

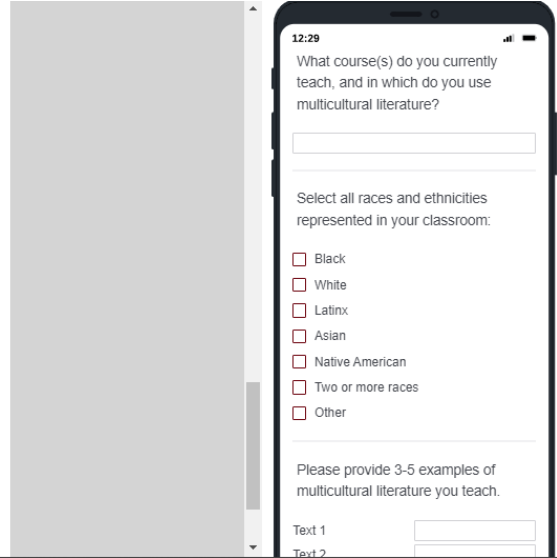
Text 1

Text 2

Text 3

Text 4

Text 5



Please provide 3-5 examples of multicultural literature you teach.

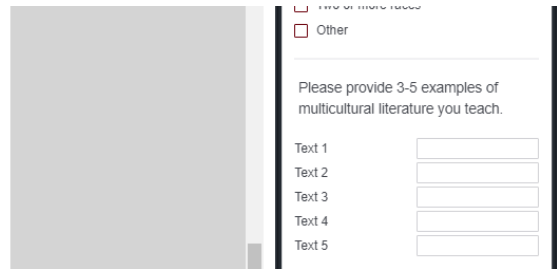
Text 1

Text 2

Text 3

Text 4

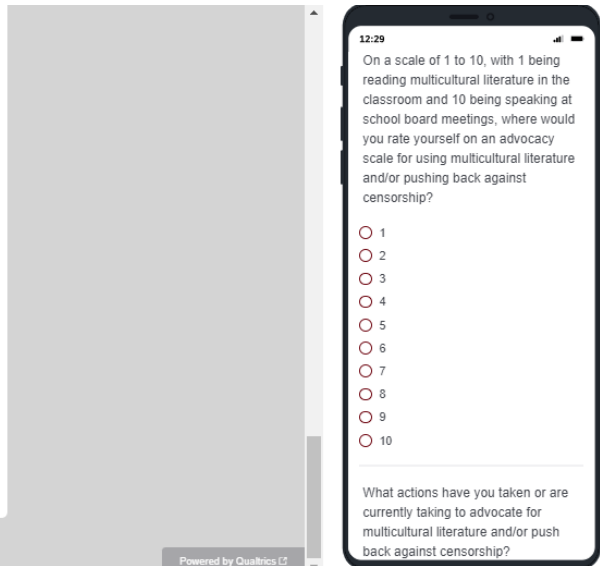
Text 5



On a scale of 1 to 10, with 1 being reading multicultural literature in the classroom and 10 being speaking at school board meetings, where would you rate yourself on an advocacy scale for using multicultural literature and/or pushing back against censorship?

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9
- 10

What actions have you taken or are currently taking to advocate for multicultural literature and/or push back against censorship?



APPENDIX D:
Recruitment Flier

DO YOU TEACH MULTICULTURAL LITERATURE?



This Photo by Unknown Author is licensed under CC BY-NC

ARE YOU . . .

- An English teacher who includes multicultural literature in your diverse middle or high school classroom?
- Frustrated with recent efforts to censor literature featuring characters of color, members of the LGBTQIA+ community, religious minorities, etc.?
- Advocating for the inclusion of multicultural literature in the classroom, libraries, and beyond?
- Willing to share your story about why multicultural literature matters?

If you answered **YES** to the above questions, I would be honored to listen to and learn from your story as part of my research study on why English educators teach multicultural literature.

Questions regarding the purpose or procedures of the research should be directed to Brooke Payne at oupayne@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.

Why participate?

To share your perspective on the importance of multicultural literature

To advocate for multicultural literature

To inspire other educators

Please contact me if you are interested in sharing your story!

Brooke Payne
aupayne@valdosta.edu