Striving and Thriving: Students of colour activating agency to negotiate place, position, and relevance at an elite U.S. Independent School

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October 2022

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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Abstract

This thesis documents the self-perceptions of students of colour in their attempts to claim agency and navigate academic and social discourse in dominated spaces at a U.S. independent school. The study investigated the role played by racial and ethnic socialization as a form of cultural capital embodied by the students of colour in predominantly White U.S. independent schools. It is practitioner research that examines the capacity of students of colour to summon a complement of constructs to actualize their academic potential, navigate new social boundaries, and negotiate a sense of belonging. It argues that the students' understanding of self as a socialised subjectivity allows them to engage in counter-storytelling and resistance to affirm the value of their voices and self-identity. This thesis seeks to contribute knowledge toward interrogating the colour-blind ideology embedded within the social structures of the American education system and sustains systemic racism and asymmetrical power dynamics. The study concludes by emphasizing the salience of an anti-racist framework in policy discussions to dismantle systemic inequalities in education.

Table of Contents

Abstract i

List of Figures and Abbreviations v

Acknowledgements vi

Chapter 1: Introduction…. ………………………………………………………2

1.1 Rationale and significance ……………………………………………………5

1.2 Background ……………………………………………………………………7

1.3 The National reckoning with race ……………………………………………8

1.4 A culture of exclusion …………………………………………………………8

1.5 Research question ……………………………………………………………10

1.6 Researcher positionality ……………………………………………………..11

1.7 Outline of the thesis ………………………………………………… 15

Chapter 2: The U.S. Independent School Landscape …………………………..17

2.1 U.S. independent schols and the diversity rationale ………………………..18

2.2 Social change ………………………………………………………………...23

2.3 Sense of duality ………………………………………………………………30

2.4 Social advancement ……………..……………………..………………………31

2.5 The #Black@ effect and critical consciousness ……………………………..32

Chapter 3: Literature review ………………………………..……………………34

3.1 Theoretical framework ………………………………………….……………..34

3.1.1 Why Critical Race Theory? ..………………………………………………… ..37

3.1.2 Community Cultural Wealth…………………………………………………42

3.1.3 Counterstorytelling …………………………………………………………..45

3.2 Bourdieu's Capital Theory ……………………………………………..………47

3.3 Racial socialisation ………………………………………………………..……...51

3.3.1 Racial identity ………………………………………………………………..55

3.3.2 Critical Consciousness …………………………………………………………56

3.3.3 Racial stress and trauma ……………………………………………………….57

3.3.4 Racial coping ……………………………………………………………………57

3.4 Claiming agency and self-authorship …..………………………………………58

3.4.1 Correlation between racial and ethnic identity and self-esteem …………59

3.5 Racial discrimination ……………………………………………………………59

3.5.1 Whiteness as property …………………………………………………………60

3.5.2 Micro-aggressions ………………………………………………………………63

3.5.3 Exclusion policies ………………………………………………………………64

3.6 Students of color at independent schools ……………………………………..64

3.6.1 Double consciousness, code-switching, and impostor syndrome ………64

3.6.2 Belonging ……………………………………………………………………...66

3.6.3 Literature gap …………………………………………………………………67

Chapter 4: Methodology ………………………………………………………………68

4.1 Research paradigm and methodology ……………………………………….68

4.2 Research design ………………………………………………………… ….74

4.3 Research site ……………………………………………………………………74

4.4 Ethical considerations …………………………………………………………75

4.5 Sampling …………………………………………………………………………77

4.6 Data collection ………………………………………………………………… …79

4.7 Data analysis ……………………………………………………………………84

4.7.1 Coding ……………………………………………………………………………85

Chapter 5: A thematic presentation of findings and discussion ………………89

5.1 Overview of findings ……………………………………………………………90

5.2 Narratives about racial identity ……………………………………………..95

5.3 Racial socialisation …………………………………………………………102

5.4 "My Black is not the only Black" ………………………..…………………106

5.5 Social class distinctions among students of colour ………………………107

5.6 Racial coping………………………………………………………………..116

5.7 Crafting a counter-story ……………………………………………...….120

5.8 Negotiating belonging and community ……………………………………..123

5.9 Layers of marginalisation ……………………………………………………127

Chapter 6: Conclusions, recommendations, and contribution to knowledge ..138

6.1 Conclusions …………………………………………………………………138

6.2 Recommendations ……………………………………………………………144

6.3 Contribution to knowledge …………………………………………………146

Chapter 7: References ……………………………………………………………149

List of Figures and Abbreviations

List of abbreviations

#Black@- social media handle used by Black students and alumni in American independent schools and colleges

CRT – Critical Race Theory

BIPOC – Black, Indigenous, and People of Color

EMBRace – Engaging, Managing, and Bonding through race intervention framework

Latino/a/x – a modified term that denotes the gender in the word Latino (male) and Latina (female), or removes the gender descriptor in Latinx, a descriptor of a person from Latin American origin or descent living in the United States of America

NBA – National Basketball Association

RECAST – Racial Encounter Coping Appraisal Socialization Theory

U.S. – United States of America

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my advisors Jo Warin and the late Steve Dempster for your guidance, wisdom, and patience. Thank you, Jo, for showing me how to be a teacher, a coach, a mentor, and a research practitioner. Many thanks to the Department of Educational Research at Lancaster for your support, and the hospitality and warmth I always experienced every time I visited on campus.

This thesis is dedicated to my late parents, Lungile and Constance Mayikana, my siblings Mbulelo and Noncedo, and my son Mbasa, and the rest of the family for their steady encouragement and support even when I didn't believe in myself. You all lifted me throughout this journey, and I cherish your love and support.

I owe on immense debt of gratitude to my life coaches, Jim Stuart, and Diane Copeland, for their support and guidance out of the lowest points in my life and for helping me believe I can finish writing this thesis. To my writing group, my sisters, my friends, Ceci Lewis, Mary Guererro, Lee Krishnan, and Ummi Modeste, I thank you for helping me shake off the dust and write throughout the roughest months in 2020. You all have helped me find my voice and overcome insurmountable challenges.

I dedicate this thesis to the students who shared their journeys with me. You all have been the best teachers and guides, and I hope your voices will reverberate and continue to influence change.

Author's declaration: This thesis results entirely from my own work and has not been offered previously for any other degree or diploma.

Signature ....

Chapter 1: Introduction

This practitioner-research was designed to engage the students of colour in dialogue about their perceptions of self by identifying a problem of practice that challenges the dominant normalized narrative about the presence of students of colour in dominated spaces. The study challenged the dominant deficit orientation that relegates students of colour to the margins and questions their academic abilities by assuming tokenism in their admission to prestigious educational institutions (DeCuir-Gunby, 2007; Leong, 2013.) It prominently investigated the role played by racial and ethnic socialization as a form of cultural capital embodied by the students of colour in predominantly White U.S. independent schools (Yosso, 2005; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). By illuminating the advantage gained through their reflexive capacity to articulate a narrative of self, sharing accounts of resistance and resilience in the face of adversity, this research stressed the students' identity capital (Warin, 2015) to highlight the cultural knowledge that often goes unrecognised and unacknowledged (Howard, 2003; Delgado, 2002; Yosso, 2005).

The study bears witness to a quest to understand the self as a socialized subjectivity by students of colour in American independent schools. Amid the trials of identity development during adolescence, students of colour in predominantly White U.S. independent schools also must negotiate belonging and the implications of racial identity in a nation steeped in hyperpolarized politics. This study examined the understanding of self as a socialized subjectivity that influences how students of colour negotiate position and relevance in dominated spaces at elite U.S. independent schools. It interrogated the students' capacity to summon a complement of resilience constructs to actualize their academic potential and negotiate a sense of belonging. This thesis engaged Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework and methodology that "foregrounds race and racism in all aspects of the research process" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002: 24) by illuminating the discourse around race and class in the American educational

context. Critical Race Theory is an interdisciplinary framework that locates race at the centre of analysis, recognizes race as a social construct, and addresses race as a real phenomenon (Cook and Dixson, 2013, Charles, 2008, Solórzano and Yosso, 2002). Thus, it centred on Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005), which recognises the experiential knowledge students of colour bring into the classroom and focuses on the students' racialized narratives as counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is a strategy used to critique and expose dialogues perpetuating racial stereotypes (Yosso, 2005; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Cook and Dixson, 2013; Martinez, 2020). A Critical Race Theory analysis recognizes racial subordination's social and historical context and challenges liberal claims of race neutrality, colour-blindness, and meritocracy. It casts doubt on the validity of accepted views and narratives by focusing on personal narratives and stories as valid evidence (Gildersleeve et al., 2011). Critical Race Theory's critique of liberalism deconstructs the colour-blindness ideology that minimizes the effects of race as a shaping force in White denial within the context of the American discomfort about race, racism, and whiteness. It challenges the refusal to acknowledge race, racial differences, and racism by questioning and challenging the myth of meritocracy (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Cook and Dixson, 2013.)

This study sought to bring the lived experiences of students of colour in independent schools to light. As a practitioner-researcher, I sought scholarship embedded within my practice as a diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioner at a U.S. independent school. I was aware of the mutual attraction reflected in the independent schools giving access to many opportunities to students of colour in their desire to fulfil their diversity efforts. Similarly, students of colour see independent schools as a pathway to give them access to elite colleges and universities. The study positioned the students of colour as social agents who "actively construct reality through categories of perception, appreciation, and action" (Wacquant, 2011:85). It foregrounded the student's articulation of self through a framework that gives voice to the experiences of students of

colour in White-dominated spaces. By so doing, the study engaged with curiosity examining the effects of racial and ethnic socialization in a systematic and deliberate attempt to understand the students' self-regulation, self-scrutiny, and self-surveillance in these spaces. At the intersection of scholarship, theory, and practice, this research sought to give the students a voice to displace the dominant normalized narrative about the presence of students of colour in the dominated spaces. This research investigated the socialization elements the students of colour mobilize to engage cognitively, psychologically, and socially, specifically probing how they overcome the anxieties posed by the threat of living up to the negative stereotypes held about the groups to which they belong. It engaged the Critical Race Theory lens to investigate the equity barriers to the well-being of students of colour in the dominated spaces to the degree they strive to fit into the institution's fabric while negotiating place, position, and relevance. Critical Race Theory became an apt analytical framework to interrogate barriers to naming the source of racial and cultural inequities and challenging colour-blind racial beliefs.

Contrary to the race-avoidant majoritarian narrative of colour blindness and other constructed epistemologies in the racialised American education context, this research foregrounds racial socialisation as a self-management and self-regulation tool and a cultural asset contributing to coping behaviours summoned in racially dominated spaces. Racial socialization is defined as the "verbal and non-verbal messages that families use to communicate race to their children" (Anderson, McKenny & Stevenson, 2019:53) that instil transferrable ways of engaging with the world. It develops the children's psychological coping strategies to survive racial denigration and dehumanization. Like habitus (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1994), it is an embodied disposition, a reflexive process ingrained and established in early childhood in the individual through verbal and non-verbal corrections and adjustments. It emerges whenever the individual is in a crisis as a form of cultural capital and a tool of self-management and self-regulation (Adams, 2006). Research illuminates the significance of racial socialization as a

cultural asset that contributes to the coping behaviours of individuals and helps them understand the racial dynamics at play in society (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2019; Cabrera, 2018; Su et al., 2021; Phan et al., 2022). It prepares individuals for possible biases and protects them against stressors that can negatively impact the students' self-efficacy in racially dominated spaces. Racial socialization is a form of inherently reflexive habitus within the U.S. context, where the ubiquitous fractious political climate has become a normalized crisis mode. Therefore, reflexivity becomes habitual, consisting of a hidden regulation process, self-surveillance, and self-scrutiny (Adams, 2006).

1.1 Rationale and Significance

While there has been a significant shift in the racial composition of the student body at historically and predominantly White institutions in the U.S., the overall climate and curricula have remained the same (Adams, 2005). Not only do the students of colour in dominant spaces vigilantly exercise buffering, which pertains to the psychological capacity and skill to protect themselves (Cross, 2021; Sue et al., 2007) carefully by performing a sense of self that does not play into a racial stereotype, but they must also navigate academic and social spaces as outsiders. It is a double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903; Cross, 2021) of how the dominant group regards their marginalized identities as justification for disdain, contempt, and exclusion. These dominant spaces periodically subject the students of colour to racial microaggressions, anti-immigrant rhetoric, taunts, and racial trauma in interactions with peers and teachers whose racial ignorance accommodates their comfort, status, and emotions (Barton, 2021; Petts & Garza, 2021). Independent schools, by design, are socially exclusive scions that "breed a gentry, leisure class, aristocracy" (Saveth, 1988: p. 371). Therefore, as sites for socialization, schools become an epitome of symbolic violence consonant with the purposes of surveillance, regulation, and control (Harber, 2004), rendering student students without symbolic capital invisible (Samuel, 2013) and the discernment of appropriate actions in social spaces.

On the other hand, White students from affluent backgrounds navigate independent school spaces with the efficacy of symbolic power, the ability to use the rules and distinctions of social space with the psychic comfort of a world constructed to benefit them (Samuel, 2013: 401). As an expression of a similar form of symbolic power and compartmentalization of Black athletes, in 2018, Laura Ingraham (a Fox News host) rebuked LeBron James and other NBA players to "Shut up and dribble" and stay in their lane as athletes and not get involved in political commentary. She argued that athletes who draw an enormously high salary to play a sport have no place in offering political commentary about social and political problems that negatively impact the Black community. Her strident rebuke invoked the tropes of inferior intelligence and linguistic capabilities about the said commentary. Ingraham's commentary mirrors the culture of exclusion and fear of retribution and retaliation that stops students of colour at independent schools from advancing their concerns to school administration and accepting the judgments of dominant agents. Students of colour who receive significant financial aid are cautioned by their families against rocking the boat. They urge them to wait until after graduation before voicing their concerns and grievances, hence the strong presence of Black alum voices in the #black@ testimonies on social media.

Against this backdrop of political polarization, I wanted to probe into ways to make diversity efforts at independent schools more affirming and sustainable by giving voice to the students of colour to share their lived experiences in predominantly White spaces. The racial protests and the emergence of the #Black@ social media accounts in the summer of 2020 broke the silence around racial hostility and inhospitable circumstances in most independent schools. When many educational institutions posted public statements of solidarity and support during the nationwide protests after the killing of George Floyd, alumni of independent schools across the U.S. called for transparency and accountability to demonstrate the schools' commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

1.2 Background

After four centuries of anti-Black racism motivated by the belief that one race is inherently inferior or superior to other races, systemic barriers to opportunities and access to education, the American society still sees the persistence of lack of generational wealth and social capital often played out in having access to influential connections to open the doors to social advancement. Systemic racism is a pervasive, permanent component of life in the U.S.; therefore, racial identity is at the centre and operates like a natural and essential phenomenon. Nevertheless, in a society in "which colour-muteness is the dominant approach to discussing race" (Michael, 2015: 74), there is still a reluctance to engage in conversations about racial literacy and equity in the education system. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed endemic societal fissures that have been in existence systemically for generations, exposing disparities in the disproportionate impact of the pandemic on the North American Black and Latinx communities.

A vestige of the past in the form of social systems and structures is still a reality that holds up the blatant violation of respect and the right to human dignity for masses of Black people. Therefore, it was not a surprise when the global spotlight fell on the rife incidents of racial injustice targeting Black people as the political polarization in U.S. society saw the disintegration of social and political etiquette dating back to the 2016 presidential elections. The polarized political rhetoric of the 2016 presidential elections also caused much tension in schools as inappropriate chatter from social media and gossip became increasingly and flagrantly denigrating and harmful to those targeted by the malicious gossip. The rise of White nationalism and nativism during the Trump era silenced dissent and emboldened attacks against social justice. Consequently, the 2020 brutal killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery and bringing to light the flagrant murder of many other Black people in the U.S. launched a national reckoning with racial

injustice. Likewise, many educational institutions made public statements of solidarity and condemned racial injustice.

1.3 The national reckoning with racial injustice

The nationwide protests of 2020 galvanized support for the Black Lives Matter movement worldwide and elevated the call for accountability, a reckoning against racial oppression, and the wanton and brutal murder of Black people by the police force. In response, many educational institutions pledged solidarity and a strong commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Barton, 2021). Listening sessions at various educational institutions and the trending #Black@ on social media unearthed the realities of anti-Black discrimination and harassment by White students, teachers, and administrators. The “righteous rage” (Love, 2019) on social media and during these listening sessions revealed detailed accounts of marginalization and exclusion that Black students experienced at predominantly White institutions (Whitehead, 2021; Barton, 2021). Though a public-facing rebuke, the student's accounts of these experiences did not discount their love and pride for their schools and recognized the schools' role in their formative years. They wanted to see meaningful transformation towards embracing a sustainable anti-racist orientation that would eliminate the racial stress and trauma and the structures designed to exclude the racially minoritized in the schools.

1.4 A Culture of Exclusion

The 2020 national reckoning with race brought a significant shift in the tone on racial issues in education nationally from when my research proposal was approved in 2016. It released me from paralysis of the impostor phenomenon that had me sitting on data I had collected as a practitioner-researcher. I collected data for my research in the wake of a caustic political climate of the 2016 presidential elections as the school climate at the site of my study unravelled. For two years, a crippling impostor syndrome got in the way of my ability to write about and elevate the voices of students with multiple marginalized identities to displace the

dominant normalized narrative about their presence in the dominated spaces. I censured myself to the point of silence, unable to imagine the best way to communicate the insight gleaned on this journey. Burdened with foreboding at explaining the decentring of the White dominant voices in my research, I could not find my voice in my writing as I composted other people's emotions (Barton, 2021; Oluo, 2018).

My own early educational experiences in a colonized system spawned the cognitive dissonance that defeated my attempts to reclaim agency while not authentically sharing the narratives of resistance and counter-storytelling that informed my research and the students of colour had entrusted to me. I censored and silenced myself, not letting the story be the story, editing and critiquing the words, thus rendering myself complicit in the students' continued marginalization and silencing. Notwithstanding, after the 2020 national reckoning with race, I no longer felt inclined to explain away the narratives about the defensive armour the students of colour put on every morning, bracing for hostile encounters and the scars they carried from the microaggressions inflicted by oblivious peers and teachers. I gained the courage to resume my research from the national clamour by students and alums to have their schools and alma mater advance racial equity and engage in sustained efforts to change the culture in the summer of 2020.

The U.S. field of secondary schools represents institutions created by the dominant social classes to inculcate a curriculum corresponding to the dominant class position (Adams, 2005; Warikoo & Deckman, 2014; Petts & Garza, 2021). The preponderant evidence of Whiteness as Property (Harris, 1993; Cabrera, 2018) in the American education context, where its accumulation of power operates through racial inequality (Warikoo & Deckman, 2014), justified the choice of Critical Race Theory as a theoretical and analytical social justice framework in this research. The study underscores the scholarship necessary to interrogate the cost of buying into the elitism of the "geography of exclusion" (Harris, 2020:6) of independent schools. U.S. laws protect the accumulation of White power (Hextrum, 2019) and the relations of domination that are re-enacted

generationally. Yet, the disposition, right to use, and the right to belong, are not extended to the students of colour in these spaces (Harris, 1993; Bourdieu, 1978; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Hextrum, 2019).

1.5 Research question

The question guiding this research:

What aspects of their racial and ethnic socialization give students of colour agency and critical consciousness to resist marginalization in predominantly White American independent schools?

Focusing on the personal narratives of the students of colour as a form of counter-story, this research attended to the significance of the student's articulation of their narrative of self and perceptions of belonging within independent schools (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). It foregrounded dialogue as a catalyst that blends and analyses the sociological notion of habitus and fields, the different dispositions the students have acquired by internalizing and embodying capital gained in the fields they traverse, exploring favourable opportunities to actualize their academic potential and social advancement (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, Bourdieu, 1993). Belonging in this study focused on the students feeling comfortable and content with their identity and not limited by the structural expectations to assimilate into the school culture while approximating markers of whiteness (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019).

In this study, the focus on the narrative accounts of students of colour aimed to illuminate the students' use of their community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) and creating community within in-groups as a respite from the daily indignities of micro-aggressions and racial discrimination. While acknowledging that resilience and grit could be characteristics that the students of colour learned as part of the internalized racism that forced them to reorient and adapt to the discrimination and inequality encountered in their educational journeys, this study focused on the students' narratives as a form of counter-storytelling. I wanted to learn how the students used their cultural capital

to navigate the structural barriers in American independent schools to attain the educational outcomes and their aspirations for subsequent social advancement. The study explored the degree to which the students of colour engaged in resistance and counter-storytelling as they navigated a dominant culture, academic and social discourse.

To better understand how the students of colour accrued social capital in their encounters in dominated spaces, I leveraged Anthony Jack's research (2014, 2016) that points to the student's desired outcomes. With an awareness of how the U.S. education system is designed, Anthony Jack (2016) notes that students of colour graduating from independent schools "enter college with a propensity for and an ease in engaging authority figures akin to middle-class students" (2). Teasing out the factors that influence the students' courage and determination to persist toward their goals, this study accentuated the degree to which their racial identity anchors the students' experience of belonging and inclusion. Consequently, the study surmised that the students' socialized subjectivity contributes to their resilience and self-authorship (Barber, King & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2014) guided by the students' habitus (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993). Habitus is a set of dispositions that influence and structure the students' perceptions and actions (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993). This research investigated how the students' habitus helps to subvert the impact of alienation and marginalization on their social and academic engagement.

1.6 Researcher positionality

As a practitioner-researcher embedded in U.S. independent schools, this study is significant as it amplified the role played by implicit societal structures in the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital and the codes of power that become barriers for students of colour (Delpit, 2006). In my capacity of providing pastoral care and support, I work with students of colour who often share personal beliefs shaped by their home culture and that they harness these beliefs to navigate the impact of a

hostile campus climate. To that end, I wanted to gain a better understanding of how the student's self-perception positions a racialized social narrative that speaks to the U.S. field of schools as institutions created by the dominant social classes to inculcate a culture and curriculum corresponding to the dominant disposition (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Adams, 2005; Brown, 2018; Carter, 2006; Cookson & Percell, 1991; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). As a researcher, I needed to recognize that my role was to investigate the experiences of the students I serve while avoiding the inclination to defend my professional position within the institution. I already incorporate some of the insight I gleaned to provide better support and create platforms to give students of colour a voice, and I plan to use the findings of this study to inform further and influence my practice.

My position as the Dean of Pluralism and Multicultural Affairs is a senior administration role responsible for diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, and justice (DEIBJ), mainly focusing on designing, implementing, delivering, and analysing DEIBJ initiatives and policies within the institution. The position demands versatility in handling the complexity of diversity crises, cultural resistance, and building institutional clarity and capacity around diversity, equity, and inclusion issues. The responsibilities involve countless hours of counselling, comforting, and soothing students to ensure they appreciate the school's aspirations and efforts to be inclusive while acknowledging the students' accounts of their racialized experiences. My daily routine at the school involves supporting students or groups that have experienced harm directed at them because of their identity. I use an adaptive leadership approach that involves a continuous cycle of observing events and patterns of behaviour around me, interpreting what I observe, then designing and testing interventions. The job challenges me to be unafraid to make mistakes as I engage and collaborate with various stakeholders and embrace the value of listening. I am part of a team of educators committed to cultivating and nurturing an inclusive, respectful, and caring learning

environment where all our students feel respected, engaged, supported, and appreciated.

My practice drives my inquiry into ways the school can advance inclusive processes and create an environment where all students, including those with historically marginalized identities, feel challenged and supported to flourish and experience equity and belonging at the school. Operating within the American education system, where racial hierarchy and inequity are embedded in the structure, equity is an aspiration yet to materialize. After the 2020 racial justice protests, the school, like many independent schools, pledged a commitment to anti-racist practice that demands transformative change to bring redress. Moreover, as a Black educator, I acknowledge the difficulty of combating the racial realism of doing racial justice work at predominantly White educational institutions (Haynes & Cobb, 2022).

As a woman of colour and an educator at a U.S. independent school, I reflect upon my narrative of originating from a politically disenfranchised disposition beginning my journey as a Black educator in segregated schools in South Africa during the apartheid era. I attended segregated schools, where the legislation dictated what resources I could access as a Black student. Throughout my tertiary education, I clawed my way out of the academy's fringes to start my career teaching in segregated schools, restricted to teaching students who looked like me. Notwithstanding the oppressive political dispensation of the time, I credit the strong sense of social and cultural socialization I received throughout my formative years for my ability to persevere through myriad obstacles.

Before landing in my current position at an elite U.S. independent school, I taught and supported Black students who matriculated from under-resourced township schools at the historically White University of the Witwatersrand, as South Africa slowly transitioned out of decades of government-sanctioned discrimination and segregation. The University of the Witwatersrand is a historically White English medium university affected by the University Education Act of 1960. The Act established separate universities for Blacks and prohibited them from enrolling in

White universities except with ministerial permission. With the differentiated education policies for different races in South Africa, the University of the Witwatersrand was one of the White universities that admitted a handful of Black students. These students were designated as under-prepared and required additional learning opportunities to prepare them to succeed in higher education. Their integration into the mainstream came through the extended curriculum, where they would take a few academic courses, academic literacy skills courses, and supplemental courses offered by the various departments. The academic development programs were structured to meet the teaching and learning needs of students who had benefited from alternative admission policies. Negotiating access to the institution's culture for the students I supported was arduous for many who did not readily have the cultural capital and could not identify with the university culture (Starfield, 1999; Mabokela, 2000; Yeld, 2001).

Much like the students of colour I work with presently, meaning making in this context entailed subjectivities or experiences of a culturally learned sense of identity, focusing on how the students determine the process and align with the lived reality that shaped their identity. Familial and ethnic socialization plays a role in developing ethnic identity (Phan, Harris, & Gaylord-Harden, 2022). The benefit of this research allowed for a collaborative inquiry that focused on the school's equity goals beyond the access and emphasized the critical need to create an inclusive, equitable, and just learning environment where all students experience unconditional acceptance and belonging.

This study makes a case for the resistance of the students of colour by invoking their ways of knowing and being to counter the dominant narrative about their presence by unearthing the silence surrounding their lived experience in these dominated spaces. The contribution to knowledge this research makes pertains to the need for independent schools to look at themselves through a racial lens to understand the experiences of students of colour and create inclusive learning environments that address incongruent lived experiences. It presents the

impetus to reframe how schools approach diversity initiatives to include professional development for educators and administrators to courageously contend with the implications of America's complex historical racial hierarchy and the racially mute independent school landscape. It contributes to the research focused on the capital that students of colour bring into predominantly White education institutions and how to remove institutional barriers to advancing and actualizing inclusive practices. This practitioner research presents evidence that the Return on Investment (ROI) for diversity efforts demands that schools demonstrate their awareness of cultural differences and a commitment to creating an environment where all students feel valued and respected. Valuing diversity and commitment to transformation should involve intentional efforts to enhance equity, inclusion, and belonging and provide psychological safety for students to take risks without fear of judgment.

1.7 Outline of the thesis

This thesis is organized into seven chapters. **Chapter two** presents the contextual background of the U.S. Independent school landscape. It also gives meaning to the presence of students of colour in independent schools and the calls for social change in the wake of the national racial reckoning of the summer of 2020.

Chapter three presents the conceptual framework that underpins this study. It consolidates a review of salient literature that framed this research and highlighted the focus on and the decision to use Critical Race Theory as a theoretical and analytical social justice framework to challenge the assumptions of inferiority held about Black and Latinx students in the U.S. education system. It explores the permanency and endemic nature of race in American education and also examines the role of racial socialization as a buffering mechanism against racism. The literature review is organized to highlight literature that addresses the emerging themes in response to each research question.

Chapter four advances the research paradigm and methodology underpinning this practitioner research and rationalizes the methods for generating, analysing, and interpreting data in this study. It foregrounds Critical Race Theory as methodology, as well as theoretical and analytical framework oriented toward interpreting students' perceptions of their racialized lived experiences.

Chapter five again engages with the research questions to present an overview of the research findings and discussion supported by the literature presented in chapter three.

Chapter six summarizes the thesis with key conclusions of this research, the implications for educational practice in American independent schools, the recommendations for further study, and the overall contribution to knowledge.

Chapter 2: The U.S. Independent school landscape

This chapter presents the contextual background to the U.S. Independent school landscape locating it within the more extensive American education system. The summer of 2020 illuminated racial injustice and inequities in the United States. Many independent schools nationwide met the protests and calls for social change that summer with convictions and commitment. At the time, there was a surge of a social media presence of Black independent school alums and current students nationwide using social media accounts created anonymously to chronicle their experiences as Black, Latinx, Indigenous, and people of colour in independent boarding school communities across the United States.

Independent schools in the U.S. have a long history and traditions dating back to the 1600s (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013). They habitually emphasize the importance of cognitive and personal growth in cultural knowledge and understanding, leadership abilities, and a commitment to promoting understanding and building community (Howard, 2010; Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012). The meritocratic frame validates the importance of cognitive and personal growth in cultural knowledge and understanding, leadership abilities, and a commitment to promoting understanding and building community. It downplays minoritized students' challenges in independent schools (Cookson & Persell, 1985). School leaders of most independent schools tend to primarily focus on the school's public image and position within the larger American education landscape (Purdy, 2015).

Students seek out diverse schools believing that diversity will enhance their experience and prepare them for the elite colleges and universities that prioritize fostering racially diverse campuses (Warikoo & Deckman, 2014; Hextrum, 2019). Like the selective admission practices at elite colleges and universities, U.S. independent schools are also selective in designing cultural diversity that aligns with their mission and

vision (Warikoo & Deckman, 2014). Independent schools are free to admit students who contribute to a robust exchange of ideas and prepare students for a diverse workplace and world beyond school years. Even though independent schools value a diverse representation in student demographics, a body of literature indicates that the assumptions and beliefs of the privileged class "keep people of colour and their experiences peripheral to the schooling mission and practice" (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013, p.551). The focus on diversity metrics rather than emphasizing the significance of engaging students in a conversation about their lived experiences and connecting identity and cultural capital normalizes access enjoyed by the dominant group as universal, exempting them from the forces of socialization (Carr & Lund, 2009; DiAngelo, 2018; Orem, 2019).

2.1 U.S. Independent Schools and the Diversity Rationale

By design, U.S. independent schools were conceived as exclusive and have since pivoted towards diversity with the changing times. Nevertheless, current trends in diversifying predominantly White independent schools in the U.S. tend to focus on demographic representation. Consequently, the schools' desire for a diverse student body tends to neglect structural inequalities while attending to the need to align their mission, policies, and practices (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013). However, the shift towards diversity while holding on to the reproduction of social hierarchies of race, class, and gender without changing the elite independent schools' cultural framing neglects the intersections with equity and inclusion (Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009). Hence the experiences of exclusion, isolation, and marginalization are a reality for the students of colour in these schools. Most independent schools focus on numerical diversity rather than ensuring that they craft the schools' programs, curricula, policies, and social experiences

thoughtfully to emphasize equity and respect for the lived experiences in a climate where all school community members feel safe and whole (Warikoo & Deckman, 2014; Jenkins, 2020). As such, connecting identity and cultural capital normalizes the access the dominant group enjoys as universal, exempting them from reflecting upon the forces of socialization (Carr & Lund, 2009; DiAngelo, 2018; Orem, 2019).

The 2020 racial reckoning at most North American schools using the social media handles #Black@, and #BIPOC@ illuminated the need to look beyond the numbers and pay attention to the actual experiences of students of colour in predominantly White educational institutions. Diversity efforts in independent schools immerse students from the comfort of homogenous monocultural backgrounds into a rigorous academic context that challenges them to see the relevance of discourse that pushes against power and privilege. Moreover, these efforts are rooted in the belief that interaction with individuals from different backgrounds engenders empathy and compassion and thus bolsters the students' self-awareness and confidence to recognise the human dignity of the communities with which they interact (Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard 2012, 2013; Khan, 2011).

Independent schools in the USA have traditionally been associated with the reproduction of class with their rigorous curricula and their capacity to "develop students with privileged habits of mind and heart" and trained in the upper-class values, knowledge, dispositions, and codes (Kuriloff & Reichert, 2003: 752). Nevertheless, independent schools have yet to reframe the imperative to include racialised critical consciousness as a tool that counters the internalized ways of making meaning and concentrating on racial construction in the education context (Herr, 1999; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). To find success, many students of colour form social identities that resist appropriate school structures, occupying spaces provided by the institutions on their terms (Herr, 1999). At times, the promise of social advancement and the

possibility of admission to selective colleges and universities far outweigh the challenges of adapting to different cultural norms and the potential setbacks and frustrations the racially minoritized students may encounter during their sojourn in independent schools (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012, 2013, Howard, 2003; Howard, 2010; Jack, 2016). Herr (1999) notes that while buying into the institutional culture, students of colour risk social isolation from home relationships and distance themselves from a cultural, politicized sense of self in their attempts to find success. Consequently, they are puzzled by the school's de-emphasis on the enduring forms of inequality visible throughout the schools by advocating a meritocratic frame (Khan, 2011).

Cookson & Persell (1991) claim that "most boarding school administrators are from upper-, upper-middle, and middle-class backgrounds, and there are very few African American or other minority faculty members at the elite schools" (219). Such an experiential gap suggests that teachers and administrators should understand that students of colour perceive the independent school experience as isolating and alienating. As a result, the students of colour are left with no alternative than to approximate "an idealized way of being, of knowing oneself as 'better than' in racial terms" (Gaztambide-Fernandez & Angod, 2019:720).

The discourse of integration associated with marginal groups emphasizes the groups' agency and responsibility to integrate and calls for them to adopt the dominant discourse regarding how they present themselves (Cederberg, 2014). However, the discourse of integration tends to obscure the implications of social inequalities, as individuals from non-dominant groups try to gain access to the dominant discourse, with the dominant discourse becoming a currency for exchange. Submitting and buying into the dominant discourse becomes necessary to gain access. Thus, the hegemonic discourse maintains "power [that] can be maintained without force if the consent of the

dominated can be obtained through education and other kinds of cultural labour on the part of such intellectuals" (Gramsci, 1998: 673). Nevertheless, this study argues that non-dominant students' understanding of self and the world represents their embodied agency and mitigates their social embedding in predominantly White social spaces. Given the non-dominant disposition of the students of colour within the American context, the students' racial socialisation positions them to approximate the dominant discourse and provide a counter-story that attests to their lived experiences in the dominated spaces. The students of colour recognize that their presence at the elite independence schools defies the prevailing norms of exclusiveness and constantly find themselves having to negotiate their position and relevance to engage in the racial spaces (Sonu & Deckman, 2021).

The change in student demographics in independent schools does not factor in the subjective reality of the students of colour in dominated spaces that do not acknowledge nor recognise the cultural knowledge they bring and their racialised lived experiences. Assertions of meritocracy, race-neutrality, and colour blindness (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) obfuscate the "self-interest, power, and privilege of the dominant groups in U.S. society" (26) that continue to be the main focus in these diversified and racially integrated spaces. Therefore, a germane diversity rationale calls for a shift from focusing on transmitting high culture and maintaining prestige and privilege in independent schools and creating learning environments that embrace and nurture the funds of knowledge (Moll, 2005) the students bring.

The American education system reflects the production process and structure of class relations in the United States (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 1995; Howard, 2010). The perception is that schools train the wealthy to take up places at the top of the economy while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status in the class. Wealthy parents and children make choices and strategies to maintain their

position in an education system that serves and favours the privileged in a social reproduction necessary to further the capitalist mode of production (Giroux, 1983; Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995, Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009).

In this context, independent schools in the U.S. reinforce the ways of being and knowing of the privileged in their educational practices, where the choice of the curriculum, teaching pedagogy, the relationships between teachers and students, and the selectivity of schools constitute a symptom of causal determinism. Schools play a socialization role for the elite class by rewarding the cultural capital of students from the dominant classes who are familiar with the dominant culture that is implicitly necessary for the transmission, notwithstanding claims of a commitment to preparing students to live critically and meaningfully (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012). Cookson & Persell's (1985) study notes that independent schools work hard to cultivate the public image of intellectual rigor and social responsibility. The biggest challenge for students of colour in U.S. independent schools are negotiating access to social and cultural capital, both academically and socially. The students soon learn to evade the perception of the deficit by capitalizing on their cultural capital to find success.

Cultural capital, the central focus of Bourdieu's theory, is defined as the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills passed from generation to generation (MacLeod, 1995). According to Bourdieu, the education system is often seen as meritocratic and legitimate, although social inequalities work on the presumption that students possess the cultural capital that is usually not readily accessible to lower classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Sullivan, 2001). Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth challenges interpretations of Bourdieu's cultural capital theory and presents an alternative concept that illuminates the under-utilized assets students of colour bring from their homes and communities into the classroom (Yosso, 2005). It utilizes

Critical race Theory to elevate forms of capital possessed by communities of colour that go unrecognized and unacknowledged.

2.2 Social change

The demands of the ever-changing, interconnected 21st-century global society challenge schools to equip students with the competencies they need to navigate this new world order (Banks, 2007). Significantly, U.S. independent schools are seeing an influx of students from outside the affluent elite class, admitting students from under-represented communities domestically (African Americans, Latino/a/x, and Asian Americans) and a sizeable number of international students from non-European nations. These schools are integrating diversity initiatives in their strategic planning to keep up with 21st-century global education trends. Therefore, a commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion calls on U.S. independent schools to provide students with the agency to promote social change and tear down hegemonic practices in society while preparing them to become productive global citizens who value cross-cultural communication and collaboration (Orem, 2019, Burnett & Wheeler, 2019).

A compelling and robust diversity rationale (Leong, 2013) elevates diversity and equity as prerequisites to cross-racial relationships. It requires institutional efforts to create conditions that allow all school community members to flourish. Moreover, the schools profess a social justice-oriented educational philosophy that places social change at the centre as racially inclusive communities and encourages students from dominant groups to participate and strive to dismantle oppressive systems (Bell, 1997; Edwards, 2006). However, the practical reality is that Whiteness is used "as a standard in policy against which to measure the progress and success of people of colour and exposes inherent racism in diversity policies" (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013: 550). Therefore, there is tension between the access and presence of people

of colour in independent schools and the colour-blindness and institutional racism pervasive in the American education system.

On the other hand, the complex history of race relations in the U.S. challenges efforts to diversify independent schools because race is sometimes inextricably linked to social capital and conflated with socioeconomic status (Yosso, 2005). The lack of awareness about racial inequities presents symbolic boundaries that deter students from homogenous, racially dominant communities from questioning the social and economic advantages they enjoy, unable to challenge the policies and social boundaries they see as the norm, and thus their duty to protect. Symbolic boundaries are conceptual distinctions that allow social actors to categorize objects, people, practices, time, and space (Lamont & Molnar, 2002, *cited* in Warikoo, 2010). These are interactions where members of the marginalised groups question the actions and intentions of members of the dominant group who are sincere in believing that they acted in good faith without racial bias. When their actions, whose meaning is invisible to members of the dominant group, are perceived as microaggressions by members of racially minoritized groups, they feel betrayed and their best intentions diminished (Sue, 2010).

For independent schools that have seen a significant shift in student demographics, it has become imperative for them to engage in inclusive practice, adapt to the changing demographics, and adhere to strategic plans that emphasize a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Brown, 2018). Schools are positioned such that the social and political climate where they are located permeates the school hallways. Racial inequality and injustice continue to be displayed as more Black lives are sacrificed on the streets and in the hands of law enforcement officers and vigilantes operating with impunity, confident that the law of the land will shield them from prosecution. Thus, racial trauma and microaggressions are a reality for students of colour.

Stevenson (2014) argues that a poor school climate around issues that deal with race can have a detrimental effect on the social, emotional, and academic development of students of colour. The hyper-visibility of the racially minoritized groups within this social milieu heightens the dominant majority's normative presence without acknowledging the barriers to framing meaningful, transformative change in education (Carr & Lund, 2007; 2009). Thus, schools must become more intentional in providing culturally sustainable and informed support to students of colour.

Contrary to the schools' social justice-oriented aspirations, the students from racially dominant groups find themselves challenged to put up their defences as they protect the dominant narrative, they have known all their lives. Unbeknownst to them, the dominant narrative denies and dismisses the notion that students from marginalized communities can experience their national identity differently. In a perfect world, this process would require all students in this setting to engage in the process of critical reflection about their identities and experiences, engaging in a dialectical process that connects the political, economic, and socio-cultural to effect sustainable change (Maclaren, 2007; Carr & Lund, 2009). Warikoo (2010) argues that to promote ethnic and racial integration among teens, schools should not only serve integrated student bodies and maintain structures that present opportunities for students to bridge racial and ethnic boundaries. The development of self-reliance and advocacy among these students becomes muted when their educators do not provide them with the tools they need to engage in dialogue and honest courageous conversations. Opportunities for students to engage in courageous conversations with those whose lived experiences differ from theirs can create meaningful moments of shared understanding and avert the potential for conflict and misunderstanding.

Diversity efforts focusing on access and opportunity for students of colour need to emphasize engagement by meeting them where they are and recognizing and respecting their right to thrive and belong in these spaces. As Nikole Hannah-Jones posits, “We have a system where White people control the outcomes, and the outcome that most White Americans want is segregation” (Douglas, 2017, p. 1). When the schools’ diversity efforts do not create opportunities to acknowledge the different lived experiences and the unique strengths brought by their diverse demographics, they continue excluding members from marginalized communities. Diversity efforts in schools should work toward creating a shared vision, articulate clear goals, and create opportunities for individual responsibility with inclusion as a cultural norm. The sustainability of diversity initiatives that focus on the appearance of diversity to bolster the schools’ standing among prospective students becomes questionable when there are no expressed efforts toward building cultural competence and cross-racial understanding (Orem, 2019; Burnett & Wheeler, 2019). Paying lip service to diversity efforts rather than cultivating cultural competence and promoting social belonging and well-being in these educational communities does more harm than good.

The admission of students from communities that do not traditionally have access to the elite independent school education, owing to the racial, ethnic, and economic stratification of U.S. society, gives them access to the opportunities for social advancement such an education affords. Nancy Leong (2013) argues for dismantling racial capitalism in education to ensure that any transaction involving racial value is structured to discourage future racial capitalism. She defines racial capitalism as the process of deriving social and economic benefits from the racial identity of another. She maintains that such diversity initiatives are not directed toward genuine racial inclusiveness and cross-racial understanding (Leong, 2013). The notion of racial capitalism is

characterized by the tendency to maintain racial hierarchies and resistance to redress racial injustice and inequities.

Using market rhetoric in racial discourse commodifies racial identity, thus negating the association of racial identity with selfhood, an integration of racial identity with one's concept of self. Ultimately, the absence of racial egalitarianism results in the degradation and commodification of students of colour, who become relegated to the status of "trophies" and "passive emblems" to grace the schools' catalogues. Such marketing tropes as a ploy to attract new students result in a deficit discourse about students of colour (Petts & Garza, 2021) that has led to lawsuits against Affirmative Action in admission decisions, including the recent lawsuits against Harvard University and the University of North Carolina. In this context, social capital is viewed as an investment in social relations with expected market returns. The cost of non-whiteness is transferred through the exchange, an economic component of the interaction between actors (Leong, 2013, Lin, 2001).

For students of colour from low socio-economic backgrounds, admission to an elite independent college preparatory school promises social and economic advancement, a chance to break out of a class structure that social reproduction theory deems susceptible to being reproduced from one generation to the next (Bowles & Gintis, 1977; Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). The selectivity of independent schools means schools get to pick the most gifted and motivated students to join their ranks, and high academic potential and ability become significant variables in the admission of students of colour from poor backgrounds. High intellectual prowess, performance, motivation, and academic resilience account for the cultural capital that is the currency of independent schools; however, the presence of students of colour from the lower socio-economic strata disrupts the social reproduction of the elite class. Similarly, admission into an elite independent school does not guarantee unrestricted access to all the academic and social spaces, as

students of colour from lower socioeconomic backgrounds constantly negotiate relevance while navigating an educational landscape of privilege and abundance (Gaztambide-Fernández and Howard, 2012; Barton, 2021). Upon admission, students should have access to educational resources and networks critical to their educational attainment and social advancement into the elite class. However, students of colour do not access all the resources out of fear of perpetuating negative stereotypes about their presence in the dominated spaces.

The historically affluent independent schools become attractive to students of colour who believe in the power of education to transform lives and the prestige of being part of 2% of students of colour (Hextrum, 2019), the “privileged poor” (Jack, 2019), accepted to highly selective colleges and universities. Moreover, these efforts are rooted in the belief that interaction with individuals from different backgrounds engenders empathy and compassion, thus bolstering the students’ self-awareness and confidence to recognize the human dignity of the communities with which they interact.

Taking on their socialization role, the predominantly White U.S. independent schools engage the diversity frame where race and ethnic diversity are cherished and celebrated for the different holidays, styles, and perspectives it brings (Warikoo, 2019). Students understand societal norms around gender and sexuality, race and cultural relations, the ease of talking about race, and the cultural meanings of racial identities (Warikoo, 2019, Warikoo & Deckman, 2014). However, racial privilege and cultural capital become muted through race-neutral institutional policies and procedures that benefit White and high socioeconomic-status students (Hextrum, 2018, 2019, Barton, 2021). Yet, the students gain a competitive edge through their ability to coexist and the malleable ways of understanding the role of race. Thus, the students acquire the 21st-century skills, knowledge, and attitudes to function in their

communities and beyond their cultural borders, a form of multicultural citizenship (Banks, 2007).

The invisibility of whiteness (Carr and Lund, 2009) ingrained and normalized in their American identity positions students from dominant backgrounds to assume power and domination in their attempts to shift the focus away from the value of multicultural education. Their limited exposure to people of different backgrounds becomes most pronounced in the lag in developing racial negotiation skills among students in schools with racially avoidant curricular approaches (Stevenson, 2014). Confronted with the realization that their worldview is different from others who claim an American identity, White, affluent students from dominant groups lack the competencies to navigate that reality. They often need more tools to unpack their responses, and their educators need to be able to guide them rather than shy away from these conversations (Berila, 2016).

Students in predominantly White schools tend to avoid talking about race, having learned their teachers' reluctance to acknowledge the implications of racial differences and the concomitant racial disparities within the context of the United States society (Warikoo, 2017). Many students from dominant majority groups subscribe to the race-avoidant majoritarian narrative of colour-blindness of not seeing race (Capper, 2015; Warikoo, 2019). The perception of a lack of awareness about each other becomes crystallized in the palpable anxiety about how to behave in mixed ethnic groups. It thus inhibits spontaneous conversations unless it is with like-minded peers or in structured discussions. The firm racial and ethnic boundaries (Warikoo, 2010) are the unintended consequences of the intentional residential zoning legislation that separated racial groups in the past and continues to sow discontent and challenge diversity efforts in educational institutions nationwide (Cashin, 2005; Rothstein, 2017). Encounters with individuals who differ from them challenge students to pause and gain new perspectives informing

interaction with diverse individuals. The occasional uncertainty and discomfort with boundaries of acceptable behaviour and chatter in these encounters sometimes create tension and anxiety about the possibility of offending.

2.3 Sense of duality

Students of colour in independent schools traverse a duality manifest in the two worlds in which they reside and see themselves through two different lenses. These students see themselves through the identity they developed at home and are also aware of the lens through which others regard them within the school culture. Their sense of duality, termed double consciousness by Du Bois (1903), roots them in the racial and ethnic identity and the values about their history and legacy instilled in the home. At the same time, the students are keenly aware that to thrive in the White dominated spaces in their schools, they must learn and adopt the norms and values regardless of the cost. While there might be no physical injury or death threat, stressful experiences can induce distress and trauma among individuals. The students of colour always negotiate the nagging pain and racial tension often played out in encounters with peers and in group text messages or social media posts where they perform disagreements in front of a bigger audience (Stevenson, 2014). Of course, the toll of the micro-aggressions and the verbal and environmental slights experienced in encounters with individuals adds up and become characteristic of the whole ecosystem (Sue, 2010). They find succour in building community among other groups of students of colour who have experienced similar jabs and taunts in these spaces. For the students of colour seeking community and belonging, the affinity spaces become a refuge that promotes resistance and hope and connectedness in a space where they can show up as their true authentic selves in the community.

In a study that focuses on personal narratives of self-affirmation by students of colour, I wanted to capitalize on the literacy that "engages and resolves racial stress and conflicts" (Stevenson, 2014: 27) that the students of colour bring while they negotiate a sense of belonging and relevance and navigate the social landscape and structures within the selective U.S. independent schools. Admission into independent schools promises social status and prestige but comes at the cost of isolation and alienation when awareness of racial capitalism is realized (Khan, 2011). Therefore, motivation, resilience, and a positive sense of self galvanise them to persist in their academic goals despite challenges with integrating into the institution's fabric. The cost of integrating into the institutional culture depends on how well the students can cross borders between their sense of racial identity and performing a sense of self that is deemed worthy of elite status. In the elite spaces, race operates as an exclusionary force and requires embodying markers of whiteness to claim belonging, while also negotiating a shift in self-understanding (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019).

2.4 Social advancement

Admission into a selective independent college preparatory school for students of colour from low socio-economic backgrounds comes with the implicit promise of breaking out of a cycle that social reproduction theorists have addressed for years (Giroux, 1983; Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). Upon admission, the students of colour access educational resources and networks critical to their educational attainment and social advancement into the elite class. The selectivity of independent schools gives schools a choice to pick the most gifted and motivated students, a significant variable in the admission of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds (Howard, 2010). High academic ability, performance, motivation, and resilience account for the cultural capital that is the currency of independent schools. However, admission into elite independent schools does not guarantee unrestricted access, and the

cost does not always translate into financial terms. Students of colour from lower socioeconomic backgrounds must constantly negotiate relevance and belonging as they navigate an educational landscape of privilege and abundance from the margins (Khan, 2011). In this context, the presence of students of colour from the lower socio-economic strata disrupts the social reproduction of the elite class. Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod (2019) define "eliteness as a marker of both economic rank and social status …secured through material resources …confirmed through symbolic boundaries" (727). The awareness that their presence and their acceptance into the elite class are on condition they participate in systems of white domination (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019) runs counter to the critical consciousness of the students of colour who recognize that the social structures, hierarchies, and exclusions remain firmly in place despite their presence.

2.5 The #Black@ effect and critical consciousness

The students of colour are familiar with the social structures, hierarchies, and exclusions in the fields they occupy. Engaging in critical consciousness allows them to challenge and deconstruct the systems that put up barriers. The conscientization (Freire, 1970) comes from the students of colour calling for transformative action to investigate and analyse the counter-stories that debunk the dominant narrative about who they are. Therefore, the emergence of the #Black@ against the backdrop of the 2020 Racial Justice protests and the groundswell support for the Black Lives Matter movement precipitated a turning point in developing the critical consciousness of students of colour in the American education system, particularly in independent schools. Voicing their awareness of social and structural inequalities in the system, the students of colour called for a change of course as they resisted the oppressive systems that have defined their racialized experience in the White-dominated independent schools.

In sum, this chapter provided the context of the U.S. independent school landscape. It identified the challenges students of colour encounter in their quest for social advancement and belonging in predominantly White spaces. It presents the impetus to reframe how schools approach diversity initiatives to include professional development for educators and administrators to courageously contend with the implications of America's complex historical racial hierarchy and the racially mute independent school landscape. The diversity dilemma that emerged with the #Black@ social media accounts is a clarion call to schools to deepen conversations about race and work toward the best anti-racism framework in independent school communities. The next chapter will review the salient literature that examined how students of colour experience their racial identity in predominantly White independent schools.

Chapter 3: Literature Review

As a theoretical and analytical framework in education, Critical Race Theory challenges the assumptions of inferiority held about Black and Latino/a/x students in the U.S. education system. This chapter presents the theoretical framework that underpins this study - Critical Race Theory. It "seeks to identify, analyse, and transform those structural and cultural aspects of education that maintain subordinate and dominant positions in and out of the classroom" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002: 25). This study examines the centrality of race and racism and the intersections with other forms of subordination through the lens of Critical Race Theory and Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005). Therefore, the literature in this study explores the permanency and endemic nature of race and racism in American education and examines the role of racial socialisation as a buffering mechanism against racism. Moreover, this study's research question guided the sourcing of existing research and the thematic presentation of this literature review. Thus, this chapter will review the salient literature that framed this study, examining the racialized experiences of students of colour in independent schools.

3.1 Theoretical framework

Critical Race Theory illuminates and asserts that racism is permanent and normalized in daily encounters in American life and, as such, is used to ensure the power of the privileged, dominant group (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013). It is, therefore, an apt analytical and social justice framework as it attends to the racial and power dynamics in the U.S. education system and challenges normative assumptions of race that promote racial neutrality and colour-blind understanding (Cook & Dixson, 2013). Community Cultural Wealth aligns with Critical Race Theory which values the students' knowledge and counters dominant narratives of education that influence the educational policies and institutions rather than acknowledge the educational disparities in the American education system. Using Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth lens, which re-

articulates Bourdieu's Capital theory (Cook & Dixson, 2013), this study examined how the students of colour reclaim agency by activating experiential knowledge derived from racial socialisation in the form of family advice, stories, and lived experiences to facilitate their ability to negotiate the social spaces within the academic and social context of a predominantly White U.S. independent boarding school. It places the students' cultural narratives at the centre as a form of resistance and counter-storytelling, a method that challenges privileged discourses that perpetuate a deficit narrative of the cultural capital students of colour bring into schools (Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012; Brown, 2018; Martinez, 2020). By foregrounding the unique knowledge of the students of colour, Community Cultural Wealth challenges the deficit models of education (Macias et al., 2021) that devalue the cultures, knowledge, and lived experiences of communities of colour and recognises racism as a system of power and privilege that is endemic in the American society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2005; Delgado Bernal et al., 2012; Macias et al., 2021).

Critical Race Theory illuminates the permanency of racism and its endemic nature in American education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995; Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Cabrera, 2018), and it interrogates the normalized sociocultural discourse played out in the U.S. educational context, specifically positioning power as culturally and symbolically constructed through the interplay of agency and structure in education (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Bourdieu, 1984, 1993). Using Critical Race Theory as an analytical framework challenges the inferiority paradigm used in educational research involving the racially and ethnically minoritized. It interrogates the implications of the role of race and social class in learning and its influence on how students of colour experience the education system (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Tate, 1997; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Critical Race Theory illuminates the inextricably connected unspoken discourse around race and class in U.S. educational contexts and, thus, the tendency to use race as a variant for

class (Adams, 2005; Yosso, 2005; Leonardo, 2012; Hextrum, 2018, 2019). It explores the role played by racial and ethnic socialization in helping students of colour assert their agency while negotiating belongingness in predominantly White spaces without neglecting the power dynamics and social barriers they must navigate.

In examining the implications of Critical Race Theory in education, Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) surface the correlation between race and property rights to understand U.S. culture and how inequality is embedded in society and in education. They argue that attempts to create inroads into multiculturalism in education have not sufficiently addressed race and equality in education. Critical Race Theory challenges the assumptions held about Black and Latin/o/a/x students in the U.S. education system, where there is a tendency to conflate race with class, particularly in the context of the black-white racial binary (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005; Yosso, 2006; Leonardo, 2012). Therefore, the synergy in Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth and Critical Race Theory in this research highlights and critiques the deficit assumptions about students of colour, particularly assumptions that Black and Latino/a/x students in American schools come to the classroom with cultural deficiencies. At the same time, it does not exonerate the education system of its accountability for the isolation and alienation the students of colour are subjected to in the elite independent school spaces.

The students of colour embody a racialized self-understanding within the American context as community cultural wealth that rejects the inferiority paradigm by virtue of their admission into selective independent schools. The students gained admission into the selective elite schools despite limited access to the resources and supplementary tutoring and coaching received by white middle- and upper-class students. Their counter-story claims agency as they engage Whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) as a means to an end, where buying into the eliteness of independent schools does not unhinge them from their ways of knowing and being (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019; Macias et al., 2021). The students are rooted in a strong racial identity that buffers the

indignities of racial inequality and gives them a voice to demand redress. While negotiating a sense of belonging in predominantly White spaces, students of colour often encounter many social barriers to navigate to find success. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth places the students' narratives at the centre as a form of counter-storytelling that challenges the privileged discourses perpetuating racial stereotypes (Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012). My research also recognizes the understated assets that the students of colour bring into the classroom while not acknowledging the effects of racial stress in the students' encounters with the dominant group (Brown, 2018; Stevenson, 2014; Seals Arlles, 2019).

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth (2005) theory provides the backdrop to explain the students' understanding of how their racial socialization gives them the social currency they need to negotiate belonging during this critical period of their identity development. As a critique of Bourdieu's cultural capital, it illuminates how normed social discourse around negotiating academic space can influence the students' thinking and behaviour (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1992). The Black-White racial binary (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005) tends to conflate race with class. Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth presents an apt conceptual framework to interrogate the normalized sociocultural discourse played out in the U.S. educational context.

3.1.1 Why Critical Race Theory?

According to Dixson & Rousseau (2005), Critical Race Theory (CRT) is a framework developed by legal scholars that can be used to examine the role of race in education. As an interdisciplinary framework, CRT locates race at the centre of analysis and recognizes race as a social construct while addressing race as a real phenomenon (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Cook & Dixson, 2013; Charles, 2008). It is a theorizing counter space for scholars to challenge and transform racial oppression

(Cabrera, 2018). CRT is the study of relationships among race, racism, and power (Cabrera, 2018) and insists upon recognizing the social and historical context of racial subordination in the analysis and challenges the liberal claims of race neutrality, colour blindness, and meritocracy (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The Critical Race Theory theoretical and analytical framework in education acknowledges the historical racial hierarchy as substantiated in the laws (Tate, 1997; DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012) and focuses on how education institutions reinforce the different forms of social inequities (Hiraldo, 2010).

As an analytical framework, Critical Race Theory attends to issues of race. It challenges normative assumptions of race that promote racial neutrality and a colour-blind understanding while illuminating the permanency and endemic nature of race and racism in American education (Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Gildersleeve et al., 2011). It presents a framework that theorizes, examines, and challenges how race and racism implicitly and explicitly impact social structures and discourses (Yosso, 2005; Cabrera, 2018). Critical Race Theory's critique of liberalism deconstructs the colour-blindness ideology that de-emphasizes the effects of race as a shaping force within the context of the American discomfort about race, racism, and whiteness (Tate, 1997). It challenges the refusal to acknowledge race, racial differences, and racism by questioning and challenging the myth of meritocracy. One of the tenets of Critical Race Theory, counter-storytelling, is a strategy used to critique and expose dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes.

Counter-storytelling casts doubt on the validity of accepted views and narratives by focusing on personal narratives and stories as valid evidence. As such, it gives voice to the students of colour and recognizes the experiential knowledge (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005) they bring. In this study, counter-storytelling challenges the "dominant social organisation and racial ideology in the United States" (Urso Spina and Tai, 1998: 36).

Thus, it decentralizes normative discourse and refutes limitations circumscribed by social identities. This study looked at counter-storytelling as an "assertion and acknowledgment of the importance of the personal and community experience of people of colour as sources of knowledge" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 10). Through personal narratives, storytelling allows students to "construct a personal sense of self" (Warin, 2015, p. 690) as they share their perceptions of their experiences as students of colour in predominantly White spaces.

CRT challenges dominant discourses that maintain that the school system is fair and racially equitable (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Chadderton, 2013). This research positioned the students of colour as creators of knowledge (Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2000; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) who can define their lived experience in the form of sharing personal narratives and their understanding of self. It focused on the school as a site of resistance, alienation, silence, and failure. It sought to situate the school as a site that can affirm the identity of students of colour and how these students resist general assumptions about their academic abilities (Howard, 2003). As an analytical framework, Critical Race Theory attends to issues of race and challenges the normative assumptions of race that promote racial neutrality and colour-blind understanding. The focus on counter-storytelling decentralizes the dominant normative (racially influenced) discourse. CRT values the storytelling of the individual experience; thus, counter-storytelling gives voice to the historically marginalized experiences that challenge the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Stinson, 2008; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The utility of CRT as an analytical framework foregrounds the permanent and endemic nature of race in U.S. society and culture and the negative consequences of racism and discrimination in the school experience of historically marginalized students of colour. Personal narratives and stories shared during interviews were valid evidence to document perceptions of inequities and alienation. The study foregrounded the voices of the students of colour

and thus examined the hegemonic practices and boundaries perpetuating inequality and alienation.

Within the American system, students of colour find themselves at a disadvantage and working against many stereotypes that threaten to become a self-fulfilling prophecy for those who cannot avoid the impact of stereotype threat (Steele, 1997, 2010; Howard, 2003). Stereotype threat takes the form of students devaluing their possibilities of academic success because of the social identity that renders them susceptible to alienation in their social and educational contexts (Steele, 2010). Stereotype threat (Steele, 1997) presents in the form of anxiety that undermines the academic performance of students of colour as they become mindful of negative stereotypes about their group membership and their attempts to combat the effect of the stereotype on their academic performance (Howard, 2003; Steele, 1997; Steele, 2010). Therefore, counter-storytelling legitimizes the lived experiences of marginalized people, exemplified by the #black@ accounts that exposed and critiqued the dominant narrative. Giving voice to the lived experiences and perceptions about the school climate for students of colour in independent schools became an opportunity for schools to recalibrate ways to make their schools purposefully equitable and inclusive.

Chadderton (2013) argues that CRT is useful as an analytical tool for "uncovering the often-hidden subtext of race in society" (44). Advocating for a category of analysing the effects of race in the field of education, Chadderton challenges the conflation of race with the socioeconomic class as the primary determiner of educational experiences and focuses on Critical Race Theory as a framework that informs research on the experiences of students of colour (Chadderton, 2013). CRT provides a tool to render visible forms of covert racism that involve acts of micro-aggressions, especially when racial disparities related to educational experiences are not officially recognized as racist practices (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Chadderton, 2013). Micro-aggressions

(Sue, 2004; Sue, 2010) are denoted as small nicks and stings whose subtle and pervasive impact is often underplayed and sometimes explained away. However, the cumulative effect can traumatize individuals subjected to these micro-aggressions. The post-2020 rush to draw diversity action plans throughout the U.S. education sector risks ineffectiveness and possibly propelling and reinforcing structural and institutional racism without focusing on the structural impact of systemic racism in education.

Critical Race Theory emphasizes intersectionality, counter-storytelling, interest convergence, and dismantling systems of racial oppression by analysing whiteness as property in the U.S. context (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT examines how structural racism is maintained and enacted in education to sustain racial privilege. Connecting CRT to educational praxis is seen as empowering communities of colour. Most U.S. schools seeking to redress the educational inequalities of the past tend to advance a diversity rationale that introduces students of colour to educational spaces previously inaccessible by people of colour. When the structural barriers in place in the environment have not been addressed, the students of colour in these educational spaces find their lived experiences and interactions with racism silenced in the same way as their stories and histories are not acknowledged (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Brown, 2018; Seals Arlles, 2019). Consequently, the racial opportunity cost (Chambers et al., 2014) becomes too high for the students of colour negotiating space and belongingness in dominated spaces where their presence is predicated by a condition of being indebted for the favour to interface with peers from the dominant group.

For the students of colour, their embodied habitus in the form of the cultural knowledge gained from early racial socialization in the home and the various fields they occupy facilitate their attempts to negotiate the social spaces within the academic and social context of predominantly White schools (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu,

1984; Bourdieu, 1992; Bourdieu, 1993; Bourdieu, 1997). In these spaces, White dominance embedded in the policies, practices, and assumptions operates below conscious awareness. It continues to silence and malign the presence of students of colour (Sue, 2010). While members of the dominant group experience themselves as good, moral, and decent human beings who do not intentionally discriminate against others based on race (Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Sue, 2010), the reality of the experiences of students of colour in predominantly White schools involves negotiating belonging while resisting fitting other people's narrative of who they are that are demeaning and invalidating. Therefore, this study engaged the Critical Race Theory to problematize the inferiority paradigm used in educational research involving the racially minoritized and the role of race and social class in education (Tate, 1997).

Therefore, engaging Critical Race Theory as a theoretical framework challenges the deficit theories suggesting a lack of skills and knowledge to succeed in educational settings. CRT challenges the deficit theories that influence educational policies and institutions for not acknowledging the disparities in the American system that devalue and marginalize. Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth and Counter-storytelling are grounded in Critical Race Theory and value the students' knowledge by documenting and counter-storying the dominant narratives of education. They recognize structural racism as a system of power and privilege based on racialisation as endemic in U.S. society and embedded in educational institutions (Yosso, 2006; Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

3.1.2 Community Cultural Wealth

While negotiating a sense of belonging in predominantly White spaces, Black students often encounter many social barriers driven by anti-Blackness and racism that make it difficult to navigate the space and experience belonging. In a critique of Bourdieu's work used to discuss

social and racial inequity, Yosso (2005) challenges the deficit narrative associated with the differential academic and social outcomes of students of colour. Yosso (2005) asserts that dominant groups within society maintain power by limiting access to the forms of capital for social mobility. In Community Cultural Wealth, Yosso (2005) centres the Critical Race Theory framework to "theorize, examine, and challenge the ways race and racism implicitly impact social structures, practices, and discourses" (70).

Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth places the students' narratives at the centre and leverages the "transgressive knowledge" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70) that challenges the privileged discourses that perpetuate racial stereotypes (Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012). It recognizes the understated assets that the students of colour bring into the classroom to facilitate their attempts to negotiate the social spaces in the academic and social context. The Black-White racial binary (Crenshaw, 1991; Yosso, 2005) tends to conflate race with class as the primary determiner of educational experiences (Chadderton, 2013). The deficit discourse associated with students of colour often lumps racial and socio-economic class disparities. People of colour are perceived to lack the social and cultural capital required for social mobility (Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012). On the other hand, the tendency to elevate the knowledge of upper and middle classes, considered as "capital valuable to a hierarchical society" (Yosso, 2005, p. 70), obviates the need to address concerns about access and equity and social inequalities in the American society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) challenges traditional interpretations of cultural capital and assumptions of cultural deficiencies among students of colour. It focuses on the cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities of students from marginalized communities that are only sometimes recognized or acknowledged. It is the agency possessed by the students of colour that centres their lived experiences and counter the deficit narratives. Yosso's re-articulation of Bourdieu's cultural capital to include recognizing the community experiences and resources among

people of colour as sources of knowledge reasserts the significance of race in social science discourse and the need to push beyond the black-white binary (Ladson-Billings (2005). It presents a shift from a deficit view of communities of colour that trains its gaze on disadvantages rather than focus on cultural knowledge, skills, and abilities of the socially marginalized groups (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) challenges Bourdieu's cultural capital theory to introduce community cultural wealth as the "under-utilized assets students of colour bring with them from their homes and communities to the classroom" (70). Anzaldúa (1990) and Yosso (2005) attribute this blend of different forms of capital and community cultural wealth as being responsible for the resilience of the students of colour.

Yosso (2005) outlines various forms of capital nurtured through community cultural wealth – aspirational, linguistic, resistance, social, familial, and navigational capital - that give individuals the knowledge and skills necessary to navigate and succeed in their educational pursuits as navigating social institutions. Aspirational capital is characterised by maintaining hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers. Thus, this form of capital attests to the students of colour whose educational aspirations are driven by the desire for social advancement. They believe that getting a good education, a solid connection to their culture, and learning the communication systems to navigate the predominantly White spaces will give them the edge towards social mobility despite challenges with social barriers.

A blend of aspirational, familial, social, navigational, and resistant forms of capital (Yosso, 2005) contrasts the deficit narrative. It centres the "transgressive knowledges" (70) the students of colour bring into the classroom. Yosso (2005) refers to familial capital as the cultural knowledge nurtured among kin that carries community history, memory, and cultural intuition nurtured through maintaining a solid connection to the community. The cultural values instilled in the home equip the students of colour with the academic resilience to persist despite setbacks upon entering the new cultural context of independent college

preparatory schools. When the students of colour engage their ways of knowing and skills to take action to address inequality, they activate the resistant capital (Yosso, 2005). The collectivist orientation and familial bonding through teaching children about their identity and the racial dynamics at play in society equip students of colour with the coping and buffering strategies they need against racial stress. They also help these students regulate their psychological well-being in dominated spaces.

The students access social capital through networks of people and community resources the students summon to provide emotional support to navigate various societal institutions (Yosso, 2005). Additionally, the students of colour activate a repertoire of tools to mitigate the impact of denigration and racial stress. With navigational capital, Yosso speaks to the ability to manoeuvre through a racially hostile school environment, acknowledging the individual agency that also connects to social networks that facilitate courage and tenacity in the face of stressful conditions (Yosso, 2005). Learning stories of people of colour who could overcome insurmountable challenges in dominated spaces also motivates students of colour to follow a legacy of pioneers and trailblazers. As part of accessing their networks of people, the students of colour look to alums of colour who came before them to share their stories of triumph against the odds in dominated spaces.

3.1.3 Counter-storytelling

As one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory, counter-storytelling is a strategy used to critique and expose dialogues that perpetuate racial stereotypes. Counter-storytelling casts doubt on the validity of accepted views and narratives by focusing on personal narratives and stories as valid evidence. This thesis placed the students' narratives at the centre as a form of counter-storytelling, a method that challenges privileged discourses that perpetuate a deficit narrative of cultural capital (Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012; Brown, 2018). Moreover, it explored the degree to which the students of colour engage in resistance and counter-

storytelling as they navigate a dominant culture and academic and social discourse and claim agency in the dominated spaces that do not acknowledge such boundaries.

The focus on counter-storytelling highlights the students' embracing of their racial identity and stories that hold them up, foregoing the temptation to fit into other people's narrative of who they are. In this study, counter-storytelling challenges the "dominant social organization and racial ideology in the United States" (Urso Spina and Tai, 1998: p. 36) and, thus, decentralize normative discourse and refute limitations circumscribed by their social identities. Storytelling, in the form of personal narratives, afforded the participants interviewed in this project the to "construct a personal sense of self" (Warin, 2015, p. 690) as they shared their perceptions of their experiences as students of colour at a predominantly White independent school. Critical Race Theory emphasizes intersectionality, counter-storytelling, and dismantling systems of racial oppression by analysing Whiteness as property in the U.S. context (Crenshaw, 1991; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). CRT examines how structural racism is maintained and enacted in education to sustain racial privilege.

As a methodology, counter-storytelling uses "a narrative method to theorize racialized experience framed by … symbiosis, colour-blind racism, interest convergence, racial formation, intersectionality, or hegemonic whiteness" (Martinez, 2020: 17). Further, Martinez (2020) claims "as a function of a counter-story, these narratives serve the purpose of exposing stereotypes and injustice and offering additional truths" (17) in the students' narratives of their lived experiences in dominated spaces. Counter-stories give voice to the perspectives and lived experiences of the students of colour and identify problems and accounts of systemic inequalities. By recognizing the students of colour as individuals with inherent value and experiential knowledge and potential to transform educational environments, counter-storytelling names racism and stereotypes and tears down distorted myths about

people of colour (DeCuir- Gunby, 2007; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). As a methodology, counter-storytelling challenges majoritarian narratives reinforcing the macro-level power and privilege system (Delgado, 1989; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Yosso, 2006) and centres race and racialisation and the salience of intersecting identities as the students of colour navigate the school context. It emphasises and humanizes the students' cultures and experiences (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) and values their voices to identify problems and create space to organize and bring social change. Counter-storytelling illuminates the interconnectedness of racism and institutional power. It gives students a voice to call for equity in schools and challenges unfair policies and the lack of representation of their cultures in the curriculum (Macias et al., 2021; Smith et al., 2011).

3.2 Bourdieu's Capital Theory

Bourdieu theorizes that educational institutions play a critical role in the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital as they "reproduce existing power relations more subtly through the production and distribution of a dominant culture" (Giroux, 1983: p. 267). The Bourdieusian concept of social capital is accrued through social networks, family, and wider community interactions as students move from one field to another (Bathmaker, 2015). Social capital is defined as "the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 119). Within the U.S. educational context, the dominant cultural capital lends legitimacy to "certain forms of knowledge, ways of speaking, and ways of relating to the world that capitalize on the type of familiarity and skills that only certain students have received from their family backgrounds and class relation" (Giroux, 1983: p. 268).

The educational circumstances present a reproduction of the structure of distribution of cultural capital among social classes and run the risk of replicating the social inequalities in the hidden processes of the reproduction of cultural capital (Warin, 2015). Buying into the institutional culture has the value benefit of culture, and the symbolic profits accrue from membership to an elite class. Many studies illustrate how the "middle-class habitus and culture represent the official capital that schools reinforce, which socially promotes children who enter school already embodying these codes" (Leonardo, 2012: 436; Giroux, 1983).

McGovern (1988) observes, "Bourdieu argues that educational institutions play a critical role in the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital and consequently in the structuring of the economic and political elite" (336). The U.S. independent school culture contributes to and reflects the cultural capital of the elite class (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977), a steppingstone to a legacy of the Ivy League education that will prepare them to claim their position of power in the upper echelons of American society. Bourdieu's theory of capital constitutes the means of maximizing profits, where one's network of connections "is the product of investment strategies, individual or collective, consciously or unconsciously aimed at establishing or reproducing social relationships that are directly usable in the short or long term" (Bourdieu, 1997: p. 52). It facilitates the capacity to mobilize a network of connections to capital, economic, cultural, and symbolic, possessed by those to whom one is connected (Martin, 2009). Therefore, a concentration of the dominant class culture emphasizes "character and discipline" in prestigious independent school education. It is cultivated and nurtured in preparing upper- and middle-class children to take their place in positions of power. Hence education and culture can be perceived as a means of social control (Saveth, 1988).

Bourdieu's field theory in education serves as a conduit to a better understanding of the social structure and phenomenological dimensions to interrupt cultural domination (Ferrare & Apple, 2015). Bourdieu defines

fields as “a network, or configurations, of objective relations between positions” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Bourdieu’s notion of habitus attests to the possibility of normed social discourse around negotiating academic space that has the potential to influence students’ thinking and behaviour. In negotiating the social boundaries within the academic context, students activate their habitus, composed of a system of dispositions that generate perceptions, appreciations, and practices (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1992). As a product of internalized principles of a cultural arbitrary, habitus is structured by past and present circumstances, such as family upbringing and educational experiences (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984; Bourdieu, 1992).

Students of colour in independent schools, where they are a numerical minority because of many factors related to limited access to prestigious education and generational wealth, contend with the possibility of having to negotiate fields where different forms of capital become the value to be exchanged while investing in the projected outcome of social and educational advancement (Bourdieu, 1984). While navigating the fields, the students learn to embody the rules and norms of the various fields they traverse (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Bourdieu, 1984) as they straddle boundaries and internalize the values and norms of each field with their racial, ethnic, and cultural identities playing a significant role (Carter, 2006). Therefore, the exchange involved in buying into the culture poses the challenge of assimilation into the dominant culture. They are left in a quandary of buying into the new culture and devaluing their existing capital, a symbolic violence concept where dominant values are valorised as universal and innocuous. Symbolic violence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) is characterized as the exercise of symbolic power waged by the dominant class and “reinforces the arbitrary power” while maintaining the hierarchy of social classes (Bourdieu, 1997, p. 13).

The American education system reflects the production process and structure of class relations in the United States (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; MacLeod, 1995; Howard, 2010). Schools are seen to provide training for the wealthy to take up places at the top of the economy while conditioning the poor to accept their lowly status in the class structure (Giroux, 1983; Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). Wealthy parents and children make choices and strategies to maintain their position in an education system that serves and favours the privileged in a social reproduction necessary to further the capitalist mode of production (Maxwell & Maxwell, 1995). Schools play a socialization role for the elite class by rewarding the cultural capital of students from the dominant classes who are familiar with the dominant culture that is implicitly required for educational attainment, notwithstanding claims of a commitment to preparing students to live critically, just, and meaningfully (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012; Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019).

According to Lareau (2015), Bourdieu "argues that individuals from different social locations are socialized differently" (3). Therefore, the students of colour are socialized into a sense of what is comfortable through the experiences and stories shared in the home that constitute the cultural capital they possess when they enter the predominantly White independent schools. While their cultural knowledge is devalued in the spaces they occupy in independent schools, it is an agency that helps them to form social networks that help them to resist and persist amid challenges. Students of colour "engage in open and notorious trespass of White property to reclaim it" (Lawrence, 2015, p. 30.) The critical consciousness enables them to resist the marginalization in the elite spaces and cultivate the cultural capital that facilitates their social advancement.

The biggest challenge for students of colour in U.S. independent schools lies in negotiating access to these schools' social and cultural capital, both academically and socially. Cultural capital, the central focus of Bourdieu's capital theory, is sustained in the general cultural background, knowledge, disposition, and skills passed from generation

to generation (MacLeod, 1995). According to Bourdieu, the education system, often seen as meritocratic and legitimate despite social inequalities, works on the presumption that students possess the cultural capital that is usually not readily accessible to lower classes (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Sullivan, 2001).

Consequently, the marginalization of students from non-dominant backgrounds manifests in school discourse that does not reinforce the values and knowledge learned from their families and backgrounds. Wacquant (2013) argues that "class as a modality of social grouping, and spring of consciousness and conduct, emerges and obtains in and through the endless competition in which agents engage across the varied realms of life for the acquisition, control, and contestation of diverse species of power or 'capital'" (p. 275). Hence students from non-dominant groups find themselves marginalized as their internalized ways of knowing and relating to the world are deemed to have no value (Giroux, 1983). Thus, implications of symbolic power and structure in the schools are reified in socialization into the dominant culture, where students of colour must comply with a racially mute and colour-blind narrative of meritocracy.

3.3 Racial socialisation

Racial socialisation contributes to the resilience of students of colour when immersed in educational contexts where they not only have to negotiate rigorous academic spaces to navigate the unfamiliar but also unwelcoming social environments. The student's ability to tap into the resources at their disposal facilitates their ability to negotiate a sense of belonging by creating affinity spaces with others with shared identities to build community in White-dominated spaces. Racial socialisation plays a significant role in the ability of students of colour to manage and respond to racial stress and regulate emotions to ensure that they engage with their environment assertively. The racial socialisation in the home anchors the students of colour in the cultural capital, which helps them

navigate and succeed in their academic pursuits and contributes to their resilience during racial stress (Yosso, 2005; Stevenson, 2014).

Racial socialisation is present in the verbal and non-verbal messages that teach students of colour about cultural pride, preparation for bias, and discrimination incidents (Phan, 2022). It aligns with Yosso's (2005) familial capital, depicted as the cultural knowledge nurtured among kin that carries community history, memory, and cultural intuition nurtured through maintaining a strong connection to the community. Parenting in communities of colour requires racial literacy education through verbal and non-verbal communication about racialised experiences (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013; Anderson & Stevenson, 2019; Yosso, 2005). Parents share racial coping strategies to help their children gain psychological protection, communicating their fears for their children's safety and providing information about a history of racial violence (Stevenson, 2014; Anderson & Stevenson, 2019). Racial socialisation helps the youth of colour cope with racial stress, using protective and affirmation strategies that prepare them in communities of colour for bias and help them navigate potentially challenging racial terrain (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2019). Racial identity and self-esteem are borne out of racial socialisation to rebuff the deleterious effects of racial discrimination.

Conversely, the tension of negotiating racial interactions in schools does not threaten to force students to give up their heritage, dignity, resources, or the power that constitutes the racial stress at play in U.S. independent schools. Early socialisation in the home introduces students of colour to the realities of the unequal societal structures in America. It equips them with the tools to enhance their ability to thrive and succeed academically. A strong racial identity roots the students of colour in the values instilled at home and thus mitigates the impact of marginalisation and denigration. Strong identification with their racial identity results in lower levels of psychological distress (Sellers et al., 2003; Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2019). Through racial socialisation, students of colour learn specific strategies and culturally

relevant behaviours that serve as a buffer during unpleasant encounters to ensure their academic and emotional well-being.

The presence of students of colour in spaces that advocate the values of individualism and objectivity challenges how the students of colour were socialised as racialised beings among a myriad of other social meanings within the complex race relations in America. Students of colour experience cognitive dissonance when confronted with distressing encounters with White peers and instructors in a White norm-centred environment that focuses on intention over impact. The habitus of the students of colour includes "a person's internalized awareness of his or her status, as well as responses to the status of others" (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 182) that help in moments of disequilibrium in White spaces where the rules of negotiating capital are different. As a result, students of colour from families where they hear stories and are given feedback about race develop a racial identity that is not overwhelmed and knows how to cope during stressful racial encounters (Cross, 2021). The students' self-understanding as racialised beings provides them with the social currency they need to negotiate to belong and activate the cultural knowledge when responding to racial stress.

The psychological toll of racial stress and trauma among Black students is exacerbated by mass media representation and the transmission of bias and fear in the social media images that shine the light on racial disparity in the killings carried out by police officers. In the highly charged political and social climate, racial stress manifests in preoccupation with the fear of encounters resulting in life loss. Recognising the harmful impact of racial discrimination on the psychological well-being of Black youth, the EMBRace intervention framework seeks to reduce racial stress and trauma through racial socialisation practices, stress management, and promoting bonding in Black families (Anderson, McKenny, and Stevenson, 2019).

Systemic racism is legitimated and maintained in education using evasive language that deflects and downplays racial matters. In a

commentary on the cultural and ideological practices of schooling, Urso Spina & Tai (1998) note the rhetoric of equal opportunity used to mask pervasive economic, political, and social control. They observe that the dominant racial ideology is a system of beliefs backed up by economic and political power that supports and maintains generalisations about Blacks, Latino/a/x, and Asians. White youth are privileged to determine their academic destiny, whereas Whiteness is normative and the dominant racial ideology. Whiteness becomes non-racialised, thus denying the ability of the minoritized to point out racism, and in the process, gives the dominant White culture more freedom from criticism. This is evident in some political discourse that permeates school hallways in arguments about the legitimacy of Black Lives Matter or taking offense at the mention of White Privilege. The invisibility of Whiteness as a socially constructed state of personal identity maintains the hegemony of the dominant culture and thus "reinscribes its centrality and reinforces its privileged position as normative" (Spina & Tai, 1998, p. 37).

The racial socialisation from home equips them with the "emotional, physiological, cognitive, and voice skills that aid in the recasting of racially stressful encounters and the promotion of racial coping" (Stevenson, 2014: p. 115). It is a form of social capital that students of colour activate when they enter predominantly White spaces in independent schools. The students of colour activate the racial self-efficacy and coping strategies specific to people of colour that can be summoned in hostile racial encounters (Coleman & Stevenson, 2013; Stevenson, 2014). Racial socialisation and racial literacy play a significant role in managing and responding to racial stress and regulating the emotions of students of colour so that they can engage with their environment constructively. In a world of racial avoidance and colour-blindness, racial literacy intimates the "ability to read, recast, and resolve racially stressful encounters" (Stevenson, 2014: p. 62). Cultural socialisation (Anderson & Stevenson, 2019) prepares for bias and discriminatory incidents. Additionally, it can reduce racial stress when

interracial encounters generate mistrust and an orientation towards racial avoidance and silence about race.

Among the students of colour, the centrality of racial identity to one's self-concept boosts resilience in the face of racial discrimination. It presents one with coping strategies for dealing with racial encounters. High levels of racial identity centrality, the extent to which a person normatively defines themselves regarding race, serve as a buffer from the adverse effects of racial discrimination (Sellers et al., 2003).

3.3.1 Racial identity

Racial identity denotes the significance and meaning an individual ascribes to being a member of their racial group (Sellers et al., 2003; Seaton et al., 2014). The extent to which a person's race is a relevant part of their self-concept is referred to as racial salience, and centrality refers to the extent to which people normatively define themselves about race. Despite their "conspicuous invisibility" (Stevenson: 2003, p. 523) within the American education system, students of colour do not have the luxury of colour-blindness. Within the American education structure, students of colour learn to perfect bicultural efficacy, the belief that one can navigate between one's culture of origin and mainstream culture without having to compromise their sense of cultural identity (Hussain, 2018; LaFromboise et al., 1993), but it comes with many challenges. It is comparable with the Du Boisian double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) that affords the students of colour insight into how the dominant society perceives them and learn to compartmentalise the enactment of their identities to participate in mainstream culture by synthesising it with their home culture (Cross, 2021). Therefore, their mainstream interactions are characterised by dealing with power implications by being on guard, code-switching, resilience, endurance, and resolve not to be broken (Cross, 2021).

3.3.2 Critical Consciousness

Critical consciousness involves awakening marginalised youth of colour subjected to socioeconomic or racialised domination, and they become agitated to change their social conditions (Diemer & Li, 2011). It is a period of socio-political development as the youth become conscious of social inequities and can analyse the systems that cause inequities and structural oppression. It is demonstrated in the youth overcoming structural constraints on human agency, often associated with school and career engagement among the low socioeconomic status youth of colour. The racialised experiences and beliefs of the students of colour contribute to their understanding of social inequality and empower them to effect social change to an unjust order (Anyiwo, Bañales, Rowley, Watkins, & Richards-Schuster, 2018). According to Anyiwo et al. (2018), race, culture, racial identity, and racial discrimination become particularly salient during adolescence, a period of active identity development for students of colour.

In the context of the critical consciousness that emerged in the dissenting voices in the #Black@, students of colour in independent schools assert a presence that claims a seat at the table in the spaces where they have been pushed to the margins. It is a critical consciousness that erupted in response to the students' experiences of isolation, marginalization, and exclusion. The marginalisation and exclusion persist despite efforts to diversify the student body without changing the policies and procedures, curriculum, and diversifying teachers, thus perpetuating a school culture where students of colour are perpetual outsiders within and do not feel welcome. The students' outcry contradicts the popular rhetoric of nominal diversity efforts devoid of the engaged pedagogy that values a practice of freedom and transforms "the curriculum so that it does not reflect the biases or reinforce systems of domination" (hooks, 1994: 21). It is a critical consciousness that challenges hegemonic barriers and practices that do not make room for the non-dominant voices whose perspectives are silenced or absent in curriculum, policies, structures, and procedures.

3.3.3 Racial Stress and Trauma

The racialized experiences of students of colour in predominantly White schools threaten an individual's previous view of race relations (Stevenson, 2014). As such, the perceived and actual encounters that the individuals experience as threatening include micro-aggressions, feelings of marginalisation, and encounters with institutionalised racism. Such racial interactions are experienced as emotionally threatening to one's well-being. Stevenson (2014) characterises racial stress as the racial conflict that challenges one's previous perception that racial matters are irrelevant in daily social life. Consequently, the racialised experiences that are part of racial stress affect the individual's academic and social well-being, sense of belonging, and school connectedness and are experienced as a shock to their coping system before, during, and after the racial encounter (Stevenson, 2014).

3.3.4 Racial coping

Gaylord-Harden, Burrow, and Cunningham (2012) assert that Black youth successfully adapt to stress by identifying culturally relevant mediators and thus can navigate general stressors and environments with racially specific risk. Racial socialisation practices contribute to the *racial coping* behaviours the youth of colour learn for racially specific stressors with their growing awareness of racial discrimination and its impact on their self-concept (Anderson et al., 2018). Coping strategies involve engagement behaviours directed toward the causes of stress or an individual's response to stressful encounters. Similarly, disengagement coping strategies involve behaviours that are disconnected from the source of stressors and one's emotional response (Anderson et al., 2018). Ultimately, coping strategies are context and situation-specific, and coaching, modelling, and encouragement from parents ensure that the engagement coping strategies positively impact the youth's self-esteem.

3.4 Claiming agency and self-authorship

Messages that prepare students of colour for bias and racism in the racial socialisation they receive from family and other primary socialisation agents teach them the basics about identity in their early years (Gaylord-Harden, et al., 2012). While society does not teach them the same confidence level to advance their ideas and know they are worthy, they learn adaptability and resistance to psychological stress as they grow older. They gain a keen understanding of the racial dynamics at play in society and the coping strategies against racial stress and discrimination from the accounts of experiences of racial discrimination shared among family members, which improves their psychological well-being and strengthens familial bonds (Anderson et al., 2018). With time, they craft a sense of identity that honours and balances theirs and other people's needs, cultivating the capacity to respond and act in ways that make them feel whole (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2014).

When the youth of colour respond to adaptive challenges that require a shift toward more complex ways of making meaning (Baxter Magolda, 2014) and enable them to manage ambiguity, they gain transformational learning, preparing for productive adult life. As they embrace and assert all the intersecting dimensions of their identity and craft a self-identity that honours and balances the social contexts they navigate, they grow into their self-authorship (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2014). They develop self-authoring maturity as they fluidly navigate the adaptive challenges that require a shift in how they make sense of knowledge, their intersecting identities, and social relations. Baxter Magolda (2014) notes that *self-authorship* is the internal capacity to construct one's beliefs, identity, and social relations. It is an awareness of one's reality, self-consciously participating in ongoing dialogue, and developing an intercultural maturity to work interdependently with diverse others and manage conflict, ambiguity, change, and multiple perspectives (Baxter Magolda, 2014). With a strong foundation within their home culture, the students of colour

challenge the deficit assumptions, enact the psychological strengths and interhuman competencies modelled in the socializing agents, and embrace the mindset that gives them the edge toward social mobility (Cross, 2021).

3.4.1 Correlation between racial and ethnic identity and self-esteem

The concept of race is a social construct based on physical characteristics such as skin colour and tends to ascribe some socio-political hierarchy in the U.S. context (Fine, 1987; Helms, 1994; Howard, 2003; Chadderton, 2013). Phinney (1996) delineates *ethnic identity* as how individuals interpret and understand ethnicity and their degree of identification with their identity group. The distinction between racial and ethnic identity is based on cultural traditions and values passed down from generation to generation (Umaña–Taylor, 2004). Tafjel's (1981) social identity theory notes that identity develops from an individual's sense of belonging and group membership. Working with Bourdieu's capital theory, Warin's (2015) *identity capital* emphasises the advantage gained through the reflexive capacity to articulate a narrative of self as it fits into this research on students of colour's ability to tell their narrative of resilience in the face of adversity. Students of colour embody the habitus of the socio-cultural and socio-historical discourses that have fostered their success in various fields and facilitated their ability to negotiate social spaces. The familial, ethnic socialisation plays a role in developing ethnic identity. Ethnic minority status in the U.S. has less power and status as students of colour struggle to gain equality, recognition, and acceptance within a predominantly European American society (Umaña–Taylor, 2004).

3.5 Racial discrimination

Blank, Dabady, & Citro (2004) define *racial discrimination* as an evolving social-cognitive construct. Building upon this definition, they claim that racial discrimination consists of two components, (1) differential

treatment based on race that disadvantages a racial group and (2) treatment based on unjustified factors other than race that disadvantage a racial group (Blank et al., 2004, p. 40). It is mainly demonstrated in behaviour and treatment with differential outcomes that disadvantages one racial group. The field of education tends to justify discriminatory practices by focusing on meritocracy as causal evidence of fairness, neglecting the tendency towards discriminatory practices determined by in-group and out-group membership (Tomova Shakur & Phillips, 2022). Disparate impact discrimination that does not involve race directly harms members of a disadvantaged racial group without a sufficiently compelling reason (Blank et al., 2004, p. 41.) It is the differential treatment of one member of a racial group less favourably that is perceived as harmful to the racially minoritized regardless of the intention because discrimination is experienced as activating distinct knowledge (Williamson, 2013).

3.5.1 Whiteness as Property

Whiteness is a construct created in the mid-to-late 1600s as an intentional community grouping designed to maintain White dominance and oppress people of colour (Bondi, 2012). According to Frankenberg (1993), Whiteness refers to a set of "locations that are historically, socially, politically, and culturally produced and are intrinsically linked to unfolding relations of domination" (6). Harris (1993) claims that *Whiteness* is a legally protected immaterial and material propertied resource available to some and denied to others. It is characterized as universal humanness, the invisible norm against which other races can be judged in constructing identity, representation, subjectivity, knowledge production, and the law (Moreton-Robinson, 2019). Whiteness confers the right to exclude, as evident in numerous lawsuits against colleges accused of racial preferential admission practices that are not merit-based (Dixson & Rosseau, 2005). Therefore, *Whiteness as property* pertains to laws that protect power accumulation (Hextrum, 2019), relations of domination re-enacted intergenerationally (Bourdieu, 1978;

Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977; Hextrum, 2019), and capital exchange. Dixson and Rousseau attribute the origins of the Critical Race Theory tenet of Whiteness as Property to Cheryl Harris, who defined it as the "legitimation of expectations of power and control that enshrine status quo as a neutral baseline while masking the maintenance of white privilege and domination" (Dixson & Rousseau, 2005, p. 8).

The changes in demographics and national census projections that portend a shift in race relations have caused a shift in attitudes toward racial diversity and multiculturalism within American society. Political fearmongering about the threat of Whites becoming a numerical minority has manifested in a significant shift in political rhetoric and intergroup anxiety. Shifts in the social geography of the race (Frankenberg, 1993) resulted from attempts to structure social enclaves that construct and maintain barriers that reduce incidental intergroup contact. Anxiety about intergroup contact motivated the preference to interact with other Whites and the formation of such social enclaves (Anicich, 2021). As such, when the euphoria of the election of President Barack Obama waned, there was a rise in political rhetoric agitating to have Whites avoid sharing physical spaces and institutional access with non-Whites. Even so, not all schools have committed to examining themselves through a racial framework and reflecting on the power dynamics, systemic structures, policies, and practices in place. Tatum's (2017) seminal text about the preoccupation with the hypervisibility of Black students has not lost relevance in most U.S. schools, where the physical landscape prominently delineates how physical and social space is divided and inhabited.

In the best schools in the country, there is endemic tension between supporting students of colour by providing access and voice while also perpetuating colour-blindness and institutional racism that impacts the students' academic achievement and progress. Coleman & Stevenson (2013) assert that CRT illuminates how "Whiteness [is] used as a standard in policy against which to measure the progress and success of people of colour and exposes inherent racism in diversity policies" (550).

Nevertheless, students of colour face restrictions and barriers to access to social capital (Anicich et al., 2021). While the social-emotional impact of excluding students of colour reverberates, it is shrouded by the nation's fixation on disparities in educational outcomes in an education system oblivious to the problematic instructional practices and cycles of inequity.

Colour-blindness principles protect the property interests in Whiteness by defending the status quo of the distribution of social goods, status, and privilege (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Yosso, 2005; Gillborn, 2006; Leonardo, 2012; Chadderton, 2013). Yi et al. (2022) characterizes *colour-blind racial ideology* as a belief system that informs one's interpretation of and response to racial stimuli. They argue that it is an erroneous belief that race is a biological construct instead of a social construct. They attribute failure to consider the role of racism in outcome disparities and not investigate the root cause of the disparities to colour-blind racial ideology. Yi et al. (2022) distinguishes between *colour evasion*, ignoring racial or ethnic group membership to reduce interracial tension and prejudice, and *power evasion*, which presents as the denial, minimization, and distortion of the existence of institutional racism. They regard the proclivity to focus on similarities and the denial of group membership or racial categorization as an intentional strategy by Whites to appear non-biased and ultimately promote racial harmony (Yi et al., 2022). Denying and overlooking the racialized lived experiences of people of colour is the power evasion (Yi et. al., 2022) that legitimizes the racial status quo that benefits Whites most by masking racism.

For many students of colour, the construct of Whiteness is based on mistrust of Whites that has grown out of their communities' lived experiences. People of colour see the privilege of Whiteness and have suffered the consequences of their lack of privilege and power in society (Habig, Gupta, & Adams, 2021). As a result, because of their experiences of oppression, people of colour coalesce and unify. The experiences of students of colour at predominantly White institutions are influenced by extraneous issues such as stereotype threat that entails dealing with expectations rooted in White cultural norms as embodied in

the values and behaviours of White students and faculty (Steele & Aronson, 1995; Adams, 2005).

3.5.2 Micro-aggressions

Microaggressions are subtle statements, actions, or incidents that can be indirect or subtle and effectively demonstrate some form of discrimination against members of a marginalized group, often resulting in harmful consequences to members of those groups (Sue, 2010). They take the form of small slights that produce minimal harm in isolation; however, their harmful sting is felt when an individual is exposed to daily taunts, insults, disregard, and disrespect. Unlike overt acts of discrimination or those embedded in social systems, institutions, or policies, micro-aggressions are not "micro" but constitute a subtle form of discrimination that strongly impacts the targeted groups and tend to take the form of subtle, stunning, non-verbal exchanges that are put-downs of the targeted groups. The cumulative weight caused by these mini-assaults may seem harmless because the good faith intentions of the aggressor mitigate the aggression. Still, the burden of a lifetime of micro-aggressions can hurt the campus racial climate, especially when the response is worse than the trigger (Sue, 2010).

In navigating the academic and social spaces they occupy, students from racially minoritized and marginalized backgrounds find themselves walking on eggshells as they seek to focus their attention on good faith intentions rather than perceiving any malice in the words and behaviours of members of the dominant groups. They steel themselves not to react to the jabs and nicks of these micro-aggressions. Still, the weight becomes unbearable when perceptions that members of the dominant groups are racially insensitive or believe they are superior and treat them poorly because of their race and wish to control everything. The weight and the negative impact of microaggressions is as damaging as overt acts of racism as the target individual feels devalued by statements they perceive as offensive, invalidating, and perpetuating stereotypes. From the period leading up to and after the 2016 American presidential elections, the polarization in political rhetoric

seemed to erase any semblance of civil discourse and left many racially minoritised students vulnerable to what seemed to become an everyday occurrence throughout the nation.

3.5.3 Exclusion policies

For centuries, the American suppression of minority organisations and rights has prohibited the racially minoritised from gaining access to valuable social and material resources to social mobility and other life outcomes. Housing discrimination continues to contribute to the generational wealth gap due to the suppression of minority organisations; the suppression caused the denial of rights and access to valuable social and material resources to racially minoritised (Rothstein, 2017). Structural discrimination contributes to the persistence of segregated public schools, opportunity gaps in education, wealth gaps, health disparities, and other life outcomes (Anicich, 2021). Discriminatory practices, customs, and policies lead to inequities that prevent people of colour from gaining access from the exclusionary policies that insulate Whites from incidental racial intergroup contact. The ongoing lawsuits against the University of North Carolina and Harvard University for considering race and ethnicity as part of the holistic admission process present evidence of barriers to avoiding sharing physical spaces and institutional access with non-Whites (Anicich, 2021; American Council on Education, 2022). The social construction of the American identity is crafted and preserved in textbooks that reflect and protect Whiteness as a national inheritance and passed on through generations to an education system that espouses American values that advance White supremacy (Yacovone, 2022).

3.6 Students of Colour in American independent schools

3.6.1 Double consciousness, code-switching, and impostor syndrome

William Cross (2021) refers to Black identity enactments, the psychological techniques and performance of different styles of

Blackness for survival purposes while participating in mainstream culture. Double consciousness is a concept established by W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) about the awareness and knowledge of how others see them as a way of survival from dehumanisation. The performance of self is premised on fear and vigilance and performs "the identity work expected and demanded by those with the power to stigmatize" (Cross, 2021, p. 81). Code-switching is proactive behaviour and openness to cross-cultural and cross-racial relationships that involve bridging one's sense of identity in mainstream settings and being true to oneself. Cross characterises code-switching as a "bicultural competence that allows one to function at a high level within two cultural realms (Cross, 2021: p. 89). To manage different ecosystems, some of which might be perceived as highly oppressive, the individual enacts the psychological buffering as protection from racial aggression.

In their quest for belonging in the independent school world of pedigree and prestige, the students of colour often find themselves outsiders and facing barriers that challenge their attempts to fit in. For most Black and Latino/a/x students, shifts in how they experience these barriers challenge their presentation in dress and style and language use in their desire to fit in and not stand out. It is what Gaztambide- Fernández and DiAquoi (2010) term "a part and apart" as the students of colour navigate symbolic boundaries in elite boarding schools. The presence of students of colour in predominantly White spaces, is characterised by an "understated optimism" that makes them realize that within the American context "some part of them will always bear wounds, something in their eyes shows that they know that after a long struggle they will cross to the distant shore where they will integrate themselves into the wholeness of sorts" (Anzaldua, 2009: 279). It is a dual consciousness, a precarious position of straddling two different worlds as border-crossers. The students of colour are confronted with "the lack of sophistication in American coping in race relations [that] endangers the resolution of racial conflicts by encouraging disengagement from the smallest of racial matters instead of resolution" (Stevenson, 2014, p. 39). Their

acceptance among peers at times comes at the expense of dialling down their individual identity to reduce being seen as a threat while enduring micro-aggressions in a race-avoidant colourblind social landscape.

The students of colour enter the predominantly White world of U.S. independent boarding schools with strong self-awareness and learn to ward off the nagging impostor syndrome sensation, a persistent feeling of self-doubt despite evidence of success, that creeps up as they navigate the diversity-as-deficit thinking among peers and instructors whose low expectations result in them feeling invisible and ignored in academic spaces (Murkhajee Reed, 2021). Mukharjee Reed (2021) characterizes diversity-as-deficit thinking as the negative conceptualisation of people, tokenised for their identity, which results in the systemic reduction of their full dignity, worth, and skills to their "diversity." The deficit thinking manifests in unpredictable social interactions with peers and adults, filled with landmines of micro-aggressions, feelings of isolation, snickers, and awkward questions that make it hard to keep their sight on the primary purpose.

3.6.2 Belonging

Belonging is defined as being accepted and invited to participate and having the opportunity to be authentic and show up as yourself (Wise, 2022). It is a visceral sensation one experiences when they feel accepted unconditionally to "learn, live, love, […] honoured, encouraged, and allowed to develop" as themselves and as part of the groups that develop and celebrate identities, needs, and contributions (Wise, 2022, p. 7). Even with the best intentions, diversity and equity work that ignores the environment's effects on the individual feeling welcomed and accepted to engage authentically fails to meet its goals and leaves some unable to experience belonging. Therefore, it is integral to create positive, inclusive environments for equity to "take root and flourish" in a culture that promotes dignity and belonging (Cobb & Krownapple, 2019, p. 14).

3.6.3 Literature gap addressed

This study addresses the literature gap of K-12 practitioner research that examines the practitioners' knowledge and understanding of the systems they operate in and their impact on students of colour. As a practitioner-researcher embedded at an elite independent boarding school, my research sought to illuminate the counter-narrative regarding the presence of students of colour at elite U.S. boarding schools. Deficit models and theories of education attribute the disparities in educational outcomes in the U.S. education system to cultural deficiencies without acknowledging racism inherent in the social systems from which low-income students of colour come. Independent schools are exclusive by nature and the sole preserve of the elite. The students' counter-narratives in this study challenge and de-centre the dominant colour-blind ideologies espoused in institutions that prop up hegemonic structures and proclamations of treating all students equally.

As such, the study problematises the role of racism in the outcome disparities, focusing on students' voices that speak to the cultural wealth undervalued by schools that uphold the diversity-as-deficit mindset and de-emphasize the existence of institutional racism. Also, the focus on eliteness in the study sought to disaggregate how the socio-economic class differences among Black students experience the dominated spaces and delineate the Black experience rather than treat it as monolithic. This study contributes to the research focused on the capital that students of colour bring into predominantly White education institutions and how to remove institutional barriers to advancing and actualizing inclusive practices.

In sum, this chapter introduced an eclectic blend of Critical Race Theory and Yosso's Community Cultural Wealth as a theoretical framework that interrogates the normalized sociocultural discourse in the U.S. educational system around negotiating academic space. Further, it presents a survey of the academic literature that informed this research and is referenced in the discussion of key findings in the following chapters.

Chapter 4: Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological approach that underpins this study and provides a rationale for the research design and methods of generating and analysing data. It documents a holistic narrative approach employed to understand the meaning of participants' counter-narratives. It outlines the relationships between the researcher and the participants to ensure the purpose of the inquiry is explained well to capture and accurately document and analyse the participants' narratives.

4.1 Research Paradigm and Methodology

Social constructivism foregrounds the subjective meaning negotiated socially and historically and formed through interaction with others (Cresswell, 2007; Robson, 2002; Detel, 2015). I engaged the social constructivist framework in practitioner-research seeking an "understanding of the world in which [I] live[d] and work[ed]" (Cresswell, 2007: p. 20) through the interpretations and meanings the the students of colour attach to their experiences of an American independent college preparatory boarding school. In my understanding and explicating the experiences, I had to unpack the meaning behind the participants' lived experiences without stripping them of agency in retelling their counter-narratives. This research aimed to analyse and develop subjective meanings relying on the participants' perceptions of the context, a reconstruction of selfhood (Segalo, 2020) through counter-storytelling. So, the overarching research question that guided this study examined the knowledge capital the students of colour mobilized to overcome the perceived challenges to remaining motivated and resilient despite conditions that malign them within the context of a predominantly White, affluent independent school. The question helped delineate factors that drive the inquiry and shaped the data collection methods while probing the implications of racial socialisation in the participants' experiences of belonging in non-dominant spaces (Robson, 2002, p. 27).

This research engaged the Critical Race Theory methodology (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002) grounded in Critical Race Theory and the reflexive nature of my position as a practitioner-researcher best suited to the constructivist grounded theory methodological approach. This approach allowed me to uncover the fundamental nuances that fuel hegemonic practices whose relevance extends beyond the research site and can help many independent schools pursue similar diversity, equity, and inclusion objectives. This research required a methodological self-consciousness that aligned my role with our social reality and physical context to inform my current practice where the participants are the subjects and inform the inquiry. A critical inquiry is "embedded in a transformative paradigm that seeks to expose, oppose, and redress forms of oppression, inequality, and injustice" (Charmaz, 2017, p.35). Therefore, throughout the research process, I needed to keep an open mind while scrutinizing my practice and dissecting my worldview and the meanings associated with the privileges accompanying my position and role (Charmaz, 2017).

Leveraging a theoretical framework grounded in Critical Race Theory, this study sought to examine the influence of the home cultural knowledge gained from earlier racial socialisation on the ability of students of colour to access social capital to negotiate discourses in a challenging social context (Martinez, 2020). My overarching research question examined the degree to which racial and ethnic socialisation gives students of colour agency and the critical consciousness in the counter-storytelling of their racialised lived experiences as marginalised groups at an American independent boarding school. The research question explored the role played by racial and ethnic socialisation in building a foundation to foster resilience and perseverance as the students of colour negotiate the academic and social spaces within an academic context where they are a subordinate group. The study foregrounded counter-storytelling as the resistance that gives the historically marginalised students of colour agency anchored in the sociocultural factors that shaped and influenced their self-

perception. Martinez (2020) asserts that counter-story "is a methodology that functions through methods that empower the minoritised through the formation of stories that disrupt the erasures embedded in the standardized majoritarian methodologies" (3). Because the experiences of students of colour in American independent schools do not form the central narrative, their concerns are often silenced in conversations with peers or explained away by the schools' administrators by rationalising experiences of exclusion and marginalisation as a misunderstanding. Therefore, the counter-story methodology uses "a narrative method to theorize [the] racialised experiences […] these narratives serve the purpose of exposing stereotype and injustice and offering additional truths through a narration of the researchers' own experiences" (Martinez, 2020: 17).

Further, this research accentuated dialogue as a catalyst that blends and analyses the sociological notion of the spaces the research participants navigate. It emphasised the participants' awareness of their sense of duality and the dispositions they have acquired by internalising the knowledge capital of the different fields they traverse. The ascendancy of the dialogue processes in this inquiry amplified the desire to empower, motivate, increase self-worth, and develop community. The dialogue exchanges between the participants and the researcher offered insight that evolved as the students shifted from normative surface reflections to authentic accounts of their racialised lived experiences. Solórzano & Yosso (2002) assert that a "Critical Race methodology in education also acknowledges the intercentricity of racialised oppression - the layers of subordination based on race, gender, class, immigration status, surname, phenotype, accent, and sexuality" (25). Therefore, the semi-structured interviews and focus group interviews used in the study contributed to an outcome where the students asserted their relevance within the social spaces and positioning within the community beyond the diversity-as-deficit perception (Murkhajee Reed, 2021; Davis and Harrison; 2013, Denzin and Lincoln 1998). The study sought to unveil a racialised perspective that illuminates "practices of exclusion that operate

not only at the surface of our institutions, but at levels of institutional culture that are deeply embedded, consciously or unconsciously, in the values, beliefs, assumptions, behaviours, and systems that motivate people and institutions" (Williams, 2013, p. 111). Like the #black@ accounts, I wanted to provide the students the opportunity to hear their own stories and the stories of others, listening to others during the individual and focus group interviews as a way of empowering them to share their counter-narratives to debunk the dominant narrative that "distorts and silences the experiences of people of colour" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002, p. 29).

As a practitioner-researcher examining my practice, I recognised the value of experiential knowledge, where the study subjects learn from being self-reflexive about their world and their lived experience (Stinson, 2008; Reason, 1994). I also acknowledge the recursive process in this investigation of the lived experience in real-time, aiming to bring about change that unmasks unjust discourses and disparate power relations within the institution (Kemmis & Wilkinson, 1998). By engaging an interpretivist social constructivist paradigm, this qualitative study allowed a deep examination of the participants' interpretation of their subjective experiences to unveil the shared experiences of a phenomenon -- being students of colour at a predominantly White affluent independent boarding school (Charmaz, 2014). The social constructivist paradigm suited the study as I sought to understand my practice and analyse the participants' subjective perceptions of their experiences. The approach informs and guides the research, allowing me to self-reflect on my position and privileges.

This study employed a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) oriented toward interpreting the perceptions of students of colour and their understanding of the world they live in. It placed the students' voices and their narrative accounts of their lived experiences at the centre as they reflected upon how they navigated the different social spaces within an independent school where they were not part of the dominant group. It is, therefore, an apt epistemological framework that illuminates

the systems and structures at work and supports meaningful and strategic change initiatives.

As a researcher embedded at the research site, I had to be cognizant of my role as an interpreter of the data while also recognizing the dynamics of power, authority, and domination. This meant my observations and data analysis also needed to speak to the visibility of power hierarchies and the opportunities my practice allowed me to access (Martinez, 2020). As an administrator responsible for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, Belonging, and Justice at the research site, I lead the school's equity and inclusion programs and address situations where individuals have experienced harm. I work with students, teachers, administrators, families, and the Board of Trustees to foster community and belonging and develop and administer institutional partnerships that further the school's mission. I also partner with different stakeholders in creating opportunities to deepen and expand the institution's meaningful commitment to inclusive excellence through programming and promoting diversity and inclusion initiatives within the school to move the trajectory toward sustaining an inclusive, equitable, and just school community. In this role, I also advocate for and form part of a team that mediates and uses restorative practice when bias incidents that malign students from marginalized groups, including students of colour, happen on campus (Hopkins, 2012).

This study sought to uncover new knowledge to illuminate creative alternatives to the constructed epistemologies in this education context and expose the underlying political dimensions that will inform future policy discussions. This study's use of the Critical Race Theory analytical framework placed race at the centre. It challenged the normative assumptions of race that promote racial neutrality and colourblind understanding while normalizing hegemonic racial privilege and whiteness. The focus on dialogue is also compatible with the Critical Race Theory analytical framework that focuses on counter-storytelling to decentralise the racially influenced normative discourse. CRT values the storytelling of the individual experience; thus, counter-storytelling gives

voice to the historically marginalised experiences that challenge the majoritarian narratives of racial privilege (Stinson, 2008; Solózarno & Yosso, 2002). The utility of CRT as an analytical framework foregrounded the permanent and endemic nature of race in U.S. society and culture and the negative consequences of racism and discrimination in the schooling experience of historically marginalised students of colour. Personal narratives and anecdotes shared during interviews served as valid forms of evidence to document perceptions of inequities, isolation, and alienation. The counter-narrative in this inquiry overturned the political dimension that becomes subdued when unexamined factors maintain exclusionary hegemonic practices that isolate and marginalize students of colour. The study placed the voices of the students of colour at the centre and thus examined the hegemonic practices and boundaries perpetuating inequality and alienation.

The inquiry illuminated interests, structures, and systems at work to name and remedy problems by highlighting the limits and exposing the political dynamics to support social change (Davis & Harrison, 2013; Charmaz, 2017). By its very nature, grounded theory is a transformative paradigm that spurs critical analysis and curtails any possibility of advocacy and pre-emptive exegesis informed by my role as a practitioner-researcher (Charmaz, 2017). My position as a practitioner-research blurred the power barriers between the researcher and the researched in an open-ended method that systematically instructed the analytical process.

As such, this critical inquiry aimed to find ways to inform my practice and to help the school advance the inclusive process as the institution progresses towards its strategic vision of embedding the practice of equity, inclusion, and belonging in all systems of operation and creating a learning environment where all students thrive. I wanted the research to inform practice and actualise the institution's strategic goals of meaningful, inclusive practice that extends beyond numerical diversity and ensures belonging and relevance for all community members while also embracing and understanding the dynamic nature of

the field of diversity, equality, and inclusion. I set out to generate a deeper understanding and analyse the participants' perceptions of their lived experiences as students of colour at a predominantly White independent boarding school.

4.2 Research design

This project is a qualitative study that explored students' perceptions of their lived experiences to understand better the constructs they summon to become resilient in academic and social spaces where they are a numerical minority and a subaltern group. The research design I utilised a dialogue-oriented methodology focused on the students' understanding of self as they reflected upon their academic resilience. I used a purposive sampling of students of colour at a singular research site, aiming for transferability and establishing credibility in similar schools because of the normalised sociocultural discourse played out in the U.S. educational context (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Gaztambide-Fernández, 2009; Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019; Warikoo, 2010; Warikoo, 2017). Therefore, I aimed to dig in and go for an in-depth analysis to identify the systems and structures in place. I intentionally worked not to obscure the heterogeneity of the students of colour in the sample (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2001).

4.3 Research site

The site of this project was an elite independent college preparatory (grades 9 to 12 – ages 14 to 19) co-ed American boarding school with a diverse student body hailing from close to 40 different countries, including the USA. The student demographics at the school covered diverse racial, ethnic, geographic, cultural, socio-economic, and religious backgrounds. The school was an idyllic replica of a liberal arts college set on a sprawling campus and was a cosmopolitan oasis nested in an affluent, culturally homogeneous (majority White) suburb near a major U.S city. Close to half of the student population commuted and 80% of came from families that could pay tuition without receiving financial

assistance from the school. In contrast, the other half were boarders and a mix of international and domestic students from other cities and states, most of whom were students of colour and lived in a structured residential program. While most international students came from Southeast Asia, there was also a strong presence of students from Europe, Africa, Canada, and South and Central America.

The school's mission intentionally challenged the profoundly ingrained legacy of exclusion and a culture of symbolic compositional diversity that solely focused on representative groups in the student body. While the school superficially subscribes to the elitist ivory tower image, it has intentionally committed to providing financial assistance to give access to a diverse student demographic with academic potential. It provides access to small rigorous classes and close personal interaction with instructors who are academic mentors and advisors who nurture the students' intellectual pursuits, coaches, and college counsellors. Despite the school's best intentions to promote global citizenship, community engagement, and efforts geared towards the true integration of students in this multicultural setting, students tended to gravitate towards peers of similar backgrounds, thus creating social enclaves within the school that were defined by race, nationality, and socioeconomic status (Tatum, 1997; Warikoo, 2010). The residential program purposefully engages the diverse voices in the student population through programming that exposes students to multiple perspectives in roommate assignments and hosts guest lectures and other open activities. The conception of diversity, equity, and inclusion advances principles of fair treatment and restitution for past injustices as an ongoing means of advancing an equal American society (Williams, 2013).

4.4 Ethical considerations

I recognise the ethical complexity of my role as a practitioner-researcher at the research site. As a result, I had to guard against defamation to the school by verifying information with the appropriate personnel and asking

for permission before distributing any information. At the same time, I had to safeguard the confidentiality of information shared in the study by using pseudonyms. Also, there was no coercion, nor did participation or refusal have a bearing on course assessment. I teach an ungraded class to promote the school's mission by exploring individual and community wellness. Wellness includes all aspects of one's being -- physical, social, mental, emotional, environmental, and spiritual. The wellness program spans all grade levels (grades 9 through 12 – ages 14 to 19), adjusting the depth of discourse and discussion of various life skills, health and wellness issues, and other concerns related to adolescent development.

In my 16 years as a diversity, equity, justice, and belonging practitioner providing pastoral care, structure, and emotional support to students, I counselled many students of colour to help them experience a sense of belonging and relevance in the school. I also intervened on behalf of students of colour through restorative practice when they felt isolated or alienated and, at times, harmed by the words and actions of instructors and peers of different racial and cultural backgrounds. Therefore, I had already established confidence and trust with the students I interviewed; they saw me as another person of colour whose role entailed providing support and creating a welcoming environment. Therefore, I needed to manage my relationship with those who participated in the study.

As a Black educator who has experienced marginalisation and isolation in my educational journey, I was keenly aware of the need for schools to identify and create safe spaces that nurture and deepen consciousness about identity and self-efficacy for marginalised groups and help students of colour form networks outside their own racial and cultural identity groups. I was also aware of the immediate impact this research has in advancing the educational value of meaningful equity, diversity, and inclusion practice in schools as they prepare students for a connected multicultural society. My reality of working at an independent college preparatory boarding school prompted me to investigate ways to empower students and nurture deeper self-awareness before they

advance to higher education (Jack, 2014). Also, educational institutions must look at meaningful ways to create welcoming learning spaces where all students feel affirmed and experience a sense of belonging (Brown, 2018; Hackett & Hogg, 2014; Herr, 1999; Jack, 2014; Shapiro, 2019).

4.5 Sampling

Purposive sampling (Silverman, 2000) in this context meant that I had to identify students of colour who could provide the specific data I was looking for. Hence, I targeted students that had been at the school for three to four years and could offer more depth in their reflections in this narrative inquiry. The sample comprised students in grades 11 and 12 (ages 17 to 19). Because students of colour are a numerical minority in independent schools and specifically at the research site, I recruited openly among them for volunteers to participate in the study. After verbally briefing them about my research, I sent the initial email invitation to 35 students of colour over 17. Given the small number of students of colour over 16 at the school, I could not turn away any volunteers from participating in the study in some capacity, whether in interviews or focus groups.

Sampling was done to ascertain that the sample group is a cross-section of ages and gender identities. Several students who had verbally indicated their willingness to participate did not respond to the formal email invitation. I decided to wait to follow up with them lest they see it as coercion. As an educator at a boarding school, I lived in an apartment attached to a girls' dormitory. I got familiar with many girls in residence, where I also served as a dorm parent among my other pastoral duties at the school. There were also occasions of opportunistic sampling where I would follow up on a conversation with students or recent graduates of colour. On all occasions, I asked participants to complete the consent form, where they voluntarily agreed to participate in the study.

Participants had a right to withdraw without giving a reason; however, I asked that they do so within two weeks of the interview to ensure their data could be removed before analysis. Since students of

colour are a numerical minority group in the school, I sent invitations after verbally inviting them to participate in the research and offering to send them a copy of the information sheet to review before signing the consent form. Here is an excerpt of the invitation and participant information packet I sent out:

> My name is Lusanda Mayikana, and I am a Ph.D. student at Lancaster University. I invite you to participate in a research study on students' ability to navigate the academic and social landscape at a selective, academically rigorous independent school.
>
> Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part or not.
>
> **What is the study about?**
>
> This study explores the students' self-understanding as they negotiate academic and social norms at a selective, academically rigorous independent school. The study will investigate the students' perceptions of the academic and social challenges they face and if their experiences influence their academic pursuits and their ability to stay connected with peers. In interviews and focus groups, participants in the study will reflect upon the resources they access to address any challenges encountered in their environment (academic and social) and if they impact the students' ability to attain their academic goals and connect with their peers.
>
> **Why have I been invited?**
>
> I have approached you because I am interested in learning about the resources you use to address challenges in your environment (academic and social). I am curious to learn about the impact of these resources and strategies on your ability to attain your academic goals and if the challenges influence your ability to feel connected to your peers.
>
> I would be very grateful if you would participate in this study.

I reminded all participants that they could only sign the consent sheet after thoroughly considering participation and did not feel coerced. Because all of them were over 16, there was no need for parental consent.

Apart from managing relationships, the focus groups also materialised under opportunistic circumstances within a boarding school context. I also wanted fresh perspectives on the work I was doing in this research. I looked for opportunities for a generative and focused discussion while also observing group dynamics and interaction in a setting where the students had less inhibition in the presence of their peers. The population sample of students who participated in the study

included students of colour from racial and linguistic minority groups within the school. It consisted of 9 Black (African American) students, 5 Latino/a/x students, 1 Multiracial student, four students from Southeast Asia, and 1 Latina alumna.

The population of the student demographics invited to participate included Black and African American students, Latinx students of Mexican heritage, Asian American students of Korean, Chinese, and South Asian heritage, and multiracial and international students mainly from Southeast Asia, Mexico, and Canada. I assured the students participating in the study of the confidentiality of their contributions and that participation was entirely voluntary. Therefore, there was no coercion, nor did participation or refusal have a bearing on course assessment. The participant information sheet and the consent form unequivocally stipulated that only I, the researcher conducting this study, could access the data they shared with me. I would listen to and manually transcribe the recordings and produce a written record of what was discussed to analyse the data. I assured the participants that I would remove any personal information and use pseudonyms for all participants in the study. Also, I purposefully did not select the same students who participated in the individual interviews to participate in focus group interviews.

4.6 Data collection

I began my data collection after I received approval from the Research Ethics Committee at Lancaster University in 2016. I also received permission to conduct the research at the school where I live and work (it is a boarding school where housing for teachers is provided on campus in apartments attached to dormitories or free-standing housing on campus). Permission was obtained after a conversation with members of the senior administrative team. In a follow-up email to the team, I emphasized the importance of the research in informing my role as the resident diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging practitioner at the school and in fulfilling the stipulations of the school's mission.

After each of the individual semi-structured interviews, I would go back and listen to the recording and take note of questions I would use in follow-up interviews as I sought more depth in the participants' responses. Consequently, I ended up with three follow-up interviews seeking to find better clarity in the participants' responses and allowing them to take ownership of their knowledge as they shared their understanding of their experiences. I also used field notes to accompany the data collected through interviews, where I captured non-verbal cues that extended beyond the verbal responses to the interview questions.

The interview questions were consistent with research on intergroup relations (Zuniga, Nagda, Chesler, & Cytron-Walker, 2007; Zuniga, Lopez, & Ford, 2015). I used the questions to explore students' perceptions of themselves concerning an independent school's academic and social challenges. The questions also probed the role played by the students' social identities, the values instilled at home, and how they were reinforced within the educational setting. The semi-structured interviews accentuated elements of socialisation that the students of colour access and focused on themes related to (1) identity engagement and influence of home culture, (2) comfort in communicating with people from other racial and ethnic groups, (3) motivation to bridge differences, (4) cognitive empathy (ability to see issues from different points of view), (5) academic engagement and resilience, (6) learning opportunities outside the classroom, (7) conflict resolution skills, (8) attitudes towards political issues, (9) belief in the individual agency to facilitate institutional and societal change (Zuniga et al., 2007).

This research engaged focus group interviews to generate narrative data in a focused discussion while also observing group dynamics and interaction in a setting where the students had less inhibition in the presence of their peers. Focus group interviews discussed open-ended questions addressing issues about (1) group identity and relationships, (2) academic experiences, (3) social, academic, and political perspectives, (4) participation and engagement on campus, (5) group attitudes and experiences on campus, (6)

awareness of actions directed by self and others, (7) as well as acting collaboratively with others (Zuniga et al., 2007).

Using personal narratives and anecdotes in interviews was valid evidence to document the students' perceptions of inequities and alienation. The study positioned the voices of the students of colour at the centre as necessary for a complete analysis of the educational system to examine the exclusionary hegemonic practices that isolate and marginalize students of colour and privilege power as the property of the dominant group (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Giroux, 1983).

Thus, negotiating relationships with the participants as a researcher, I had to redefine my role and began each interview session with,

> Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this interview. As I mentioned in the information packet, I am a Ph.D. student at Lancaster University. My research focuses on the students' ability to negotiate and navigate the academic and social landscape of a very selective and academically rigorous independent school. My study seeks to explore the students' understanding of self, how they have been able to negotiate academic and social norms, and how they have built resilience. I will ask you questions that examine the influences that have impacted your resilience by looking at your home culture, upbringing, and the support you get from home for the last four years of high school.

The individual one-to-one semi-structured interviews were carried out at mutually agreed-upon locations and times. The participant chose interview sites to ensure confidentiality if the participant wished to avoid being observed with the researcher. The interviews were conducted in classrooms and dormitory common spaces where the participants felt at ease, so I also had to prepare for interruptions as these are shared spaces. I was also cognizant of my role in the school, where students sought my attention for various reasons. Also, I had to use an interview protocol with questions guided by my overarching research question to elicit more nuanced responses (Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Additionally, it is essential to note that the participants were interviewed in the final eight weeks before graduating from high school, during which they had already started the process of separation from the school.

I used the semi-structured interview as a responsive data collection method that allowed the students to tell their narratives to

reclaim their being and belonging in a space (Collins, 2018; Ravitch & Carl, 2016; Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Segalo, 2020). The individual interviews were set up such that the participant would sit across the table with the audio recording device visibly in sight while they observed me take notes. My field notes recorded some physical observations about the general demeanour and atmosphere during the interview. To do this, I needed to gain the trust of the participants, who were very energized at the possibility of their contributions to the research informing practice and benefitting future students of colour at the school. I collected data over two and a half years in semi-structured interviews that lasted between forty-five minutes and 1 hour with each of the sixteen participants and one-hour focus group interviews with three participants who did not participate in the semi-structured interviews.

On the other hand, the focus group interviews were conducted with the participants seated around a big table. I ensured that participants were interviewed in a small group of people with whom they felt comfortable having candid conversations. During the focus group interviews, I would pose a question and let the participants carry the conversation, as they would tag each other with follow-up questions while I was taking notes. This allowed them to have a much more meaningful conversation than simply answering questions as they shared and reflected upon some experiences and home values they felt were contested or reinforced in their interactions with other actors within the school context. I would only step back in to keep the conversation focused. Sometimes, I had to pause the audio recording when someone else walked in and was not part of the original group that consented to participate in the interview.

I asked the participants in the focus groups not to disclose information outside of the focus group and to anyone not involved in the focus group without the relevant person's permission. Focus groups comprised three participants from a homogenous background -- one focus group with three Latinx girls and another with three Black boys. I also observed elements of group interaction, observing how the students

engaged with each other during the focus group interview and purposely noting the relational and social hierarchies in the groups in my field notes. Ollerenshaw and Cresswell (2002) argue that narrative inquiry gives voice to students, thus validating their lived experiences. When students shared stories about experiencing school, they collaborated with educators in constructing inclusive school experiences.

I would be remiss not to note that I had to build a strategy around time constraints. As a result, I would conduct focus group interviews under opportunistic circumstances when I happened to walk into a group of students from the same demographic and would ask if I could interview them about my research. My ongoing rapport with the students was a legitimate part of my methodology in what became an ethnographic action study. I played an ongoing role with different cohorts in the residential program, giving the inquiry rigor and more information. Even when I informally participated in conversations with the students, I found that I continued being a researcher and had to take care to refrain from writing in my reflections without the expressed permission of the students involved. I engaged in the cumulative ongoing analysis that informed the process and the individual follow-up interviews, looking back at data collected in earlier interviews.

The implications of the collaborative effort in the narrative inquiry entailed negotiating relationships between the researcher and the participants to eliminate possible gaps between the narrative told and the narrative reported (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The process included explaining the purpose of the inquiry to the participants, negotiating transitions from gathering information to writing the story, and arranging ways to intermingle with participants in the study. I strategically gathered data a few weeks before the end of their 12th-grade year on their way out of secondary school. All the participants were familiar with me in my capacity as the diversity, equity, and inclusion practitioner at the school. My intentionality in the late scheduling capitalized on the students' perspectives as they prepared to separate from the institution. I saw this timing as reasonable when the students prepared to disengage

from school. In the process, I also needed to redefine my role, which often involved supporting and creating opportunities to deepen and expand the institution's meaningful commitment to inclusive excellence. It is characterized by advocating and mediating when students of colour feel maligned.

4.7 Data Analysis

With the social justice orientation of my research, my data analysis process engaged Critical Race Theory as an analytical framework that probes systems and structures that produce and reify inequities to learn how students interpret their thoughts, feelings, and actions. A CRT analysis theorises issues such as language, immigration, ethnicity, culture, identity, phenotype, and sexuality (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Solórzano & Delgado Bernal, 2000; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). The CRT analytical framework also aligns with Charmaz's (2014) grounded theory, as my analytical notes captured emerging thoughts and themes about the school climate throughout the data collection process. Reflexive reading (Mason, 2018) locates the researcher and their interaction with participants as part of the data generated. As a practitioner-researcher, I collected data intermittently for two and a half years. I struggled to remove and distance myself from data generation and interpretation. Subsequently, I collected and analysed data simultaneously, creating analytic codes and categories developed from the data.

The interaction between the researcher and participants in this practitioner research also meant that the researcher's perspective was part of the process. The constant comparison method (Charmaz, 2014) also helped me identify common trends and discrepancies in the individual reflections shared by participants. I developed clusters of meaning from significant statements in the interview transcripts. I highlighted significant sentences, statements, expressions, and quotes that explained how the participants experienced and negotiated the school discourses, developing clusters of meaning from significant statements (Saldaña, 2013). There was no separation between

generating data and the interpretation process. I would look for patterns in telling the participants' stories and would be curious about the absences and what was not said in the interviews (Mason, 2018). I agonized over the implications of the omissions and the participants' motivation to focus on their social capital in their reflections.

Qualitative data analysis retains and foregrounds contextual factors that frame the conclusions based on a robust methodology and sensitivity to the changing contexts and situations involving participants (Chowdhury, 2015). My analytical process involved an iterative process of data condensation, sorting and categorizing, explaining, and considering the context of the inquiry that required intellectual, physical, and emotional effort (Chowdhury, 2015). As a practitioner-researcher, I needed to observe and interpret the respondents' attitudes and behaviours. I had to be keenly attentive to all the contextual considerations that are part of the meaning-making processes informing the data.

4.7.1 Coding

In managing data, I created and organised files for data and then read through the data transcripts, made notes along the margins, and formed initial codes. Process coding (Saldaña, 2013, 2016) is consistent with the focus on actions and processes in grounded theory's open, axial, and selective coding (Creswell, 2007). Using open coding, I generated categories and proceeded to link categories around conceptual categories in axial coding (Creswell, 2007). I concluded the process by developing thematic categories that emerged while reading the transcripts and listening to the recorded interviews.

The thematic codes I used related to:

- Racial and ethnic identity strengths
- Stories about racial identity learned from home
- Peer relationships
- Peer support
- Faculty (teacher) mentors

- Sense of belonging
- Code-switching – ways of speaking and the languages used at home and school (with peers and teachers)
- Straddling home and school cultures
- The ability to navigate tensions
- Breaking barriers and traversing boundaries
- Micro-aggressions and racial conflict at school and online
- Insecurities and doubts
- Affirmations
- School's diversity mission

These were the emergent themes I arrived at as I went back and read over the data transcripts and found common threads among the different cohorts of participants' responses. While trying to follow the guidance of examining the personal experiences in the participants' narratives, as well as their interactions with other people, I was careful not to decentre and silence the participants' lived experiences that run contrary to the dominant narrative of benevolence towards the students of colour from underserved communities.

I formulated meaning units and clustered them into common themes in all transcripts. As noted in the interview participants' responses, I synthesized the emergent themes into in-depth, exhaustive, and structural descriptions of the experiences. In the reflexive position of practitioner-researcher, I also considered how I might have contributed to creating the data collected. Consequently, I had to be sensitive to the social context of the inquiry by looking for details around the intangible factors that are not discernible when data collection is objective and rushed. I wanted to ensure that my approach ensured a holistic understanding of the meaning in the individual participants' narratives, analysing to understand the lived experience and then retelling the story (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). In my analytic process, I took the three-dimensional space approach (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) to understand the participants' personal experiences and interactions with

other people within a predominantly White U.S. independent boarding school. That meant acknowledging the centrality of race throughout the narratives and the disproportionate power dynamics in the narratives of students familiar with American education's structures, hierarchies, and exclusions.

My responsibility as a researcher involved gathering their stories and learning from participants what they experienced and their social experiences as a lens for understanding them (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). I found the notion of re-storying (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) appealing as I reviewed the clusters and identified emerging themes and categories. Re-storying is a "process of gathering stories, analysing them for key elements, and then rewriting the story" (332), providing a causal link among ideas. The students' narratives conveyed what matters to them, their identity and agency, using narratives as "interpretive devices through which [they] represent themselves" (Mason, 2004, p. 165). They shared reflections about the cultural capital accrued during their time as students in independent schools, the acquired knowledge about the social norms that would help them be at ease among the elite and diminish class distinctions as they matriculated to higher education and beyond.

The race-conscious approach revealed that the students had a critical consciousness that allowed them to challenge and deconstruct the systems. I, therefore, engaged a lens that examined how the narratives relayed the participants' personal and social experiences in the students' interactions with other actors at the site. It became imperative to focus on the temporality of the narratives (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002), analysing information about the past experiences of the storytellers, their present experiences, and events and actions they anticipated to occur in the future. As such, I listened to what was not articulated in the students' narratives, covering their perceptions of their four years of high school experience (Mason, 2017). While listening to recordings of the interviews I conducted, I realised that the participants and I were steeped in the narratives of our identities.

While analysing data, it became apparent that I had to narrow the scope and focus my research mainly on the experiences of Black and Latina/o/x participants and exclude the Southeast Asian participants. In a study probing the perceptions of students of colour on how they experienced their racialized identities in dominant spaces, I realized that the international students from Asian nations did not identify themselves as racialised beings and thus did not perceive race to have a bearing on their experiences at the school. Also, their narratives about socialisation in the home focused on something other than race. Above all, most did not share the same socio-economic background as the Black and Latina/o/x participants. As a result, I went back and condensed the thematic codes to focus solely on the Black and Latina/o/x students' experiences.

This chapter presented the research paradigm and methodology underpinning this research. It also outlined the methods employed in generating, analysing and interpreting data. The next chapter will elaborate on the findings of this research.

Chapter 5: A Thematic Presentation of the Findings and Discussion

"Until the lion can tell its own story, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter" – African Proverb.

This chapter provides evidence and a discussion of the key findings of this study. As a practitioner-researcher and educator at an American independent boarding school, this study helped me better understand the need to leverage the cultural knowledge the students of colour bring in navigating predominantly white spaces. It made me pay attention to the role played by unconscious societal structures in the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital. Also, without downplaying the harmful effects of racial isolation and marginalisation, participants in the study demonstrated the strength of the self-determination it takes the students of colour to remain focused on their goals despite setbacks and systemic barriers. The research allowed me to leverage the capital portfolio the students of colour start building up early on and thus focus on the students' possibilities for advancement rather than the problems usually amplified by the deficit lenses that perpetuate racist ideology (Thiers, 2021). Through knowing and being instilled within their families and communities, the students of colour claim agency in using that wisdom to navigate dominant systemic structures to establish a meaningful presence.

This thesis interrogated how the socialised subjectivity of the students of colour, demonstrated in academic resilience and self-advocacy, emanates from the students' cultural knowledge (Yosso, 2005) that influences and structures the students' perceptions and actions to counter the constructed epistemologies in the racialised educational setting. It foregrounded the students' embodied Community Cultural Wealth (Yosso, 2005) and the effects of racial socialisation, which helped the students subvert the impact of alienation and marginalisation on social and academic engagement. The focus on counter-storytelling (Martinez, 2020) highlights embracing their racial identity and stories that hold them up, resisting the temptation to fit into other people's narrative of who they are. Racial socialisation in the home anchors the students of colour in the cultural capital, which helps them

navigate and find success in their academic pursuits and contributes to their resilience despite the racial stress (Yosso, 2005; Stevenson, 2014).

The overarching research question in this study interrogated the aspects of racial socialisation that facilitate the self-efficacy of the students of colour in negotiating community and belonging in predominantly White U.S. Independent schools. It examined the personal narratives that outline the resistance strategies the students of colour in predominantly White independent schools mount in their efforts to navigate the asymmetrical power dynamics and cultural barriers. Sharing the narratives of their lived experiences as racialised beings in independent schools, the participants saw the re-storying of their experiences as pertinent in decentring and countering the dominant narrative. I used the research question to guide a thematic discussion of the key findings in this study. This chapter provides evidence and a discussion of the claims made in the key findings.

5.1 Overview of Findings

This research primarily probed the role played by racial and ethnic socialisation as a form of cultural knowledge embodied by students from non-dominant communities. It examined the contribution of their learned ways of being and knowing to their self-perception and resilience when immersed in educational contexts where they had to negotiate agency in a rigorous academic context and their ability to navigate unwelcoming social spaces. The students' ability to tap into their funds of knowledge (Moll, 2005) and community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005) facilitated their ability to negotiate a sense of belonging and keep their poise despite their daily challenges.

Examining the degree to which the students' learned ways of being helped the students of colour in their attempts to negotiate the academic and social spaces within a predominantly White independent boarding school, the study probed the implications of the students' position as a racial minority and their implicitly subordinated disposition with limited access to resources. Thus, this research examined the

students' lived experiences by focusing on the implications of sustained social injustice and oppressive systems through the analytical framework of the Critical Race Theory tenets of the permanence of race, Whiteness as property, and counter-storytelling within the educational context (Martinez, 2020; Yosso, 2005; Delgado Bernal, 2002; Matsuda, Lawrence, Delgado, & Crenshaw,1993).

The key findings in this research illuminated the need to revisit the diversity rationale and intentionally foster inclusive learning environments in the predominantly White and affluent U.S. independent school communities. To foster an inclusive culture of belonging for students with marginalised identities, it is necessary to probe and address the structural and systemic barriers in place. Conversations with the students of colour in this study revealed the fallacy of pursuing diversity for the benefit of the White dominant class without a commitment to creating a supportive learning environment where all students can flourish, feel supported, and experience belonging (Barton, 2021). The racial socialisation the students of colour received in their homes served as a buffer that helped them reorient and adapt when faced with unpleasant encounters with their peers and instructors from different backgrounds. Therefore, promoting and cultivating diversity and inclusion without interrogating the American history of disenfranchisement and racial oppression is not only a disservice to the students of colour who do not enjoy the same access to resources and quality education but to all students who tinker with artificial harmony and never really learn to engage authentically with people from different backgrounds.

The level of mistrust shared by the participants stems from observing how the affluent families were always guaranteed an audience with the school administration in a transactional relationship, where they would threaten to withhold funding dollars when rattled by policy decisions centred on social justice concerns. The students from backgrounds of power and privilege were not challenged to think about the systemic inequalities. Also, assumptions of the students of colour self-segregating when they gathered in affinity group spaces by those

from the majority groups did not grasp the degree of mistrust and sheer exasperation from encounters with prejudice, stereotyping, and insensitive racial comments they heard (Aries & Seider, 2007). Moreover, Black and Latino/a/x students were keenly aware of the cultural diversity among the diverse backgrounds they represented despite being regarded as a homogenous group by members of the majority groups who were unaware of the differences. Social class differences became highlighted in the ability to access financial resources to participate in programming and excluded lower-income students. Consequently, differences in the students' experiences, values, and attitudes sometimes proved a barrier despite their solidarity around their encounters with anti-blackness, stereotyping, prejudice, and insensitive racial comments.

In schools, race-neutral policies, systems, and structures inadvertently promote racial inequality and perpetuate oppressive practices by adopting the colourblind mindset that regards race and racism as irrelevant in post-racial America (Warikoo, 2019). The students of colour deal with the burden of educating peers about cultural insensitivity, social inequality, and oppression. Nevertheless, they bear the scars and the long-term impact of those interactions. Claims of ignorance about the harm caused and expectations to forgive and forget to leave the students of colour hopeless and bitter. An agile approach incorporating cultural competency and humility education is necessary to achieve social cohesion and intercultural understanding among the students. Much like the socialisation in the home, schools also play a socialisation role as purveyors of culture. When there is a misalignment between the school's mission and vision with the aspirations of cultural diversity in practice, fostering a racially diverse school community should include an understanding of privilege, power, and the historical roots of oppression in American society (Warikoo, 2019). Indeed, many White educators never learned about race early on in their lives; thus, facilitating productive conversations about race is a boon that could help improve the racial climate in the schools. The new knowledge uncovered illuminated the salience of an anti-racist framework in future policy

discussions that challenge constructed epistemologies in the U.S. educational setting. It would be a logical fallacy to believe that students of colour in independent schools within the American education context have not experienced any discomfort and marginalisation through policy, programming, curriculum, and student support (Collins, 2018). Therefore, the onus is on the schools to reimagine the structures, policies, and practices. A further examination of the systemic dimensions in this study has implications beyond this research site.

The students' narratives pointed to perceptions of cognitive dissonance in being hyper-visible yet invisible in the dominated spaces within their independent schools. Their disquiet pointed to the duality, the double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) of a Black presence in the context of American racialised societal structures. The students' perception of their presence in these spaces contrasted with their desire to expand their cultural lenses upon entering the independent school world. Sharing the narratives of their lived experiences as racialised beings in independent schools, the participants saw the re-storying of their experiences as pertinent in decentring and countering the dominant narrative. They grappled with proclamations of the diverse and inclusive communities that independent schools have styled themselves to do, yet not acknowledge the complexity of the lived Black experience (Miles, 2019) of bias, stereotypes, and the anti-Blackness in those spaces. There was a marked sense of purpose in sharing their narratives as reframing and retelling a deficit narrative (Leonardo, 2011) and locating the impact of racial inequality in the lived reality of students of colour, particularly Black students. The students' counter-narratives challenged the dominant colourblind ideologies espoused in institutions that prop up hegemonic structures and proclamations of treating all students equally while denying and silencing the persistent degradation the students of colour experience through the verbal jabs and slights from their educators and peers.

This study found that the strong sense of identity and adherence to values instilled at home contributes to the capacity of students of colour

to buffer against and subvert the deleterious impact of alienation and marginalization. The socialisation the students of colour received earlier in their homes had equipped them with the tools to enhance their attempts to negotiate access into and adapt to the elite culture of independent schools and centre their social and academic engagement in an educational journey characterised by timorous efforts to connect with peers. These students' search for meaning was often obviated by the normalised silence about race and having to redefine their lives in ways consistent with the dominant culture. They fought perceptions of inadequacy while negotiating and traversing the invisible cultural and social borders that downplay the absence of affirming images of their culture in the learning space.

Nevertheless, even among the nine Black students interviewed in this study, a clear socioeconomic class distinction amplified the diversity within the Black experience and the need not to treat them as a homogenous group. It was not lost on me that the participants' four years of high school positioned them in the throes of grappling with their perceptions of racial identity while navigating other identity development minefields. While the students' narratives unmask the implications of racial inequality in U.S. society, they also credit the racial socialisation they received in their families and communities before venturing into independent schools. Growing up in the United States, students of colour become familiar with varying levels of otherness in a society where "racism is systematically and psychologically embedded in society [systems and structures], its practices, and institutions" (Hauber-Ozer, Call-Cummings, Hassel-Goodman, Chan, 2021: 2). As such, the students' reflections about resilience pointed to some sayings they heard growing up that helped them to bounce back from any setbacks they experienced, as one of them noted about the internalised aphorisms from his early years.

> "They say things that sound really harsh, but it all comes from a place of them wanting you to succeed" (Stan).

Hence, reading such statements also made me interrogate the context of the experiences and social interactions, probing the intentions, purposes,

and points of view (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) of the people they interacted with. Racial socialisation in the form of verbal expressions (aphorisms) and behaviour models the students shared in the narratives indicated the racial preparation Black children learn to see themselves as members of the Black community. The students' narratives illuminated their parents' emphasis on facets of the Black culture while teaching them how to cope with racial discrimination in society (Stevenson, 2014; Steinbugler, 2015).

Therefore, the in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews illuminated the implications of Yosso's (2005) Community Cultural Wealth that bolstered the students' academic skills and resilience in this research context. The students' resilience was rooted in the racial socialisation they received in the home, which resulted in their ability to adapt and reorient themselves to the circumstances they were confronted with and not lose sight of their goals of accessing social mobility. Utilizing the counter-storytelling methodology as an epistemological framework that places dialogue at the centre, the study uncovered new knowledge to illuminate the students' agility as they leveraged their reorienting and buffering capabilities while unmasking the systemic political dimensions at play in this educational context. Ultimately, they learned to embrace their racial identity as they navigated and negotiated race relations among peers and educators. The students' ability to embrace their racial identity spans several years in their high school career, from when their racial identity does not have as much salience to when it becomes central to their identity as they transition into higher education.

5.2 Narratives about racial identity

This study probed into the role played by unconscious societal structures in the reproduction and distribution of cultural capital and structural advantage that mirror society while also amplifying the synergy between the home and the school. It also illuminated the degree to which the narratives of these students served as a form of resistance and counter-

narrative as they reflected on their timorous efforts to connect with peers, navigate academic discourse, and claim agency in the dominated spaces. In examining factors influencing their courage and determination to persist towards their goals, the study highlighted the significance of racial identity in the students' experience of negotiating belonging and inclusion and the value of personal characteristics that correlate with persistence and perseverance.

Further, the study explored the students' beliefs, experiences, self-perceptions, and factors contributing to their resilience in learning and social environments that are not always affirming and welcoming. The students' narratives captured what mattered as they reflected upon their identities, sense of self, and values (Mason, 2017). In the students' reflections, I gleaned the construction of narratives of their relational selves, understanding their perceptions of identity and agency relationally (Mason, 2017). The context of the students' determination to find success in their educational pursuits and their motivation for social advancement and economic mobility were interwoven in their understanding of their sense of self and their values.

In this study, the students of colour presented narrative accounts of their lived experiences within an American independent boarding school and the challenges they navigated and to which they adapted while focusing on amassing the capital portfolio to help them find success in higher education. The students strongly believed in the power of education to change their lives (Barton, 2021; Hextrum, 2018, 2019). The project found that the students' perceptions problematise a racialissed social narrative that speaks to the U.S. field of independent boarding schools as institutions created by the dominant social classes to inculcate a curriculum corresponding to the dominant class position (Adams, 2005; Warikoo & Deckman, 2014; Petts & Garza, 2021). The students revealed a solid understanding of the pervasive systemic racism that is a permanent component of life in the U.S., where racial identity operates like a natural and essential phenomenon and stands in contrast to the professed commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion. They had a

good grasp of the fluid concept of time in boarding school culture regarding self-reliance and interdependence and their orientation towards outcomes that sometimes complicated their relationships with peers and mentors alike.

The students of colour enter American independent secondary boarding schools equipped with strong self-awareness and well-grounded in racial literacy, the critical coping strategies that give them agency to manage racial tensions. The Collaborative for Academic Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL, 2022) characterises self-awareness as the ability to understand one's emotions, thoughts, behaviours, values, preferences, goals, strengths, challenges, attitudes, and mindsets and how they influence behaviour and choices across contexts. Accordingly, the capacity to recognise their strengths and limitations with a well-grounded sense of purpose and confidence can also be attributed to the racial socialisation the students of colour receive at home. It helps them become conversant with racial literacy, "the ability to read, recast and resolve racially stressful encounters" (Stevenson, 2014: 63). It affords them the courage to persist even when self-doubt sets in in the course of their time in White dominated spaces. Still, this study does not discount the reality of the barriers and challenges in the students' accounts that detail how the students of colour experience their interactions with peers, educators, and adult caregivers in these spaces.

Ostensibly, the students' narratives speak to the racial socialisation they received at home and in their communities as a source of the social agency they needed to navigate and challenge a social environment replete with cultural norms of the elite racial class. Their accounts reflect the "tumultuous upheavals of adolescence" (Steinbugler, 2015, p. 1691) and the agility to navigate the challenges of their social disposition in the American educational context. They reflected on acquiring the norms and behaviour patterns to facilitate community integration. Racial socialisation became an anchor that grounded and helped them reorient themselves when they encountered turbulent

dissonances that threatened to disrupt their progression toward their social and economic mobility goals.

When students enter secondary school at fourteen, their racial identity development has low salience (Helms, 1990; Cross, 1994). Developmentally, the students of colour are still at the stage where they absorb many beliefs and values of the dominant White culture and struggle with the de-emphasis of their racial group (Helms, 1990; 2007). The early years of secondary school coincide with the *encounter* stage of the Nigriscence model (Sellers, 2003; Cross, 2021). Black students find themselves confronted with experiences that have them interrogate their identity during the encounter stage as they try to fit in with their peers and adapt to a new environment. With the realisation of the stark contrast in socio-economic class in the world they have entered, they feel unwelcome and uncomfortable at school because of certain aspects of their identity, particularly their racial identity and socio-economic class. This student reflected on her awareness of her racial identity:

> I guess, when I first came here, I was not really aware of race and discrimination. Like I knew it was a thing but I was never super into it, and it was just kinda, "I'm gonna push through. Whatever happens, happens." And then when I got to this school, it just kind of kept coming and slapping me in the face, and I was like, "I really don't like this." Or maybe I just became more aware of it, because I was older, one of the two. But then it stopped being about me being Black and just kind of minorities as a whole. … And when they would complain about things, I'd just kind of wonder, "Why is this going on?" (Chloe)

Typical of the encounter stage, in the early years of secondary school, the students of colour experience psychological distress as race becomes a relevant part of the self-concept. The encounter set them back as they were attracted to a diverse independent school with a willingness to reconsider the significance of race and the potential for identity affirmation in other students of colour. According to Helms (1990), racial identity is a "sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular racial group" (3). The transition to secondary school also coincides with the youth's attempt to gain a sense of self-worth, approval, power, material goods, and money by emulating the sociocultural and

institutional standards of the dominant culture (Cross, 1994). They then discover a worldview that de-emphasizes the importance of racial identity yet presents a dissonance that does not acknowledge the complexity of their racial experiences (Steinbugler, 2015). The encounter with the affluence of independent school peers slams the students of colour from a low socioeconomic background with a double culture shock in all the complexities of their racial identity development. The students of colour in the study noted that before attending independent schools:

> I was surrounded by people that looked like and spoke the same languages that I did. My low-income neighbourhood consisted of a majority of Hispanics that had similar experiences to that of my family of immigrants. (Laurie)

> This whole racial identity wasn't a big thing until I came to this city. … I didn't really notice my African-Americanness until I came here. And specifically, when I came to this school because, uhm, the environment here wasn't unlike the other state where I grew up. It was diverse but mostly White students. Here, it's like we pay attention to so many things. I started noticing things I hadn't noticed before. I think that's what really shaped my experience. (Stan)

> The first big difference that hit me was the incredible difference in socioeconomic status. This presented itself in the clothes the students wore, the cars that were on campus, and the jobs that the parents of the students had. In my hometown, people would travel and visit family and not really leisure. I would hear students talk about vacations that they had taken or would be taking to Europe and tropical islands. Questions about what I was doing over break always made me feel super uncomfortable because the break was the time I got to spend at home with my family and we did not really travel for fun. (Laurie)

Developmentally, students of colour transition to secondary school before their racial consciousness solidifies, mainly if they grow up in homogenous communities. This is likely the case with students from families with limited financial means. Their interracial encounters with majority White peers weaken their racial group identification. They feel detached from their culture and immersed in an environment where they feel isolated because there are few people of colour. The Black students' reflections about racial identity informed by the family culture characterized an awareness of racial inequality in American society picked up at an early age. Parental messages concerning racial identity

influenced their emerging sense of self, values, and beliefs as they modelled and influenced their children's disposition towards self and others (Demo & Hughes, 1990). On the other hand, school exposed them to a dissonant racial context as they received prejudiced messages and outgroup norms, values, and attitudes.

Judy's (pseudonym) recollection of her transition to secondary school speaks to her self-awareness and agility upon realising that she would have to get herself "out there and talk to people that were different" because she did not have the option to gravitate towards comfort.

> When I first came to this school, I went through a culture shock because there were so many people that didn't look like me. There are so few people that look like me and speak Spanish as well. … so when I came here, I did go through a bit of a shock. At first, I was scared, I would look around, and … I didn't see a single face that looked like me, and that was new. I didn't have the same experience of relatability that everyone had. Everyone grew up around each other or almost knew or had the same culture. … There's a lot of White people here, and there aren't a lot of Black people in comparison to those large populations, but .... There aren't a lot of Hispanics so when I was looking at that I saw how you gravitate towards people you know and what's familiar to you at first when you transition, and I didn't have that first. So I was kind of forced to get myself out there and talk to people that were different from me because I didn't have the option to gravitate towards comfort, and I think that my first year at this school is really what kind of made me who I am today and how I am comfortable communicating with people who are different from me, not just race and ethnicity or culture or language but kind of beliefs, belief systems, religions, and political views. (Judy)

Upon realizing she was surrounded by peers different from her, Judy resolved on a subtle reorientation and self-definition to help her adapt and make the best of her new environment (Fox, 2022). Her self-awareness about her values and goals for attending the predominantly White elite independent school kick-started her agility while negotiating the spaces she occupied. She also admitted to the psychological effect of the early encounters at the school. She noted, "… freshman year, I got emotional very easily, and I still do, and it didn't allow me from having those conversations as efficiently and effectively as now." As she was getting ready to transition to higher education, Judy took stock of her accumulated capital portfolio while negotiating a sense of belonging and reclaiming agency in her time at the school. She attributed the role her parents played to their desire to see her find success. Judy's parents

instilled values that made her aspire to be someone with a “dignified and successful career.” She wanted to be influential, so she had to extend herself beyond what she was comfortable with. She had to learn to talk to people who were different from her. She took Mandarin Chinese because she wanted to learn to speak to her roommate from China and realised she had to talk to more Asian people, even if they were not Chinese, to be aware of their cultures. She did not want to be culturally insensitive and ignorant because she had experienced the ignorance of others. Judy felt secure in her racial identity and did not appreciate the negative comments, generalisations, and stereotypes she heard from people who did not know about her culture. Anchored in her racial self-efficacy, she felt secure because she

> … had so many people who have motivated me to be better. I have the base level of confidence because I know I don’t have anything to lose right now because I wouldn’t have had this opportunity if I didn’t take a risk. (Judy)

She knew getting an education was the only way to get her family out of their current situation, and she was willing to overcome all the challenges. Like most students of colour in independent schools, Judy knew she carried many more burdens into her academic experiences than her White counterparts. She ponders:

> While at this school I have had the opportunity to explore my interests and challenge myself both academically and socially. Throughout my four years I realized my passion for human rights, and furthermore, immigration rights. This stems largely from my experiences as a daughter of immigrants and a person of colour, but it also stems from the opportunities I have had here to join clubs and affinity groups, and eventually lead them. I see myself helping immigrants and those that fall behind in the United States because they are not knowledgeable about laws and resources that could help them. Therefore, pre-law seems like the best fit for me, although that is not set in stone. (Judy)

Poised to transition to higher education, Judy’s assertion of her identity as a daughter of immigrants and determination to help “immigrants and those that fall behind in the United States” is rooted in the self-consciousness she has found in encounters with microaggressive behaviour and taunts by her peers. Not only has Judy endured the distress of discrimination, microaggressions, feelings of isolation, and the

fear of her parents getting deported, but she has also found her voice, embodies a sense of purpose, and embraces her intersecting identities as a student of colour and a daughter of immigrants. She is determined to rise and represent those immigrants like her family, whose social status is maligned and constantly threatened.

5.3 Racial socialisation

The students' racial orientation at home prepared them to situate themselves as racial beings navigating American symbolic boundaries. The parental messages about what it means to be Black in America became a racially defined status that influenced the students' sense of self, values, and beliefs. They had learned about the significance of racial boundaries and that society reinforces their subordinated positionality through personal and social interactions. However, despite the preparation, the students' accounts illuminated the cognitive dissonance from discovering worldviews informed by stereotypes that minimize their self-worth and diminish the salience of their racial identity development (Steinbugler, 2015).

Racial socialisation in Black families entails building self-respect and pride concerning their racial identity. It prepares them for the incompatible racial contexts that expose them to prejudiced expressions of group norms, values, and attitudes (Anderson et al., 2018; Anderson et al., 2019; Cabrera, 2018). The Black students in this study spoke of their families' big influence in forming their identity. Kaylee (pseudonym) attributed her strong sense of identity to her family and everyone around her. In middle school, she learned to embrace her African American heritage in an all-African American friendship group. She found it an affirming space that led her to try wearing her hair naturally, and they helped her understand that her natural hair was a vital element of her identity that she should not be afraid to show. Her parents had instilled pride in embracing her physical likeness, identity, and culture. Growing up in a racially stratified American society, students of colour learn the basics about their identity and background when they are young. As a

result, Kaylee was frustrated by peers whose worldview was more idealistic about egalitarianism and freedom within the United States context. Because experiences of racial injustice were not part of their reality, they would deny and challenge the veracity of the accounts of students of colour and recounted,

> … they try to overlook their privilege, and they assume that everyone has it and assume that people aren't treated in an unjust way like you would see or you would read. And they just assume that these things aren't happening because it's not happening to them. (Kaylee)

Students of colour like Kaylee become frustrated with peers and educators who are dismissive of their experiences. Their disappointment with the ineffective intervention by the school's administration render the students of colour invisible as their lived experiences deviate from the norm that privileges the experiences of the majority. The persistent unresolved discrimination experienced by the students of colour further fuels their mistrust and perception that failure to address acts of racism accommodates the sensibilities of the white, affluent majority.

In her reflections about socialisation at home, Chloe shares that her mother's education is mainly focused on teaching her about facts and reality, not opinions, in her analyses of politics and the implications of legislation. Her guidance instructs Chloe on how to be a Black woman. She sees her as a "driving force and that knowledge vessel" that taught her to be independent and mused,

> I think it's very difficult, especially in America, and most likely in other places in the world, to be a Black woman, especially since so many places I guess are really into anti-blackness right now. … But to be dark-skinned and a woman, it's automatically a big deal. So you have the issue of being Black abd then you have the issue of being a woman, and it's like you sink or swim. And so my mom never said we sink. So, you know we swim.That's what we do. Every once in a while you take a break and float, but we get back to it. (Chloe)

Raised by a single mother who had to fend for herself, Chloe learned early in life that giving up, and self-pity is not an option. The mother's influence on her lets her claim her agency because she knows the odds are stacked against her. Experiencing racism and anti-blackness taught her the value of building coalitions and solidarity among students of

colour. “Rich White kids” were a problem and a solution for her. She saw the solution as mitigating a cycle of ill-treating and discriminating against people of colour. Hence, she saw her affluent white peers as heirs and “movers and shakers” of the economy in the future and saw her intervention as providing long-term solutions through sharing stories and cultivating empathy.

Parents emphasise various facets of Black culture and teach their children to cope with racial discrimination in mainstream society (Steinbugler, 2015). Racial socialisation in verbal expressions (aphorisms) and the behaviour models the students shared in the narratives indicated the racial preparation Black children internalise to see themselves as members of the Black community. The students acquired racial literacy in the subtle and overt messages they received from their parents and communities, thus forming a schema of coping strategies that were recalled in encounters of racial tension, bias, and prejudice in school. Therefore, the students attributed their perseverance to the many aphorisms they had heard throughout their early years, modelled by adult caregivers in their home cultures. Here are a few examples of such sayings:

> You are Black. You have to work twice as hard to get half the way. (Stan)
>
> … as a minority in America, always have to work 10 times harder to be considered on a similar plane (Ethan)
>
> So, wherever you’re at, hold strong. If you’re in a tough situation, remember where you came from. Remember your roots. That’s what we need. Stay focused, have a strong foundation, and keep your balance. … you have to have a good heart to survive. It’s a cold world. (Cassie)
>
> “Hey, don’t stress yourself out, we’re gonna love you regardless. Get the grades you can. Push to what you can do and just let God and everything do the rest.” (Kaylee)

The students recall these sayings to summon their courage to face adversity. They understand the emotional cost and hurdles they must jump through to access the culture of the elites (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019). Belonging within the elite academic space requires “the

ability to approximate the markers of whiteness" (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019, p. 723). Therefore, in the elite spaces where race operates as an exclusionary force, the students of colour work hard to build trust with those around them and push through the challenges and barriers to realise their aspirations.

In the interviews I conducted as the students were getting ready to matriculate from high school, I was struck by the students' determination not to reflect upon their rough transition to high school and the dissonance that transition presented to their identity at age fourteen. The students and I, as a practitioner-researcher, were keenly conscious of the burden of a minoritised identity in the space where the interviews took place. Thus, we found ourselves stuck in performing our respective roles as people of colour at a predominantly White institution and the reality of our racial positionality in the space. In this regard, I reflected on conversations with Ethan (pseudonym) to present a fuller picture of the breadth and depth of his reflections. In my notes after one of the interviews with Ethan, I wrote:

> In the whole recording, Ethan was determined to steer clear of any deficit assumptions associated with students of colour in elite independent schools, a deliberate attempt not to be boxed into the stereotype threat to the extent that his interview sounds more like what one would find in the glossy marketing literature of the school. Ethan's narrative in this interview refutes the threat seen as consciously embracing and embodying the threat of living up to the negative stereotype about one's racial group's intellectual ability and self-concept. In his accounts of social interactions, Ethan speaks to Steele's (2010) stereotype/identity threat that leads him to think of ways to make sure that his identity is "rolled out" in a manner that is not perceived as threatening to others. Claude Steele's (1997) theory of Stereotype Vulnerability refers to the experience of being in a situation where one recognizes that a negative stereotype about one's group applies to oneself. The stereotype threat affects students with skills and self-confidence associated with the academic domain (Steele, 1997). The structural and social threat ingrained in the consciousness of racially minoritized students threatens to devalue whatever identity they have forged about themselves and their academic abilities. Steele (1997) views the identification process as an important step to self-definition for Black students, maintaining that how students see themselves and regard the activities on which they base their self-esteem is important for academic success. Steele (1992) asserts that treating a student as a valued person with good prospects is the answer and maintains that the school should foster a belief that school achievement can be a promising basis for self-esteem. This belief would cancel the stereotype threat that puts Black students at the risk of devaluation of their intellectual abilities and a chance at academic success. Membership and incorporation into the culture take

> negotiating access by investing in one's membership to the culture. Ethan's interview traces the many forms of encounters students have and how they negotiate ways into the school's culture. He attributes the role sports teams play as a network that helps many students find connections with peers out of common interest. He narrates his own journey and how he used sports and student government to find a social niche for himself. (my personal journal)

Listening to the recording of my interview with Ethan made me realize that it was more of a conversation where we both seemed steeped in the narratives of our identities. I feared I talked too much or asked too many questions throughout the interview, but I realized the conversation was much more fluid. The questions I asked seemed organic and a natural follow-up to get further clarification on his points. I wanted to conduct in-depth interviews with a small sample to ensure my narrative inquiry delved deeper and did not superficially interpret the data collected. My research examined and probed the racially minoritized students' ability to use the cultural capital that motivated them to persevere and overcome the social and academic challenges in the context of an American independent boarding school. In the process, I realised that despite the solidarity among the students of colour, their identities were diverse even though they tended to be homogenised and clustered without paying attention to the distinctions in class and heritage. These distinctions were a source of tension as their lived experiences differed, hence Chloe's realisation that "my Black is not the only Black."

5.4 "My Black is not the only Black

Chloe's realisation speaks to the tendency to treat Black students as homogenous because of their minoritised status in dominant spaces. Thus, the challenge is to create learning environments that acknowledge the lived experiences of the students of color and the willingness and capacity among educators to think about the students as racial beings and engage in the process of ongoing inquiry (Michael, 2015). While the affinity spaces for the students of color provide connectedness and a sense of home, their solidarity is fraught with tensions influenced by values and beliefs. As Cassie reflects:

> So I've always had international roommates, and so I would hang out with them and their friends, or I would hang out with some of the older Black girls like Estella and Marie and Cheryl, and I would try and hang out with them, and sometimes, I couldn't really fit in with them, because they still were from around the [affluent suburban] area, and I was still very city, I was very, my home attitude. So I realized that I had to switch that and be... assimilate into the school culture, and I think once I did that, I found a group of people who I could really fit in with, like Chloe, and Estella, and even other kids from around this town. It was just, I just had to find the right one. It just took a minute for me to break my shell, break theirs, and see that they were the same. They have the same ideals that I did, so... (Cassie)

Cassie had spent time with older Black girls and saw them as mentors but could not fit in because they were not from the same socioeconomic background. Even though all of them were Black, these girls grew up in the suburbs and were used to code-switching. She could not get a sense of home with them. She recognized the diversity among the Black girls and decided it was time to adjust her attitude. Falling out with friends awakened her to the reality of school culture. When she arrived at the school, she became friends with White girls from the wealthy suburbs, and everything was fine in the racially integrated group; however, challenges became more pronounced with time when she felt excluded from activities because she did not have the financial means to participate. She had difficulty connecting with the insular group of friends as their experiences, values, attitudes, and outlooks differed. Cassie's mistrust and wariness, borne out of the stereotypes and prejudice she had endured with her initial group of friends where she was expected to play out the stereotypical Black character from TV sitcoms, drove her to break out of her shell and make new connections. Breaking out of her shell, she found an affinity by connecting with other Black girls, only to find that some from affluent backgrounds knew how to navigate the social landscape and earn trust by finding common goals.

5.5 Social class distinctions among students of colour

Black students from upper-class backgrounds did not experience as much of a culture shock because they came from schools where they were used to being a numerical minority. They were more conditioned to navigating the academic and social norms, yet they spoke of learning

from their parents that they would need to work ten times as hard as most Americans to be good enough. These students still experienced isolation and felt "like a fish out of water" to some degree because they were coming to a school with more Black students where they could find community. However, they did not share much with other Black students from different backgrounds. Most of the students of colour from lower-income backgrounds met through community-based organizations that connect diverse students with selective independent schools. While Black upper-class students wanted to clearly distinguish themselves from other Black students whose interests and backgrounds differed, they also accepted that "not every person of colour will be [their] friend." These students could distance themselves from the "mean girls" situations at school and strengthen the paths their parents had carved for them. Programs like Jack and Jill were the training ground to assume leadership among the Black elite. They had an existing network of Black friends who had high educational aspirations and were involved in service projects outside school.

Ethan, a Black student from an upper-middle-class background, projected a diplomatic tone regarding his perceptions of his school experiences and how his home upbringing prepared him for the experience. He focused on a strong home culture that instilled strong academic values and provided a solid base for his resilience. He launched into the rigorous academic and social environment with the determination he needed to thrive and find success. As a result, I had several interview sessions with him to break through the veneer of the artificial interracial harmony he presented in earlier interviews.

The parental influence on his identity was obvious in how he carried himself. His openness to embracing other cultures and languages, truly engaging with other cultures, and his ability to access other cultural knowledge were embedded in his psyche at this point in his racial identity development. The social class influence of his parents' strong beliefs about race and the perceived importance of demonstrating to children what it means to be Black was mirrored in Ethan. The latter

reflected upon the socialisation strategies inculcated early in his life. His parents had influenced the salience of his racial identity as a highly educated, high-income Black family immersed in predominantly White environments. Ethan grew up surrounded by frequent interracial contact that ensured he learned to understand White norms and negotiation interactions while still placing a high value on Black culture and being Black throughout his education.

> I remember being younger, just kind of the idea that as a minority in America, always had to work ten times harder in order to be considered on a similar plain. And so that's something that's been instilled in me and both my two younger siblings from preschool pretty much on, and always kind of... I remember being younger and not necessarily understanding math concepts, and my mom was in school at the time, but she took time off from her studies to make sure that I understood just like simple math concepts like counting and things like that. So, I think that I was fortunate enough to have a family that's really dedicated to education and parents who took a big part of their time in order to help instil education in me. (Ethan)

Ethan attributed his ability to be more accepting and understanding of individuals from a different "place," different from his home culture; he said he was taught to understand that other people bring with them ways of being that are different from what he knows, and that did not make them wrong or bad. Hence, he felt that he was more open to cultures and experiences. He echoed a sentiment that came up in other interviews with the other two African American students who stated that their parents taught them that "as a minority in America, always having to work ten times harder to be considered on a similar plain" with peers appeared normalised for Black people in America. For these students, resilience is an essential part of their social makeup, which provides a foundation for the counter-storytelling that comes with encounters in academically rigorous and socially challenging educational contexts.

Ethan credited his parents for modelling the value of education and having a knack for problem-solving. His account of his mother putting off her studies to help him grasp math concepts at a young age indicated the solid foundation he received in problem-solving that fosters perseverance to challenge difficult situations. Also, his reflections on the competitive edge his father encouraged in his children honed his ability

to tackle problematic social dilemmas. Ethan seemed to possess the kind of social capital he had been able to rely on throughout his educational journey. However, without realising it, Ethan also played into the dominant racial and class narrative that negates the efforts to make ends meet among families from the low socio-economic ranks, a common narrative that Black families are not involved in their children's education.

Ethan also playfully referred to the social wealth that can be measured by the number of 'likes' one gets in social encounters. It is the social currency exchanged in student encounters at the prestigious independent school; it is a social network that makes it possible for students to feel supported to navigate the social and academic landscape of a diverse boarding school. He talks about how he is more "in tune and understands [his] identity," where he can assess and get a better read on his environment, searching for any "possibility of hostility towards any aspect of [his] identity". He thus shares his strategy for navigating the social landscape and mitigating hostility towards his identity. His earlier exposure to interracial encounters equipped him with knowledge and the ease of navigating the social landscape and finding success.

> … maybe roll my identity, roll it slower, and introduce them to certain aspects of me later or slower than I would somebody else … being more strategic. Since I know more about myself and understand my identity more, I think I have the ability to be more strategic in order to have a more productive relationship with any given person that I wouldn't necessarily have if I went to a public school. (Ethan)

Ethan knew how to navigate the White dominated spaces, what it takes to be accepted by his peers, and how to get his teachers to treat him fairly. He avoided any aversion to his identity by magnifying the attributes he shared with the dominant group, thus approximating characteristics acceptable to the elite (Gaztambide-Fernández & Angod, 2019). Ethan spoke of the need to use comedy and humour to make people feel at ease in his presence. He was keenly aware of the threat levels that put White interlocuters on guard in the presence of a person of colour in the U.S. context. Unfortunately, the comedy and humour Ethan referred to were also seen as the reason there is little progress in race relations while

using humour to mask the common misconceptions. This notion was further challenged by two other Black students from a lower socio-economic background in this study (Stan and Chloe), who deliberately objected to the social caricatures associated with Black culture. Subsequent interviews delved deeper and challenged the students to reflect more about the risks they took in social interactions and how they challenged underlying assumptions about their identities. Stan and Chloe expressed their comfort with the intersectionalities in their identities. Similarly, their narratives, which I examined later, spoke to the multiple layers of marginalisation in the context of a racialised reality at an elite independent boarding school, where most of their diverse peers are from the White upper class.

Ethan’s narrative also highlighted the integrative variable of Black family socialisation. While the early influences from his home prepared him to identify closely with Black people, their history, and their culture, he also learned to de-emphasise his racial identity to be accepted by White peers and liked by his teachers. Ethan's family order also influenced his leadership path as the oldest sibling and the consistent message of a relentless work ethic. He credited friendships with upper-level students who were leaders and did not exclude him in social discourse when he came to the school as a fourteen-year-old. Ethan’s narrative cited the strong influence of mentors who modelled ways to navigate the school's social and academic settings and the imperative he felt to model the same for younger peers. He related the social responsibility to having younger siblings who looked up to him and was grateful to the older students who took him under their wing and showed him the ropes when he entered secondary school.

The absence of social hierarchy in the residential housing at the school allowed him to watch the social interactions of the older students, show deference, and hold back until he was confident to step in. He distinguished between confidence and arrogance, noting that it was important to portray an inviting image that was not alienating to people from all walks of life. Consequently, his encounters tended to be goal

oriented as he placed dialogue at the centre of these encounters. Learning civil discourse, he separated the personal from the intellectual as he engaged his navigational and resilience capital (Yosso, 2005) and noted, "trying to communicate to everyone that disagreement and conflict in an intellectual conversation are welcome." Ethan seemed steeped in cultural humility, which encourages self-reflection and self-awareness and requires one to take responsibility for interactions with others by actively listening to those from differing backgrounds while at the same time being attuned to what one is thinking and feeling. He remarked that one must "meet them where they are," noting that it takes energy to be social and risks rejection or judgment among peers. Ethan observed that his understanding of self also provides a better understanding of one's threshold and enables one to recognize discomforts and to feel unsafe in social encounters. As a leader in student government, Ethan talked about being more intentional in how he presents himself and attempts to fit in in different social settings.

Further, this study revealed nuances of racial avoidance among the students of colour from higher socio-economic classes whose earlier experiences in racially integrated schools where they were a numerical minority before their transition to independent boarding school set them apart from other students of colour from lower socio-economic backgrounds. It was a less pronounced distinction among the students of colour from predominantly racially minoritized communities. The students of colour soon realize that admission into the elite independent schools does not guarantee unconditional access to the culture of the predominantly White and wealthy landscape. They come into these spaces understanding the imminent struggles their racial and social identities will subject them to as they negotiate relevance and navigate an educational landscape of privilege and abundance (Gaztambide-Fernández & Howard, 2012). Ethan used the navigational capital (Yosso, 2005) to negotiate and navigate his environment and his racial socialisation facilitated his determination to negotiate the social spaces

within the academic and social context of an independent U.S. boarding school.

Samantha, a Black girl from the upper class, grew up attending predominantly White independent schools and came to secondary school hoping to be part of a community of Black students. While she felt like "a fish out of the water in a new environment," her transition into secondary school meant leaving her friends, and she made strides in being a part of the community through athletics. Her parents had carved a path for her through the Jack and Jill of America program, where she interacted with other Black youth with high educational and leadership aspirations. Although Samantha was secure in her racial identity as a young Black woman, she experienced a "mean girl" situation among the Black girls on the sports team when a close friend turned against her and became her worst enemy. She reminisced:

> … unfortunately, in my grade, there's only a few kids of colour. So, it was really hard, but I did find a group within athletics, which I really appreciated. … But then, there was one girl who I was super close with, but then she kind of turned on me so that was my first mean girl experience. But at the same time, I wouldn't have it any other way because I ended up focusing on academics even more, and it was really beneficial for me, and it made me stronger because it made me realize that not every person of colour is going to be your friend, so that's a key experience. (Samantha)

Samantha juggled a full academic, athletic, and social schedule and did not dwell too much on the fact that her Black peers at the school did not embrace her. She sought community and personal enrichment through her involvement in the Jack and Jill of America program which became a community she could depend on. She was supported by other Black students who shared similar struggles at other independent schools. The community outside the school, where she did community service projects and leadership summits, provided a network, and supported her mindset to counter social isolation. She reflected upon her open-mindedness and the intrinsic motivation to take the initiative to connect and find a sense of purpose.

> You can't be close-minded; you have to look to find friends who maybe you wouldn't think that you would be friends with. I ended up, I would say my closest friends from this school that I'll end up having or not African American; they're different races, so definitely don't shy away from the

> unfamiliar. … They need a push in most cases. To be honest, my mom was my push in a lot of situations. And that push could hopefully be from a teacher or maybe from their parents, but it also has to come from within, because you have to go through with it. … I would say it was definitely growth throughout the years. Like my freshman year, I used to forget my shoes, forget my books, and now it's 180. You just have to recognize that you're in control of your destiny, basically. You're in control of how well you do in every situation. So, that independence is really important, and that drive has to come from within to keep pushing yourself. (Samantha)

Samantha’s narrative illuminates the coaching and mentorship of Black parents who facilitate the students’ ability to navigate the predominantly White independent schools. The small social network of students of colour presented a challenge when a student had a fallout with social group members. Samantha was fortunate to have the Jack and Jill network outside of school that eventually became a training ground for her to assume leadership and gave her the initiative and drive to strive for sustained connections with like-minded Black students. She lamented the insular social networks of local students who had been friends since elementary school and were not as open and inviting to outgroups. However, she felt that the experience made her stronger and realized that not every person of colour would be her friend. Her ability to connect with different groups was not motivated by forming strong bonds of friendship, and her connections were functional and pragmatic. True friendship with implicit trust and unconditional support was not a goal for her. Thus, she became content with a network of friends, knowing they were not life-long friends.

Coming to high school with a strong identity and a clear understanding that not everyone shares the same values, Kaylee shared that her parents encouraged her to keep an open mind. As such, she was not swayed by different values and politics. She made friends with people from different nationalities. She felt inclined to speak up about her nationality, race, and everything. She learned that most students come from homogenous communities without encountering Black people. She felt compelled to represent and speak for the black experience and dispel assumptions created by what people see on TV. Some of them deny the lived experiences of black students, thus challenging her to remain

emotionally detached when others challenge her. She was frustrated by peers by peers whose worldview was more idealistic about egalitarianism and freedom within the United States context. Because experiences of racial injustice are not part of their reality, they would deny and challenge the veracity of the accounts of students of color. The emotional detachment she mentioned was meant to resist the stereotypes.

> Definitely freshman year I didn't wanna come out as that angry black woman as seen or portrayed so I just kind of, when people dispute, I would say, "Hey, I understand where you are coming from, sort of, but you have to understand my truth and you have to listen. (Kaylee)

To resist stereotypes, Kaylee battled to find a balance between advocacy and asserting a strong presence. Like other students of colour in dominant spaces, Kaylee embodies self-understanding as a racialised being in the American context. She rejects the inferiority paradigm by virtue of having made it through a highly selective admission process without the resources and supplementary tutoring and coaching of her upper-class peers. Finding community and talking to other Black girls allowed her to talk about things she cared about, like natural hair and talking about the use of the n-word and sharing the historical origins of the word and why it brings back generational trauma when people demand to use it because rap artists use it in their music. At the same time, she acknowledged more diversity within the small community of Black students when she noted,

> … but here, it's really different 'cause I don't always understand and completely connect with all the African American kids here. And I completely understand we are all coming from different places. Like some people are from Canada and some are from Texas. … some people are actually from African countries … so people don't always understand they are too different, completely different cultures coming together. …
> So I completely understand why I don't always connect like I did with people back home. (Kaylee)

Having peers treat all black students as a monolithic group was frustrating and made her feel invisible. Nevertheless, being particular in her friendships leaves her feeling isolated and lonely. Her ability to navigate the social landscape and connect with different groups leads to her observation, "I am not in a set group here, 'cause I kinda wiggle

around, but each community I find a different aspect of what I like back home." Like Samantha, Kaylee's associations with different groups serve a particular purpose, and she does not form strong bonds of friendship, as the only thing they have in common is their racial affinity.

5.6 **Racial coping**

The students of colour enter the predominantly White American independent schools equipped with racial literacy and coping strategies to manage racial tensions. The racial socialisation they receive at home helps students of colour be conversant with racial literacy, "the ability to read, recast and resolve racially stressful encounters" (Stevenson, 2014: 63). It affords them the courage to persist even when self-doubt sets in the course of their time in dominated spaces. The students' narratives illuminated their parents' emphasis on facets of the Black culture while teaching them how to cope with racial discrimination in society (Stevenson, 2014; Steinbugler, 2015). It was a challenge to fight against perceptions of inadequacy where the absence of affirming images of their culture reinforced notions of the dominant narrative that normalised the interests and perceptions of White interests. The centrality of White interest was linked to the mobilisation of structural and cultural forces to defend White power at the expense of the racialised 'other' (Gilborn, 2006). The students of colour in the study shared narratives about the fierce competition with peers in chilly classroom culture and their earlier struggles with time management and executive functioning. An awareness of multiple inequities stacked against them and the many barriers they had to navigate among peers who had been in independent school all their lives and had access to tutors to supplement and reinforce their learning helped the students' resolve to persist and become resilient.

Racial literacy is acquired through subtle and overt messages from their parents and communities. It is instilled in them early on, thus forming a schema of coping strategies that are recalled in encounters of racial tension, bias, and prejudice in school. The presence of students of colour

in predominantly White spaces is fuelled by an “understated optimism” that makes them realise that within the American context, “some part of them will always bear wounds, something in their eyes shows that they know that after a long struggle, they will cross to the distant shore where they will integrate themselves into the wholeness of sorts” (Anzaldua, 2009: 279). This dual consciousness is a precarious position of straddling two different worlds where they are constantly crossing borders.

In their quest for belonging in the independent school world of pedigree and prestige, the students of colour often find themselves outsiders and have to contend with the barriers that challenge their attempts to fit in. For most Black and Latina/o/x students, shifts in how they experience these barriers challenge their presentation in dress, style, and language use in their desire to fit in and not stand out. Their acceptance among peers sometimes comes at the expense of dialling down their identity and enduring microaggressions in a race-avoidant colour-blind social landscape. The students of colour are confronted with “the lack of sophistication in American coping in race relations [that] endangers the resolution of racial conflicts by encouraging disengagement from the smallest of racial matters instead of resolution” (Stevenson, 2014, p. 39).

The students of colour in the study attributed their resilience to being aware of disparate social norms from an early age. Growing up in America, the students learned about the harmful impact of racial discrimination on one’s well-being through accounts of family members and other narratives. The students' racial coping strategies illuminated the families’ attempts to reduce racial stress and trauma by preparing their children for unfortunate encounters later in life. As a result, the students’ self-perception elevated values that made them feel self-assured and not prone to letting things get them down, not leaving room to get depressed. Stan (pseudonym) asserted that his family members had told him, “You are Black. You don’t have time to be depressed.” His interpretation of such expressions from his early years was, “I took it as

you don't have time to sit around doing nothing or just give up. They say things that sound harsh, but it all comes from a place of them wanting you to succeed." Stan's family, like many families of students of colour, instilled values that taught them to anticipate the psychological toll of unjust prejudicial treatment and the best way to navigate it.

While the students learned the strategies and culturally appropriate behaviour that serve as a protective factor and were geared towards their well-being and academic outcomes, they were not content with the fact that there were some spaces where they had to play down their identity. They were unhappy with situations where they had to withhold their honest views and beliefs on racial issues and found it safer to align with the acceptable views. The students treasured moments when they could engage in one-on-one conversations with peers as a follow-up to class discussions. They found class discussions to be performative, and the expectations of propriety barred students from expressing their authentic opinions and positions. The students questioned what they found to be strategic colour-blindness on the part of their educators. Strategic colour-blindness is characterized as the "avoidance of talking about race – or even acknowledging racial difference – to avoid the appearance of bias" (Apfelbaum, Sommers, Norton, 2008:918). At the same time, students would be baffled by teachers' lack of meaningful intervention:

> … the memory of the teacher's involvement and instigating the incident still stings. My classmates counted the number of Americans in the class, and I was not included. As the only Black girl taking that class, hearing a student say, Oh, there's a bunch of Asian students here. The only Americans are so and so, so and so, and he looked at me and said, that's about it. And I just remember being … I was so hurt. (Chloe)

> So, we could separate into chairs that reflected our skin colour [chuckle] So the Indian kids … So the Indian boys sat in the black chairs because you know they are brown, and the teacher said, "No one should be sitting by [Chloe]." And I was just so hurt. I was like, Oh my goodness!" (Chloe)

The students of colour enter the predominantly White world of U.S. independent schools with strong self-awareness and learn to fight off the

impostor syndrome, a persistent self-doubt despite evidence of success, as they navigate diversity-as-deficit thinking among peers and instructors with low expectations (Murkhajee Reed, 2021). The deficit thinking manifests in unpredictable social interactions with peers and adults, filled with landmines of microaggressions, feelings of isolation, snickers, and awkward questions that make it hard to keep sight of the main purpose. What Chloe went through in this class was typical of diversity-as-deficit thinking in an advanced-level rigorous class. She picked up on the teacher's low expectations, suffered the humiliation that the teacher instigated, and did not come to Chloe's defence when she was excluded.

Meanwhile, students of colour were drifting away from their primary culture to gain privileges in their elite school culture, trading alliances with their culture for academic success and achievement. The students recognized that educational and economic success required them to engage effectively with Whiteness, even at the risk of rejection. For some students, rejection became a risk worth taking as they matured and became more secure in their identities. Such critical consciousness became evident as Judy mused,

> So, if I put myself out there at some point or another, I'm going to gain something even if I lose a bit, even if I feel rejected at some point. … I was afraid in my first two years. I didn't want people to know that my parents were undocumented immigrants. (Judy)

A secure connection to their primary cultural identity balanced the students' desire to access opportunities and upward mobility without diminishing their lived experiences. Assimilationist tendencies characterized by adopting the dominant culture's tastes, mannerisms, and expressions often ensured they would be accepted and embraced by peers from the dominant culture, thus minimizing the risk of exclusion and isolation. At the same time, the students of colour asserted their presence to ensure that their racial identity was a cultural asset. Social acceptance at the expense of having to numb themselves to the emotional toll of micro-aggressions from peers and a society unconscious of racist and prejudiced beliefs and unintentional behaviours was a bitter pill to swallow.

5.7 Crafting a counter-story

The students of colour did their best to resist the unconscious structures of racial prejudice embedded within the American education system. The deficit lens through which they were regarded in their environment led students of colour to be agile and learn to embody the duality of their lived reality. This double consciousness enhanced the students of colour's insight into the structure of racism and thus positioned themselves to resist the normalisation of hegemonic power structures. Cassie (pseudonym), one of the students who participated in this study, captured this duality in what she perceived as having a persona associated with her 'school' name, a moniker she assumed upon entering the institution's gates, where she dialled down her personality. Her understanding of who she is as a loud, silly, loving, and warm person contradicted the demure polished posture she put on to find acceptance among her peers and educators. When she transitioned from home and drove onto campus, she felt compelled to leave her African American Vernacular behind and assume the persona of a "well-behaved young woman who doesn't stir the pot." She realised that the reality of boarding school life was different from the "Zoe 101" TV show that influenced her desire to attend boarding schools in the first place. As she struggled to fit in, she realized that the show did not equip her with the cultural aspect of elite boarding school life. She struggled to connect with peers because of a superficial language barrier.

As an African American born and raised in a nearby urban environment, the language of her home kept Cassie rooted in her identity, yet she had to code-switch lest her intellectual capacities were questioned when not using standard English. Cross (2021) regards code-switching as a form of buffering, a Duboisian twoness that involves compartmentalising and building resilience, endurance, and the resolve not to be broken. Cassie was a young, bisexual, Black woman who wanted a different experience from her all-Black neighbourhood school in the city. Her arrival at the independent boarding school with students

from different racial, language and cultural backgrounds excited her. She saw it as an opportunity to engage with peers, break down barriers, and learn from diverse perspectives unbeknownst to her that, her acceptance was on condition she played to the racial and linguistic stereotypes her peers had of her as a Black person. Schools not attentive to the actual student experience disregard the cultural competencies and the intercultural skills necessary for effective interaction in diverse settings and for developing mutual trust to bridge differences for all the players (Sleeter, 2013). The students observe that the school,

> … has primarily White faculty so the message they are conveying is that these conversations don't apply to them and it's not important. Faculty must engage in these conversations and set an example for their students, but also they need to be trained in how to… how these difficult conversations on the various kinds of diversity at the school. For the school to truly pursue diversity and embrace global citizenship, the students, faculty, and staff have to be able to embrace and talk about differences and realize privilege and power. This lack of awareness leads to the isolation of minority students. (Laurie)

The students' comments addressed their awareness of the absence and disregard for the essential competencies and consciousness the teachers needed in a diverse school context. They noted,

> Part of making the school a more welcoming place is to require all faculty to engage in cultural competency training. None of the faculty should be able to say that they didn't know that comments they were making were hurtful and also the school needs to hold faculty accountable when they make comments that are prejudiced. … I hope to continue to be a part of this community as a mentor for students who come from my town. Last year, I came back to the school to give a little talk about how to navigate interviews during the college process. (Laurie)

The students of colour insisted that diversity was not just about what the minoritized students could do for the majority by sharing the experiences of people of colour. They were disgruntled with how the school was marketing diversity to benefit affluent White families. They wanted to have their narratives form part of the institution's fabric to promote and cultivate diversity focused on the redress of the wrongs of history that have disenfranchised various groups and made it more difficult for them to have the same access to resources such as quality education.

The "Zoe 101" universe of the television show did not match the "links with the international power structure" (Howard & Gaztambide-Fernandez, 2010, p. 18) in the students' elite boarding school with a large international student body and connections to the international community. As Cassie reminisced about her early days at the independent boarding school, she noted that at home, she had become accustomed to having family cheering her on and her mother helping her monitor her time management. Boarding school life opened more opportunities to interact with peers and participate in different activities during her free time. Being away from home led to a slip in her homework completion, followed by a decline in her academic performance outcomes. Unlike her peers from affluent backgrounds, she did not have access to tutors and supplemental support to ensure she could effectively manage her time and keep up with the academic rigor of her studies. Experiencing failure was also compounded by family problems, and she felt disconnected from home, church, and her Aikido sensei in her neighbourhood. However, she was much more self-assured and ready to engage in intellectual discourse with poise by the time she transitioned into higher education. She felt ready to assert her voice and centre her lived experience.

When entering White dominant spaces, students of colour learn the different communication systems where they learn to synthesise their own identity into the mainstream with no threat of assimilation and remain connected to the culture they were born into and immersed as children (Cross, 2021). They learn to bridge cultural barriers as border-crossers dealing with the implications of power as outgroup members. As Cassie mused on lessons in resilience and endurance from her family,

> Listen, you can't just cry anytime somebody says something mean to you. Anytime somebody pushes you down, you can't just cry. You have to learn to bounce back and get up and just be ready to go. (Cassie)

She learned that everything happened for a reason, and what was important was the desire and determination to carry on despite setbacks. The students of colour are rooted in their racial identity. Their goal

orientation gives them the edge towards social mobility as they overcome impostor syndrome (Simmons, 2018), feeling inadequate and a fraud despite a track record of success. They learn to snap out of other-focused social interactions to leverage their ability to be attuned to other people's perceptions and feelings rather than allowing anxiety to lower their self-esteem in dominated spaces. Their resilience and the cognitive and interpersonal skills they learned to enhance their agility to challenge the deficit orientation and reject the victimization mindset by accessing their strengths.

Similarly, Kenny (pseudonym), a Black student from Canada claimed, "I came to realize that in life being uncomfortable is something that will actually cultivate and enhance growth." The students of colour in dominated spaces build the resilience to soldier on through the adversity and not give up, driven by their aspirational capital (Yosso, 2005) to realise their goals. Marco (pseudonym) also shared that his father told him that the struggles he had feeling isolated and bullied by teammates made him stronger. Marco did not feel connected to his peers and could not trust them with his story. His father was undocumented and came into the U.S. by "crossing the river" from Mexico, and he did not feel comfortable with his peers whose physical stature seemed to dwarf him. He was intimidated by their gregariousness and their flashy cars that spelled a different story from his own low-income background. Marco could not make meaningful connections with his soccer teammates and gravitated towards two other players who were not part of the in-group.

5.8 Negotiating Belonging and Community

The students gave an account of myriad experiences and interactions negotiating to belong within the dominant spaces. Their perceptions of belonging beyond the proverbial 'Welcome' mat rolled out upon their admission to predominantly White independent American boarding schools varied. The students' narratives outlined their struggles in negotiating belongingness in predominantly White spaces and

weathering bouts of self-doubt and a myriad of institutionalized barriers by finding community among students of colour. Kenny declared that a sense of belonging would mean that the school recognized who he was and celebrated what he brought, acknowledged his presence in the space. He had observed a disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality in boarding school life. Kenny thought the school used the rhetoric about its diversity to reel in new students, enticing them, but most of the school community were not accepting from day to day. He felt that he constantly had to psychologically prepare for encounters and interactions and work hard to claim his space.

> They do not walk the talk. The school should allow students like me to be authentic. The expectation is that Black students should fall into the stereotype of being loud and not doing anything. I do not follow stereotypes as that strips me of my confidence. I do not want to be boxed into a stereotypical image. Conforming or defying a stereotype is a struggle. With peers, I speak Black vernacular and not standard English. Whatever I do, I am determined to prove that Black students are collectively different from how there are perceived. (Kenny)

Despite professions of a post-racial society, the permanency and endemic nature of racism in the United States education system continue to put up barriers and an inferiority paradigm the students of colour contend with (Gildersleeve et al. 2011; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995, Tate, 1997, DeCuir-Gunby, 2007). Like Kenny's reflections who had to work hard to defy stereotypes that boxed him in, Stan also reflected about the psychological armour he had to put on in preparation for interactions with peers and teachers. In a reflection that belies proclamations of being post-racial and proves that America has not reached a state of racial nirvana, Stan shared how he mentally prepared himself for encounters when immersed in a social space where he physically stands out. He attributed his patience to his comfort while attending a summer semester abroad. He thought he felt much more comfortable there than when he was back at school.

> …when people noticed my Blackness, it didn't come from a place of hate, a negative place. It seems to come from curiosity. When people would ask me about my skin colour, if I could wash it off it didn't seem like ... I told myself that it was not like people were trying to be mean or anything. They

> asked that, and it was not knowing. But like here, when you get questions about being African American you get people who are trying to act up like being African American with you. There's like a lot of things associated with that. And that's what makes me uncomfortable. (Stan)

Stan's comment about his lack of patience with peers at his school was motivated by the dissonance of the race-neutral positionality of peers and White educators who insist they "don't see race." Like many students of colour, Stan was disillusioned with the cognitive dissonance of the hypervisibility of his racial identity yet feeling invisible in most spaces. He felt he did not have a voice as talking about race was often seen as divisive, thus making it uncomfortable to share his racialised lived experience without seeing people disengage. His frustration with the performative caricature of Blackness without taking the time to learn to see and understand the racialised realities of the classroom experiences of Black students, and how the entrenched racism affects students and their outcomes through the discipline system, and much more were captured in what he learned about himself through these experiences.

> I decided to move away from whom people said I was. People say, "you are a big Black male and you should act this way," and I would act in a way I thought people thought was appropriate for me. Signing up for the football team was part of that. Coming here and trying to establish myself. My family was completely flabbergasted. It was something new and challenging. It was not me. You know in football you have to be abrasive and emotional about things I try not to. Once I realized that I was doing this to please people and validate what they thought I was, it was really exhausting. I gave up on it and started going to GSA and getting involved in things that I liked that I knew I was not expected to like. That played a big role in transitioning into the person I am now. My authentic self comes out when I am not in a place where people know me. (Stan)

Students like Stan find themselves having to make choices and feel conflicted as they move away from the norms and values of their communities and numb themselves to micro-aggressions for the duration of their high school years. They feel compelled to practice the tolerance often invoked in multicultural settings where people of colour are a numerical minority. However, the threshold of such tolerance usually cannot last for four years of high school. The students of colour turned to affinity groups to assuage the cumulative effect and impact of the micro-

aggressions. Attempts to avoid racial friction and strife with peers and educators often manifested in the students' creating buffers from dominant cultural spaces and seeking solace in affinity groups that celebrated their identity, where they can off-load the painful weight of racial scorn they passively encounter in their daily interactions, thus causing them personal stress and pain. Consequently, students gravitated toward those with the same racial and socio-cultural background. Affinity group space becomes a breathing space where the students find belonging and validation and can be authentic and not perform the self.

The students' narratives revealed a critical consciousness in resisting the deficit orientation associated with their racial identity within the dominant narrative in the American education context (Habig, Gupta, & Adams, 2021). The students' reflections chronicled accounts of using early racial socialisation as a solid foundation for their understanding of self, how they navigated social conditions of racial and economic marginalisation, and their determination to bring about systemic transformation. They shared narratives that indicated they relied on their funds of knowledge (Moll, 2005) about race relations in the U.S. context as a buffer against experiences of racial harassment, alienation, discrimination, or hostility.

Some of the students who had been at the school for four years had ascended through the ranks of the student leadership hierarchy and were grateful to the teachers who had nominated them to those positions. Yet, they still needed to acknowledge that things could have been smoother and more seamless than they appeared on the surface. They felt driven by a sense of duty to inform the research to pay it forward for the benefit of future students of colour. The participants' responses relayed an awareness of the superficial and structurally dissonant narrative of the multicultural oasis sold in everyday rhetoric about diversity in independent schools.

5.9 Layers of Marginalisation

Stan's narrative reflected how he came to the school very optimistic about all the possibilities of a new world opening, only to be handicapped by the micro-inequities and isolation in the classroom. Contrary to his expectations to learn from peers from all over the world, he found the academic and social climate at the school to be inhospitable and highly stressful such that he felt unsafe making mistakes without feeling inadequate. When he visited the school before transferring to 10th grade, he was enamoured with the school's diversity drawing students from different nationalities, religions, and socio-economic backgrounds. He was excited to learn with and from his peers who spoke multiple languages and whose worldviews differed from his own. He thought everyone would accept and was looking forward to learning a lot in this microcosm of a global society. He admitted that he did learn a lot and travelled to other countries, but what he experienced as a caste system within the school became a distraction. Stan struggled to play down his identity as he noted,

> Saying something about being African American invites some unwelcome reactions. People are less willing to participate. I've been told that not all things are about race and that I was making everything about race. (Stan)

However, as a Black man, Stan knows assumptions about his racial identity precede his interaction with them. He was comfortable being vulnerable in most spaces but was rebuffed and told that talking about injustices visited upon African Americans or other disenfranchised groups made others uncomfortable. Thus, he did not feel valued, respected, connected, or experience belonging, as the space was not inviting and safe. He could not engage with his peers and teachers by bringing his full self. The educational environment was styled such that he had to find a way to fit in and was not set up to allow him to engage as his authentic self as an asset to benefit a diverse student body.

> Talking about race is seen as divisive. I would like to talk about my real experiences. One-on-one conversations with classmates as a follow-up to a discussion in class have been revealing, and I have learned a lot from people's real opinions and positions when not performing the self in front of

> peers in the classroom. Real conversations happen among friend groups. There have been a few occasions when people allowed themselves to be vulnerable in front of everyone -- really emotional and personal. (Stan)

Stan's reflections speak to the dilemma many of his peers face, torn between being authentic and performing a version of themselves that would be acceptable to peers and teachers. He spoke about the pressure to conform to stereotypes and try out for a sports team. Realising that he was not being authentic, he found it exhausting to perform into a stereotype to please people and validate what they thought he was as an African American boy with a burly physique. He pursued contentment by joining interest groups affirming his identity as Black and gay. His overall experience was rewarding because he "was allowed opportunities to grow academically, not always socially." Stan's narrative revealed the role trust plays in allowing students to show up and be authentic, "... to build that trust people need to be authentic, and to be authentic you need to feel safe to be authentic" (Stan). Stan craved the intellectual stimulation of intergroup dialogue that allowed students to grapple with multiple perspectives, getting involved in dialogue across differences about various issues that included racial discrimination and the power dynamics in American society. He was keen on the benefits of robust intergroup dialogue to promote racial understanding and perspective-taking. However, his teachers and peers avoided disagreement, settling for artificial harmony rather than guiding them to learn by talking and listening to people with different experiences and viewpoints.

Like many Black students in dominant spaces, Stan experienced moments when his experiences were explained away by White peers and adults who discounted his experiences by telling him not to be too sensitive and not to assume malice in the micro-aggressive actions of others. My perceptions of Stan's apathy during the interview sessions I carried out in the final month before his graduation reflected the anger and resentment that bubbled up in his voice and attitude. Students of colour feel defeated by some tone-deaf assignments their teachers

expect them to do. The students spoke of expectations to write essays about how the enslaved were happy during American chattel slavery. Teachers who did not understand the harm of learning experiences where students do not feel safe to object lest they receive a lower grade or face disciplinary measures at the teacher's discretion. Stan spoke of his determination to “get away” from the school where he felt he had to suppress his identity as a Black gay man who could not practice his faith because of the pervasive Islamophobia. Stan’s narrative speaks to the majoritarian narratives framed around colour blindness (Griffin, Ward, Phillips, 2012), thus placing barriers to the Black students’ ability to experience belonging.

Likewise, Kenny shared how he had to fight for his grades where his teachers’ low expectations of his abilities had them award him grades they thought he deserved rather than what he earned. He learned to self-advocate and admitted that it was challenging to summon the courage to speak up. He felt he had to learn to speak up as his mother could no longer come and speak to his teachers once he went away to boarding school. He learned to shake off the stereotype of being seen as an athlete and not as a serious scholar. His mother was supportive and wanted him to be evaluated fairly and wanted him to have a voice, and in the process earn the teachers’ respect for being able to speak up for himself.

Unlike their BIPOC counterparts whose physical likeness racially does not stand out, Black students shared accounts of being conspicuous in all the spaces and feeling burdened by other people’s perceptions of their capabilities or limited abilities. They shared that they felt like they had to justify their presence in a racially diverse school. Being perceived as an outgroup among peers who had known each other and came from the same local schools, the Black students interviewed shared accounts of feeling vulnerable and exposed and thus sought community among students who looked like them or came from a similar background as a secure base. However, even within the Black in-group, the realization

that "my Black is not the only Black" sometimes drove a wedge in their fragile alliances. In my interviews, I learned that there was a clear distinction between Black students from upper-class backgrounds and those who were receiving significant financial aid, as well as Black students from other countries. Also, the athletes' social experiences differed from those who did not participate in sports, especially between boys and girls. While the boys who participated in sports found it easier to connect with peers, girls found their white peers less receptive socially and did not receive invitations to connect outside the classroom.

Black boys who played a sport built instant brotherhood bonds with other boys on the team. It was this unity that allowed younger team members to shadow and learn from older Black students on the team, as one of them attested:

> As a 14-year-old boy growing upon the west of the city, the only other cultures Ihad ever experienced came from private schools or church gatherings.Where I come from, the cultures are pretty much all the same. Most people in my neighbourhood were either of Black or Latino descent and weren't doing anything for themselves nor the community. I was one of those Black men trying to get out of the gruelling slums of the city. When I found this school, I didn't really know what to expect. I loved the fact that I was going to be able to get away from all the violence and abuse, but I wasn't really quite sure if I was ready to adapt to an entirely new culture just yet. When I got here I immediately picked up things that I liked to do at home. I had been playing football for aboutseven years, atthe time, so I continued to play when I got here. Football at this school has taught me what it means to be a part of a true team. It has taught me brotherhood and grit and will help me as I grow older. (Leon)

Watching older students navigate challenging classes and managing their time afforded mentorship and leadership to the younger boys. They learned from the older boys to be engaged in the community and learn to balance their academics and social lives. The guidance and mentorship they received provided an anchor and introductions to their social circles and modelled the work ethic necessary to find success. Even so, Black boys enjoyed some social privileges not extended to Black girls, and their survival was guaranteed as they were shielded by being part of a team.

The Black girls' experience in predominantly White spaces is very different as they navigate the intersectionalities of their identity. Apart from race, the girls interviewed also contended with gender expectations

and image stereotypes. Students growing up in a racially stratified America are surrounded by different narratives about their identity. Images of people of their race portrayed in mass media and the national consciousness inform how people of other backgrounds see them. How teachers and peers from other backgrounds regard them also differs from how they see themselves. Therefore, one can imagine the cultural betrayal trauma (Gomez, 2019) inflicted when they are demeaned and denigrated by other White adjacent minoritised women who judge their beauty and body image according to Western standards.

Cultural Betrayal Trauma Theory (Gomez, 2019) is a framework conceptualising and examining interpersonal trauma outcomes in minority populations. In reflecting on the intersectionality of race and gender, Chloe states, "But to be dark-skinned and a woman, it's automatically a big deal. So, you have the issue of being Black, and then you have the issue of being a woman, and it's like …" Chloe was reacting to a betrayal by other young women of colour from a different ethnic background circulating rumours of lists that ranked Black girls according to how pretty they were. Petty social snubs from roommates and other girls in the dormitory had escalated to the extent that some Black girls were told they looked like slaves. The anti-Blackness sentiment from other students of colour left some feeling depleted. There were conflicts about the privileges enjoyed by certain affinity groups to which the students of colour belonged.

During one of the in-depth interviews with Chloe, she shared that it was not enough for her to focus her energy on building coalitions with other students of colour who were not treated well by their White peers. She had determined that it would be best to use her position as a student leader to create opportunities for her peers to examine their belief systems, challenging their deeply held beliefs without alienating them. To accomplish her mission, she looked to the lessons her mother had taught her as she remarked, "I love sharing stories." Chloe referred to these students as the "movers and shakers." In articulating what she saw as her mission before graduation, Chloe asserted,

> They're gonna be the ones who are the CEOs and the ones possibly giving us our jobs. So, I wanna set the precedence of, 'This is not what we do here' so that … who goes out in the world, first you should know that you don't deserve to be treated like that. But then the kids who are treating us like this should know, "I know this is not how I should be treating people." (Chloe)

In this conversation, Chloe shared more empowering ways she related with her peers, allowing everyone to examine the social systems they all participate in, critically reflect on ideologies of power and privilege, and focus on building coalitions and alliances. Chloe examined intersectionalities and refused to be silenced by systemic structures that uphold the status quo. She jumped at the opportunity to change the course with the next generation. As a young Black woman living at the intersection of racial and gender oppression, Chloe challenged and disrupted barriers and boundaries that excluded access to poor and working-class students, gender-nonconforming students, and many more without privilege. Kaylee also felt that she could not remain quiet and spoke up to resist the unconscious structures embedded in the American education system.

> Actually, here I felt more inclined to speak out about my nationality, race and everything only because I'm a naturally outspoken person so I always do like to try and voice my opinion where I feel like it's needed. So here being the only Black person in a class, I feel like I have to speak out on behalf of my culture and my race so that people understand, 'cause a lot of people here haven't met African American people, so they do just assume we're like the people on TV. Some of them, not everyone, definitely not everyone. (Kaylee)

Speaking up in class was another way Kaylee leveraged her racial socialisation and identity as a cultural asset to foster resilience and perseverance in dominant spaces. The students created opportunities to affirm the value of their voices and self-identity to counter the dominant narratives that distorted perceptions about Black people even when they knew they were not guaranteed an audience and left to feel invisible. Kaylee notes,

> … it makes it harder for one of us to stand out. In a way, sometimes in my grade, I feel kind of lonely in way only because they kinda picked their favorite person in a way and that's kind of I feel like how I felt sometime. … I feel sometimes in my grade only because I gravitate towards one African

> American person in our grade and then other than that they just assume that we are all just kind of there. (Kaylee)

Being vocal about injustice and oppressive behaviour and taking on leadership roles in the dominant spaces, they are seen violating accepted societal norms. Consequently, Black girls deemed not to meet the feminine standards of beauty fall victim to the desire to punish their deviance from societal roles. Being assertive and independent, they also lament the intracultural betrayal (Gomez, 2019) of Black boys who violate intracultural trust through interracial dating not extended to most Black girls. The outcome is that of embittered students who cannot wait to get away from their high school, where they endured societal inequality and the trauma of intracultural betrayal.

The students of colour enter independent schools with their intercultural knowledge and consciousness holding them up; they have been taught to be true to who they are. Yet, they find themselves having to take blows of racial invalidation and isolation from peers and their teachers' insensitive and dismissive remarks as they are forced to conform to a disposition that challenges them. The seductive material conveniences of social mobility compel the students to endure racial slurs and degradation.

The students' narratives pointed to perceptions of the cognitive dissonance of being hyper-visible yet invisible in the dominated spaces within their independent schools. Their disquiet pointed to the duality, the double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) of Black presence in the context of American racialized societal structures. Sharing the narratives of their lived experiences as racialized beings in independent schools, the participants saw the re-storying of their experiences as pertinent in decentring and countering the dominant narrative. They grappled with proclamations of the diverse and inclusive communities the independent schools had styled themselves out to be yet did not acknowledge the complexity of the Black experience of bias, stereotypes, and anti-Blackness in those spaces (Miles, 2019). There was a marked sense of purpose in sharing their narratives as reframing a deficit narrative

(Leonardo, 2011), a counter-storytelling focusing on the impact of racial inequality in the lived reality of students of colour, particularly that of Black students. The students' counter-narratives challenge the dominant colour-blind ideologies espoused in institutions that prop up hegemonic structures and proclamations of treating all students equally.

Through the ways of knowing and being instilled within their families and communities, the students of colour claim agency in using that wisdom to navigate dominant systemic structures to establish a presence and desire to be engaged as co-creators of communities of belonging. While the students' narratives unmask the implications of racial inequality in U.S. society, they also credit the racial socialisation they received in their families and communities before venturing into independent schools. As such, the students' reflections about resilience point to some community aphorisms they heard growing up that helped them bounce back from any setbacks they experienced.

The signature experience of students of colour in independent schools does not consist of overt racism, name-calling, or the scribbling of graffiti; however, the socially constructed racial hierarchies, as well as the physical and psychological barriers in place, cause racial stress, marginalisation, and isolation for students of colour in these educational settings. Notwithstanding the prestige and access the independent schools open for the students of colour, the setbacks, and frustrations they encounter during their sojourn in the predominantly White independent schools leave them with scars buried deep in their consciousness. Many leave their secondary school sojourn without realizing the privileges of belonging to a shared community. Perseverance and passion for long-term goals sustain the students' motivation not to lose sight of the desired outcomes at the mind-boggling cost, evident in the surfacing of traumatic experiences in American independent schools in the #Black@ accounts that emerged in the summer of 2020.

While the accounts the students of colour shared in this study unmask the implications of racial inequality in U.S. society, they also

credit the racial socialisation the students received in their families and communities before venturing into independent boarding schools. The study engages the Critical Race Theory as an analytical framework that interrogates the implications of racial discrimination embedded in systems and challenges the normative assumptions of colour blindness and race neutrality (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Yosso, 2005; Bondi, 2012). Growing up in the United States, students of colour become familiar with varying levels of otherness in a society where "racism is systematically and psychologically embedded in society, its practices, and institutions" (Hauber-Ozer, Call-Cummings, Hassel-Goodman, Chan, 2021, p. 2). As such, the students' reflections about staying on course pointed to some of the expressions they heard from caregivers while they were growing up and how they habitually retrieved these to help them bounce back from any setbacks they experienced in their day-to-day interactions.

Students of colour internalize the deferential racelighting (Wood & Harris III, 2021) meted out in the guise of professionalism that reinforces racial hierarchies in independent schools. Wood & Harris III (2021) characterise racelighting as a form of gaslighting affecting the normalised experiences of people of colour who are forced to question their thoughts and actions due to systematically delivered racialised messages that make them second guess their own lived experiences. The students of colour on scholarship found themselves torn between their gratitude for the generous scholarships that allowed them to access the prestigious education and the silencing they felt concerning the experiences of marginalisation and discrimination in the school. Not expected to raise their voices and express concerns, they felt they were expected to show grace and understanding that were never extended to them. The fear of retaliation and retribution forced the students to be silent and not report discrimination and hostile treatment by teachers and peers. They expressed the challenge and complexity of having students follow different rules depending on racial identity and socioeconomic background. The students called out the false positivity about their

perception that they were expected to be grateful and smile and not speak up about how they truly felt. The affinity space afforded them refuge from all these expectations. Marco insisted that his goal was to get through the day and go home and talk to his sister and his mother. His perception of his difference and how his peers treated him left him feeling isolated and without confidence in his abilities. He could not relate to the extravagances of his affluent classmates and pined for the simple cultural celebrations of dancing to Spanish songs at quinceaneras in his hometown. Although he trained with professional soccer players during vacations, his teammates made him feel inadequate and always criticised him. He felt self-conscious and sat alone even in the presence of his teammates.

The students' narratives illuminated their parents' emphasis on facets of their racial identity while teaching them how to cope with racial discrimination in society (Stevenson, 2014; Steinbugler, 2015). Hence, reading such statements also made me interrogate the context of the experiences and social interactions while probing the intentions, purposes, and points of view (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) of the people they interacted with. Racial socialisation in the form of verbal expressions (aphorisms) and the behaviour models the students shared in the narratives indicated the racial preparation Black children internalize to see themselves as members of the Black community. Racial literacy is acquired in the subtle and overt messages young children receive from their parents and communities and is instilled in them from a young age, thus forming a schema of coping strategies that are recalled in encounters of racial tension, bias, and prejudice in school.

Overall, the study examined the students' self-understanding in negotiating inclusion and belongingness in academic and social spaces where they do not belong to the dominant group. It illuminated the role that racial and ethnic socialisation play as the cultural capital the students from non-dominant communities embody and mobilize in efforts to claim agency in the dominated spaces. It looked at how racial socialisation contributed to their academic resilience when immersed in educational

contexts where they negotiated rigorous academic spaces to navigate unfamiliar, sometimes inhospitable social boundaries. The students' ability to tap into the resources at their disposal facilitated their ability to negotiate a sense of belonging by creating their communities in White-dominated spaces to keep their poise despite daily challenges.

As an analytical framework, Critical Race Theory attends to issues of race and challenges the normative assumptions of race that promote racial neutrality and colour-blind understanding. The focus on counter-storytelling decentralises the dominant normative (racially influenced) discourse. CRT values the storytelling of the individual experience; thus, counter-storytelling gives voice to the historically marginalised experiences that challenge the majoritarian stories of racial privilege (Stinson, 2008; Solózarno & Yosso, 2002). The utility of CRT as an analytical framework foregrounds the permanent and endemic nature of race in U.S. society and culture and the negative consequences of racism and discrimination in the school experience of historically marginalised students of colour. Personal narratives and stories shared during interviews were valid evidence to document perceptions of inequities and alienation. The study foregrounded the voices of the students of colour and thus examined the hegemonic practices and boundaries perpetuating inequality and alienation.

Chapter 6 – Conclusions, recommendations, and contribution to Knowledge

6.1 Conclusions

The diversity promise made by independent schools attracts students of colour and their families looking for a pathway to elite colleges and universities and the subsequent social mobility. They believe that the students' racialised cultural identity would not be sacrificed, nor do they wish to tolerate the same injustices suffered by previous generations. This thesis has illustrated that paying lip service to diversity efforts rather than cultivating a welcoming and nurturing environment and promoting social belonging and well-being for students of colour in independent schools does more harm than good despite the buffering strategies students can summon. Independent schools should leverage the positive impact of cultural diversity in the classroom; it enables a robust engagement in more significant and complex conversations and encourages respect for diversity of thought.

Time honoured independent school traditions tend to marginalise students of colour whose lived experience is not the norm in predominantly White schools. A commitment to actively dismantling the barriers that hold back the students of colour in independent schools should extend beyond rhetoric with an understanding that changing a school culture demands a coherent and compelling strategy to build upon best practices and research. The biggest challenge in the schools is the disposition of objectivity that does not account for a vantage point, positionality, and perspectives assuming that one's racial identity is irrelevant. Most independent schools' diversity and inclusion practices focus on numeric representation and do not invest in structures and systems that will create an environment that values equity and inclusion in earnest. As a result, the students of colour have trouble experiencing belonging as they do not feel accepted, respected, and supported by others in the school environment. Schools that value diversity and pursue equity and inclusion should agitate for a shift from seeing students of colour as perpetual visitors and instead

engage them as co-creators of a wholesome community of belonging where all students can thrive.

The critical consciousness that gave the students of colour a voice to challenge the dominant narrative and deconstruct systems through the #Black@ social media accounts challenged schools to work against systems of oppression. The degree of mistrust and wariness about anti-blackness and encounters with stereotyping and prejudice that emerged during the national reckoning with race is emblematic of the struggles students of colour face in predominantly white independent schools. Thus, the clamour of students of colour in dominated spaces calls on schools to create healthy ecosystems and re-imagine the student experience in communities of belonging, where students can authentically engage and express their full identities. It is a clarion call to schools to deepen conversations about race and work toward the best anti-racism framework in independent school communities to realise their diversity rationale truly.

This study set out to establish the role played by racial socialisation as a cultural asset the students of colour embody, thus facilitating their ability to adapt to and thrive in White dominated spaces. The racial socialisation the students of colour received in their homes served as a buffer that helped them reorient and adapt during unpleasant encounters with their peers and instructors from different backgrounds. However, navigating predominantly White spaces where they have one dimension of their identity reflected at them can be challenging for the students of colour who did not grow up with privilege and do not have the degree of confidence to walk into a room, raise their hand and talk to adults (Jack, 2016). While they may not have the generational wealth, students of colour come to predominantly White independent schools with a high level of racial consciousness through the racial socialisation they receive from their families (Anderson et al., 2018; Stevenson, 2014). They became familiar with the structural injustice of racism quite early. They carry stories of generations of sacrifices their families have made (Anderson et al., 2018; Gaylord-Harden et al., 2012) to gain access to and the prestige of the elite independent schools. These young people have a keen understanding of

the racial dynamics at play in society and gain preparation and coping strategies against racial stress and discrimination from accounts of experiences of racial discrimination among family members, which improves their psychological well-being and strengthens familial bonds (Anderson et al., 2018). As evident in the sample of 12th-grade students interviewed in this study, they grow into their self-identity as they begin to embrace and assert all the intersecting dimensions of their identity and craft a self-identity that honours and balances the social contexts they navigate (Barber, King, & Baxter Magolda, 2013; Baxter Magolda, 2014). They develop maturity as they fluidly navigate the adaptive challenges that require a shift and reorientation in how the students make sense of experiential knowledge, their intersecting identities, and social relations. In the process, the students of colour acknowledge the role of culture and context in shaping their transformation and readiness for the next phase of their educational trajectory. While the students' cultural knowledge helps them respond to the occasional insensitive or offensive racial comments they hear inside and outside the classroom, it should not exonerate the schools from intentionally dismantling the systemic barriers and fostering communities of belonging for all students.

The students' narratives pointed to perceptions of cognitive dissonance in being hyper-visible yet invisible in the dominated spaces within their independent schools. Their disquiet pointed to the duality, the double consciousness (Du Bois, 1903) of a Black presence in the context of American racialized societal structures. The students' perception of their presence in these spaces contrasted with their desire to expand their cultural lenses upon entering the independent school world. They grappled with proclamations of the diverse and inclusive communities that independent schools have styled themselves yet do not acknowledge the complexity of the lived Black experience (Miles, 2019) of bias, stereotypes, and anti-Blackness in those spaces. There was a marked sense of purpose in sharing their narratives as reframing and retelling a deficit narrative (Leonardo, 2011) and locating the impact of racial inequality in the lived reality of students of colour, particularly Black students. The students'

counter-narratives challenged the dominant colourblind ideologies espoused in institutions that prop up hegemonic structures and proclamations of treating all students equally while denying and silencing the persistent degradation the students of colour experience through the verbal jabs and slights from their educators and peers.

This study found that the strong sense of identity and adherence to values instilled at home contributes to the capacity of students of colour to buffer against and subvert the impact of alienation and marginalization. The socialisation the students of colour received earlier in their homes had equipped them with the tools to enhance their attempts to negotiate access into and adapt to the elite culture of independent schools and centre their social and academic engagement in an educational journey characterised by timorous efforts to connect with peers. These students' search for meaning was often obviated by the normalised silence about race and having to redefine their lives in ways consistent with the dominant culture. They fought perceptions of inadequacy while negotiating and traversing the invisible cultural and social borders that downplay the absence of affirming images of their culture in the learning space.

Nevertheless, even among the nine Black students interviewed in this study, a clear socioeconomic class distinction was amplified during the data analysis. It was not lost on me that the participants' four years of high school positioned them in the throes of grappling with their perceptions of racial identity while navigating other identity development minefields. While the students' narratives unmask the implications of racial inequality in U.S. society, they also credit the racial socialisation they received in their families and communities before venturing into independent schools. Growing up in the United States, students of colour become familiar with varying levels of otherness in a society where "racism is systematically and psychologically embedded in society [systems and structures], its practices, and institutions" (Hauber-Ozer, Call-Cummings, Hassel-Goodman, Chan, 2021: 2). As such, the students' reflections about resilience pointed to some sayings they heard growing up that helped them to bounce back from

any setbacks they experienced, as one of them noted about the internalized aphorisms from his early years.

> "They say things that sound really harsh, but it all comes from a place of them wanting you to succeed" (Stan).

Hence, reading such statements also made me interrogate the context of the experiences and social interactions, probing the intentions, purposes, and points of view (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002) of the people they interacted with. Racial socialisation in the form of verbal expressions (aphorisms) and behaviour models the students shared in the narratives indicated the racial preparation Black children learn to see themselves as members of the Black community. The students' narratives illuminated their parents' emphasis on facets of the Black culture while teaching them how to cope with racial discrimination in society (Stevenson, 2014; Steinbugler, 2015).

Therefore, the in-depth semi-structured individual interviews and focus group interviews illuminated the implications of Yosso's (2005) cultural capital in the form of the community cultural wealth on the students' academic skills and resilience in this research context. The students' resilience was evidence of the outcome of the racial socialisation they received in the home, which resulted in their ability to adapt and reorient themselves to the circumstances with which they were confronted and not lose sight of their goals of accessing social mobility. Utilising practitioner research and counter-storytelling as an epistemological framework that places dialogue at the centre, the study uncovered new knowledge to illuminate the students' agility as they leveraged the habitus' buffering capabilities while unmasking the systemic political dimensions at play in this educational context. Ultimately, they learn to embrace their racial identity as they navigate and negotiate race relations among peers and educators. The students' ability to embrace their racial identity spans several years in their high school career, from when their racial identity does not have as much salience to when it becomes central to their identity as they transition into higher education.

The key findings in this research illuminated the need to revisit the diversity rationale to increase inclusivity for students with marginalized identities. The research challenges independent schools to examine systemic barriers for students from under-represented communities and create structures that support an inclusive school where all students' intersecting identities are affirmed and celebrated. Conversations with the students of colour in this study revealed the fallacy of pursuing diversity for the benefit of the White dominant class without a commitment to creating a supportive learning environment where all students can flourish, feel supported, and experience belonging (Barton, 2021). Therefore, promoting and cultivating diversity and inclusion without interrogating the American history of disenfranchisement and racial oppression is not only a disservice to the students of colour who do not enjoy the same access to resources and quality education but to all students who tinker with artificial harmony and never really learn to engage authentically with people from different backgrounds. Students from backgrounds of power and privilege deserve to be challenged to think about the systemic inequalities as much as the students from under-served communities are prepared for encounters with peers from the racial majority groups. Affluent families should not be the only ones guaranteed an audience with the school administration; policy addressing social justice concerns in schools should not be held ransom to the transactional relationship where a threat to withhold funding dollars exists.

In schools, race-neutral policies, systems, and structures inadvertently promote racial inequality and perpetuate oppressive practices by adopting the colourblind mindset that regards race and racism as irrelevant in post-racial America (Warikoo, 2019). The students of colour deal with the burden of educating peers about cultural insensitivity, social inequality, and oppression. However, they bear the scars of those interactions' long-term impact. Claims of ignorance about the harm caused and expectations to forgive and forget to leave the students of colour hopeless and bitter. An agile approach incorporating cultural competency and humility education is necessary to achieve social cohesion and

intercultural understanding among the students. Much like the socialisation in the home, schools also play a socialisation role as purveyors of culture. When there is a misalignment between the school's mission and vision with the aspirations of cultural diversity in practice, fostering a racially diverse school community should include an understanding of privilege, power, and the historical roots of oppression in American society (Warikoo, 2019). Indeed, many White educators never learned about race early on in their lives; thus, facilitating productive conversations about race is a boon that could help improve the racial climate in the schools.

Therefore, the onus is on the schools to reimagine the structures, policies, and practices. A further examination of the systemic dimensions in this study has implications beyond this research site. The students' learning experiences and negotiating access to the institutional culture significantly influenced their academic development. The institutional culture impacts their self-efficacy, the belief in one's ability to succeed in a new educational setting (Bandura, 1997). The students of colour embodied the habitus of the socio-cultural and socio-historical discourses that have fostered their success in various fields and facilitated their ability to negotiate social spaces (Bourdieu 1984, 1992, 1997, 2013). As a system of social reproduction, education should interrogate the implications of normalising the White American experience in American independent schools and its role in reinforcing epistemologies and socially constructed racial hierarchies. The students of colour should be supported to activate their agency to craft a counter-story to affirm their voices and identity in the dominated spaces and resist the unconscious social structures embedded in the American education system.

6.2 Recommendations

It is imperative for independent schools that commit to diversity, equity, and inclusion to commit to creating an environment that fosters a high level of trust, where students can experience psychological safety, a safe school climate where individuals feel comfortable to speak up and challenge opinions with no fear of retribution. The success of this initiative depends

on adaptive leadership that employs well-thought-out strategies toward equity goals and a commitment to a systemic culture change. Even so, operationalizing the initiative in earnest should be a strategic effort aligned with the school's vision to ensure a cultural shift that becomes systemic and motivates, energizes, and engages all stakeholders. It does not help to focus on the marketing and the optics, as the students in this research point out. Without it being a meaningful change that most stakeholders take ownership of and deliver on the core activities, such efforts are perceived to be performative.

Following up on school administrations' promises after 2020 racial reckoning, independent schools should re-examine their context and history regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion. Diversity should be seen as a source of strength rather than a challenge to overcome; thus, school leadership should create norms and behaviours focused on belonging and inclusion and counteractions that communicate unconscious bias in all its forms. Schools should identify the crucial equity performance and opportunity gaps and determine focus areas for equity and access. They should identify targeted actions to address equity challenges and foster a sense of belonging to enable students to perform at the highest level. It is imperative to control perceptions and ensure their staff accepts and honours diversity across age, ability, culture, ethnicity, language proficiency, nationality, race, religion, sex, gender identity, special needs, and socioeconomic levels. There needs to be a shift from opening access and bringing in students of diverse backgrounds as guests with no voice, not reflected in the curriculum, and no representation among the educators and administrators. Feeling accepted influences multiple dimensions of the students' behaviour and motivation. The students' motivation to persist in a high-stakes academic environment also depends on their experience of membership and support in the classroom and the school.

6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

This evidence-based practitioner research focused on what works in the diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging space to inspire innovative and effective practice and provide psychological safety to enhance the cultural capital of students of colour in the independent college preparatory school experience. The capital portfolio students of colour bring into independent schools iterates a significant shift from the deficit narrative of the racialized experiences preponderant in research studies that examine the experiences of students of colour (Gildersleeve et al., 2011; Ladson Billings & Tate, 1995; DeCuir-Gunby, 2007).

This research contributes to the body of work focused on improving the diversity rationale in independent schools to extend beyond representation and intentionally focus on the well-being of the students from marginalised communities in the elite, predominantly White U.S. independent schools. It is critical to pay attention to the social class disparities among students of colour rather than regarding them as a homogenous group. As one of the students pointed out that, "My Black is not the only Black," it is possible to further alienate the students of colour by treating the Black experience as homogenous, not learning the students' names, or showing curiosity to get to know their stories. There is a need to focus on the structural impact of racism in education rather than focusing on unsustainable solutions through which structural racism is maintained and enacted in education to sustain racial privilege. A social justice imperative in education calls for schools to create learning environments that acknowledge the cultural knowledge and lived experiences of the students of colour and eschew the colour mute policies espoused by politicians and activists who oppose diversity, equity, and inclusion programs and initiatives. Focusing on diversifying student demographics while ignoring the realities of the students' lived experiences falls short of instilling humanistic values to ensure that society will progress toward equity and justice.

This research presents the impetus to reframe how schools approach diversity initiatives to include professional development for educators and administrators to courageously contend with the implications of America's complex historical racial hierarchy and rethink the racially mute independent school landscape. The colour-mute practice de-emphasizes cultural differences in institutional practices, procedures, and policies contradicts the schools' commitment to transformation and valuing diversity. Therefore, independent schools must examine themselves through a racial lens to understand the experiences of students of colour and create a learning environment that addresses the incongruent experiences. The focus should be on preparing students to navigate the ever-changing world and recognizing the cultural assets the students of colour bring into the character and calibre of 21st-century independent schools. While there is value in maintaining the prestige of the elite independent schools, ethnically diverse school communities call for intentionally planning an inclusive school climate, curriculum, and pedagogic practices. As such, there needs to be a more pragmatic approach to providing access to students of colour from economically disadvantaged backgrounds beyond benevolence. Dominant deficit models and theories obscure the reality of the cultural capital the students bring because they do not reinforce the dominant narrative. There is a dearth of practitioner research that speaks to the lived experiences of students of colour and how they navigate the exclusive culture of the elite independent schools.

Thus, the challenge is to create learning environments that acknowledge the lived experiences of the students of colour and the willingness and capacity among educators to think about the students as racial beings and engage in the process of ongoing inquiry (Michael, 2015). This practitioner research presents evidence that the Return on Investment (ROI) for diversity efforts demands that schools demonstrate their awareness of cultural differences and commit to creating an environment where all students feel valued and respected. Valuing diversity and commitment to transformation should involve intentional efforts to enhance

equity, inclusion, and belonging and provide psychological safety for students to take risks without fear of judgment.

Cultivating an inclusive learning environment is challenging and requires intentionally creating an inclusive environment that fosters a culture of belonging where everyone thrives. When people from diverse backgrounds and viewpoints (students and colleagues) come together, it is essential to create community agreements to ensure that everyone can engage and work together productively. Mitigating implicit biases and microaggressions is a big challenge for independent schools and education because it will be hard to change people's habits. Schools must commit to creating a sense of belonging for students and colleagues, and educators should ensure that learning content, pedagogic practices, and materials, including print, images around the institution, social media posts, and the school website, reflect a diverse and inclusive community. Therefore, empowering students to recognise and address micro-aggressions and guiding them to build coalitions with peers to hold themselves accountable. The 2020 racial reckoning taught us that schools should be communities of accountability and that educators should address microaggressions, recognizing that equity and inclusion work is everybody's work.

Recognizing and mitigating implicit biases and microaggressions is an important step toward creating a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. To help to promote a sense of belonging and support for all individuals, particularly those from marginalised or underrepresented communities, it is important to take steps to address social injustices in our schools. Setting schoolwide expectations for behaviour improves the school climate and student well-being, encourages respectful behaviour, and clarifies that microaggressions and harmful behaviour are unacceptable. Creating equity-minded institutions requires ongoing effort and commitment from everyone.

Chapter 7: References

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