African Nova Scotian Dream Keepers: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Promising Practices

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Abstract

The systemic educational inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners have been well documented over the years. The Nova Scotia government's acknowledgment and institutional responses to these inequities, have so far failed to address the persistence of the disproportionate representation of African Nova Scotian learners scoring low on provincial student performance assessments, and high in school suspensions. This study explored two research questions: (1) How are teachers of students of African ancestry culturally responsive? and (2) What are the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia? It relied on a qualitative methodology informed by principles embedded in critical ethnographic studies. My methods included consultation with the African Nova Scotian community to identify teachers who are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners, and who have championed promising practices and approaches. I conducted one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with four African Nova Scotian and six white teachers using anti-racist, Africentric and culturally relevant and responsive lenses to analyze the data. Decolonialism and critical race theory were applied in the literature review to help analyze and better understand the Nova Scotian context. My study relied on the expertise of African Nova Scotian community members through community consultations to indicate which teachers they understand to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. My findings reveal that research participants generally prioritized: (1) the value of growth and learning to academic success, (2) the necessity of creating safer learning environments so students can bring their full selves into the classroom, while practicing the ability to communicate across their differences effectively, and (3) the importance of teaching

students to critically reflect on the ways systems preserve the human rights and dignity of every individual, and to take appropriate actions when they do not. In terms of characteristics, the participants demonstrated an ability to empathize with students, which inspired an internalized commitment to their students' social, emotional, cultural, and academic needs. The research participants were able to develop meaningful and authentic relationships with their students and community. They were able to focus on students' well-being based on the needs identified through the relationship and improve their ability to become better equipped to respond to their students' academic, social, emotional, and cultural needs through an ongoing commitment to teaching and learning. The interaction and overlapping of these findings model the type of allyship required to respond to the inequities experienced by racialized learners. This dissertation concludes with recommendations for Bachelor of Education programs, in-service teachers, and the education system in general.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the many "walking wounded" from our African Nova Scotian communities across the province who internalized the systemic inability of our education system to be responsive to their social, emotional, cultural, and academic need as a personal deficiency in themselves. I want to say clearly that you are not "failures." You were failed, and your perseverance in life is evidence of our greatness as a community. In addition, I would also like to dedicate this to my entire family, starting with my grandparents, who raised me for a time, and to whom I continued to return—Mary Helen "Helen Mom" and Quentin Benjamin "Benny Dad" Morrison. Tracey, you have been with me and supported me throughout our life's journey together for over 30 plus years. Throughout this academic pursuit, I cannot begin to express the depth of my gratitude for your love and commitment to me, and to our children Medayah, Marquis, Mali, Maziah, Meisha, and Mayes.

To my mother, Margo, the original "Google" who, when I would ask a question, would look it up in the encyclopedia, and sit across from me until my homework was done. To my sister Misty—whom I did not tell that I was studying for a PhD, to prevent her from doing it first. I appreciate the unwavering belief in me and support along the way from my favourite brothers, Marlo and Morgan. I thank my grandparents Charles, "Charlie" and Evangeline, "Vange" Cromwell for regularly taking me up to the corner. The African proverb applies to our family, community, and the communities across this province—If you want to go quickly, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

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I also acknowledge the support of the African Nova Scotian educational infrastructure, including the African Canadian Services Branch, the Council on African Canadian Education, the Black Educators Association, the Delmore Buddy Daye Learning Institute, regional educators, race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights coordinators, African Nova Scotian

Student Support Workers, education committees, parent support groups, and many other community leaders across the province. I am grateful for the support of the Inter-University Research Network funding, without which this study would not have been possible. To the teacher participants, my heartfelt appreciation of your dedication and unwavering commitment to all students, especially to our African Nova Scotian learners' social, emotional, cultural, and academic needs. You are the African Nova Scotian Dream Keepers.

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Chapter 1: Introduction to the Study

Harlem

by Langston Hughes

What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore—

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over—

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?

I refer to dream keepers in the title of my dissertation, "African Nova Scotian Dream Keepers: Culturally Responsive Teaching and Promising Practices" because dreams can inspire people to work towards something that seems currently unattainable to them. While all parents hope their children will be better off than they were, the historical experiences of people of African ancestry demonstrate that this hope is more out of reach for them, than it is for those with more privileged social identities, or who are members of the dominant group generally (Thiessen, 2009; Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2019). The recognition that the cultural exclusion of learners of African ancestry is a central contributing factor to the student performance inequities and school climate concerns experienced by Black

students. This understanding places the responsibility to be adaptive on the system, that is resistant and resilient to deficit thinking. Culturally relevant and responsive teaching is intent on utilizing "the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse [African Nova Scotian] students to make learning more appropriate" (Gay, 2010, p. 31) along with a criterion including the responsibility "to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and the development of sociopolitical and critical consciousness" (Ladson-Billings, 1995, p. 483). The framework organized through the inclusion of these understandings aligns with the historical and ongoing conditions of education experienced by racialized learners. A culturally relevant and responsive approach is significant in exploring and identifying the themes, characteristics, and approaches of teachers identified who support Black learners, when posing these research questions to them. Therefore, it was my goal to identify and interview teachers who work to keep the dreams of African Nova Scotian learners alive, by recognizing their cultural contributions to the learning process, and identifying strategies to expand this impact toward their academic success and future opportunities.

I wanted to learn from teachers of any background from across Nova Scotia about the strategies, approaches, and ways they are able to reach, meet, engage, motivate, and be responsive to the needs, interests, and backgrounds of their students. My intention was to collect opinions from representative teachers from across multiple grade levels, elementary to middle/high school backgrounds, in urban, suburban, and/or rural settings. I was curious about teachers' diverse backgrounds and social identities, inclusive of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, ability, or religion. I hoped to access a diverse pool of participants that would provide the most universal or core principles, themes, and approaches to culturally relevant and responsive teaching.

However, my participant inclusion criteria were based on reliance on community members' referrals, in order to identify teachers who were culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian students. This was important since culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy acknowledges the exclusion of Black students being central to student performance inequities and school climate concerns.

The key research questions posed by this study were: How are teachers of students of African ancestry culturally responsive? What are the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia? To answer these questions, I first engaged with the insights, expertise and feedback from African Nova Scotian community members through community consultations.

Imagine growing up as a child in a relatively isolated but in many ways very safe and nurturing environment both at home and in your immediate community. Literally (and figuratively), your neighbours are your grandparents, great aunts and uncles, and cousins. You can walk the roads freely and visit anyone's home for a quick chat, a drink of water, something to eat, to use the washroom or phone. In other words, wherever you were, you were home. The adults in your community would lay down the law, correct you if necessary and call your parents to let them know why they corrected you. While this was not always pleasant, there was a comfort and a tremendous sense of belonging because you knew you were loved, and your neighbours had high expectations for you. This was my experience growing up in the Black communities of Danvers and Southville.

Background of the Study

When I was born at the Digby General Hospital in Nova Scotia on December 14, 1975, my mother was 19 years old and a student completing her diploma in business education at the Annapolis Valley vocational school near Middleton. My father was a student at the vocational school, studying automotive body repair. Initially, my young parents were financially unable to provide a house for us, that we could call home. After coming home from the hospital after a bout of jaundice, on December 19, 1975, I went to live with my maternal grandparents, "Helen Mom" and 'Benny Dad' in a little house on a dirt road at the corner of Southville and Riverdale in Digby County.

Southville Road leads back to what is known as New France or "Electric City," because it was one of the first places to have electricity in North America. The community of Southville is located on the periphery of the larger community of Weymouth, populated mainly by more affluent white people who owned or ran businesses there. Weymouth was the town where the consolidated school of the late 1950s was located. It absorbed the small village schools formerly located in Danvers, Weaver Settlement, Weymouth Falls, and students from various backwoods communities, which were either closed or where they were transitioned to after elementary school. The community of Southville was racially mixed. A large portion of the Black community lived in Southville, but the racial makeup was interspersed with working class white people. The white people mainly worked in the forestry trades like logging, cutting firewood, or what we generally called, working in the woods.

Many members of the Black community possessed the same skills as their white counterparts. Black community members often ended up working for white folks, or were forced to sell their wood to white people who had better access to the market, and who could turn a

profit from buying for less and selling for more. Southville and Danvers were on the borders of Weymouth. These settlements were deemed undesirable, for those who could afford to live in or much closer to the town of Weymouth. My great-great-grandparents were able to purchase what today seems like large tracts of land, upon which to build their home and farm. This land was eventually divided amongst their children, and then passed down to their grandchildren.

Successive generations established homes and families, many of which I am either directly or peripherally related to. There were few exceptions where interracial relationships did occur. This overall dynamic led to the relationally interconnected Black communities of Southville, Danvers, Weymouth Falls, Hassetts, Acaciaville, Jordantown and beyond. This reality often meant that when people from these communities met for the first time, the following types of conversation would occur:

Stranger: “You from Southville?”

Me: “My grandparents are, but I am from Danvers!

Stranger: “Yeah, I think that is out in back of Weymouth. What’s your name?”

Me: “Martin Morrison!”

Stranger: “I don’t know many Morrisons from up there; you related to Mark and Matthew?”

Me: “Ya, they’re my uncles!”

Stranger: “So your mother is Marcia or Margo?”

Me: “My mother’s name is Margo!”

Stranger: “Oh, okay, I got you now, you are Margo and Andy’s son!”

Me: “Yes, I am the oldest.”

Stranger: “So you’re Misty’s brother?”

Me: “Yup!”

These exchanges capture the significance of family connections and sense of community amongst African Nova Scotians. These conversations establish a sense of validation and affirmation of one's place in the community, and this belonging demonstrates a sense of mutual respect, support, and understanding of one's lived experience as an African Nova Scotian.

I moved into my parents' house in Danvers to live with my mom and dad when I was three or four years old. This house was about six kilometers away from my maternal grandparents (Helen Mom's and Benny Dad's) home, and an even shorter distance across the street from my paternal grandparents, Vange and Charlie Cromwell. Once I had moved in with my parents and new baby sister, Misty Rose, each opportunity, whether on weekends, during summertime, or simply for babysitting purposes, I would beg to go "up to the corner" to Helen Mom's and Benny Dad's house. At my parents' house, when it got dark out, and I was ready to go to bed, I would walk across the road and ask Grampy Charlie to take me "up to the corner." We would go through the pageantry of him saying, "No, it's too dark out!" to, "Well, get my boots." I would try to put Grampy's boots on his feet as he pretended, he could not get his feet to fit into the boots. Finally, he would say, "Get in the car," and we would be off to 'the corner.'

My world was cozy and safe, warm and nourishing. At Helen Mom's and Benny Dad's home, I remember sitting by the wood stove on Helen Mom's lap, with Benny Dad sitting at the table playing solitaire. I remember the low ceilings, the oilcloth on the floor, the floral wallpaper, and the wood paneling that extended four feet up the wall, with a routed wood border for detail, enveloped in the warmth, love, and a sense of security that was a constant for me right into adulthood. The smell of Helen Mom's cooking, and the return of her children—my mother, aunt and uncles, to see what she made for lunch. The sound of home is the symphony of bubbling soup or stew, the lifting of covers off pots, the rattling of silverware and plates being taken out of

the cupboard, and the suctioning sound of the door of the fridge opening and closing while someone grabbed butter, or milk, or chow chow and pickles, along with the molasses cookies, cake or ice cream.

On the wall in the kitchen, there was also Benny Dad's gun rack with rifles, and a birch bark moose call that was passed down to him by his grandfather, Ben Hatfield. I remember the smell of freshly cut wood, and wood shavings on the runner over the grey carpet in the porch leading from the back step up to the kitchen. I loved the sound of Dad telling stories of people he worked with in the woods, and some of the antics they used to get up to while working or hunting with my other grandfather in days gone by.

"Helen Mom" was always a hard worker, and taking care of her children and keeping her house clean was always a point of pride for her, after a short-lived career of cleaning houses for white families. My mother told me that Helen Mom took a job working for a couple, who she thought were mutual friends of both her and Benny Dad, until one day she overheard her "friend" say to a white female visitor, while Helen Mom was on her hands and knees scrubbing the floor that, "Those people do such good work!" Obviously, the sting of the insult and hurt of being reduced to "those people" from a perceived friend, affected Helen Mom, and she finished the job and left. After discussing the incident with Benny Dad, she never returned to work for other people's families again.

"Benny Dad" was also always trying to improve financially through entrepreneurial endeavours. He worked in the woods and cut firewood, purchased more land, tractors, tree farmers, and eventually bought a lumber mill. While he seldom talked about it, Helen Mom would share stories about the ways barriers were placed in front of him, such as how someone undercut him on a piece of land he was looking to buy, or how someone would ask him to saw

an order of logs but bring him the tops, which were much more labour intensive to saw, and less lucrative, so that he would not go beyond the expectations of what they thought he was worth. In spite of all of this, Helen Mom and Benny Dad were never defeated. They did not "explode." They persisted, and did so with dignity, integrity, and a righteous anger towards injustice. This is imprinted in who I am, and the legacy that I wish to continue.

The trials and tribulations my grandparents experienced involved sacrifices required to fulfill the commitment and dream of a better life, which they, in many ways, succeeded in providing for their children and their children's children. This dream is no different from their parents' and grandparents' dreams of a better life.

My desire to visit Benny Dad and Helen Mom regularly, represents a place of comfort and belonging that stands in stark contrast to the places I have experienced during my life, including when I became a Black teacher as an adult, working within an education system where I felt unwelcomed and ill-prepared to respond to the needs of Black learners.

Benny Dad and Helen Mom's house is the backdrop to my dream. This is the dream, is it not? Dreams are inspirational and aspirational. Dreams are things that we imagine we want to be or do. We search for ways to attain the dream that we aspire to, and in many ways, our institutions tell us we can be anything we want to be. This is how dreams and aspirations are built into creeds, social, and national identities that evolve into dominant messages. Perhaps the most famous dream is that of Dr. Martin Luther King's (1963), *I Have a Dream* speech**.** It is important to note that King's dream was grounded in the experience of oppression and the struggles for civil rights in the American context. Here, what is included in a "dream" reveals and locates our particular reality. And here, Martin's dream, my dream, is rooted in a desire for opportunities previously denied to Black people within Nova Scotia.

In reflecting on the journey that has brought me to this point in my life, both personally and professionally, I can say that fundamentally, it has and always will be about the love I received from, and have, for my community. The lessons of integrity, righteousness, justice and support they have provided me with have and continue to serve me well in navigating incidents and issues that require a critical lens about the approaches, attitudes and behaviours of teacher colleagues in schools. While I felt and continue to feel I have much to offer public education, this diplomatic approach requires a level of patience, intensity and tediousness that eventually can wear you down because everyone is not working with the same sense of urgency.

Eventually, in my role as the race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights (RCH) coordinator I became tremendously frustrated about my ability to evoke the type of change I felt was necessary in responding to the needs of marginalized learners. We had received data that evidenced long standing concerns about inequities in education from the African Nova Scotian community. We had recommendations, along with timelines, for implementation outlining how to respond to these identified issues. However, there was a lack of a sense of urgency, systemic commitment, and resources being offered to implement these recommendations, despite being fully accepted and endorsed by the Minister of Education. These continued conflicts within the education system, between acknowledging an issue and not meeting the commitments to address the issue, are what motivated me to apply to the doctoral program and, ultimately, to embark upon this research.

I think the cultural void that exists for me, and perhaps for many people of African descent, in navigating between the truth and the lies and/or misconceptions about who we are and what we can be in this world, contributes to a sense of loss. There is an incoherence, frustration, and sometimes anger about this missing, deliberately omitted, or cultural

misrepresentation of me and my community. I perpetually question whether I can effectively articulate my feelings, thoughts and understandings about incidents that are not the lived experiences of those holding dominant identities and the power they possess. While this struggle seems to be fundamental in any person's life, for me, it is complicated by the "route and the roots" of who we are, how we arrived here, and the spaces within which we must operate as people of African ancestry in this very oppressive and Eurocentric world.

The mutual love and respect for the people in my community did not always exist between them and the institutions we would all have to confront. Even the best among us could not count on being judged by the content of their character. I remember being coached about showing people respect, using manners, but also being permitted and prepared to fight anyone at school that sought to dehumanize me through derogatory comments like "nigger." I was coached about being prepared to defend myself with receipts if I were ever accused of stealing, because Black people got followed around in stores. There was this balance between being aware, respectful, and maintaining dignity as it related to encountering racism, which, when overtly expressed, was much easier to respond to than the everyday incidental and implicit racism generally characterized today as microaggressions (Saad, 2020). Microaggressions are the more common everyday verbal or non-verbal slights and insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to racialized or people with non-dominant social identities (Sue, et al., 2007).

While my pride in my community and knowledge of self, occurred as an immediate connection to who I am, in relation to my family and community, there was a larger void about who I am in the larger context of the world as a person of African descent and this void was and is deliberately exploited by representatives of institutions like school because representatives of

the system in positions of authority understand your vulnerabilities. I am still struck by how this very complex feeling of acceptance in one's own community, while becoming a stereotype when you leave your community, was expressed by a student during an activity about stereotyping with Black high school students.

An African Nova Scotian student participant in a high school workshop said that when she was in her community, there was a sense of comfort because people could locate her, who she was, her mother, her reputation and most importantly, her character. However, when she left her community, she said she felt summarized, she became a stereotype of, usually negative, composite of assumptions about what a young Black girl was like by white citizens.

Baldwin (1972) alludes to the fact that, in any case, ignorance allied with power, is the most ferocious enemy justice can have, and generously characterizes the demonstration of white dominance as ignorance, because it suggests not knowing better. However, this is the most frustrating part of attempting to respond to current inequities. Many attempts to articulate one's reality as a person of African descent to the system are dispelled, deflected and explained away by the persistent prevalence and power of white privilege.

Conservative perspectives, which seek to protect the status quo, often characterize progressive efforts to reform education to meet the needs of marginalized learners as too costly or unnecessary, take precedence over Africentric perspectives of unity and community because the meta-narrative contributes to an assumption of equality, the myth of meritocracy and any alternative perspectives are characterized as unfounded or dismissed as special interest claims (Apple, 2006).

The spectrum of offences to my identity as a person of African Ancestry, and the outright resistance to my ability to be successful, occurs through processes of microaggressions that

suggest that I do not look, act or behave "normally," leading to the outright denial of opportunities and justice. Coates (2015) describes it this way:

> The destroyers are merely men enforcing the whims of our country, correctly interpreting its heritage and legacy. It is hard to face this. But all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience, that it dislodges brains, blocks airways, rips muscles, extracts organs, cracks bones, breaks teeth. (p. 10)

This is the fundamental drive to seek knowledge and speak truth to power about the disconnect between how I see the world working for and against me and my community. This personal incoherence between the beauty and pain in the people of my community, the struggle against oppressive mechanisms and the outright invalidations of the Black experience by representatives of the systems compelled me to seek truths to reconcile these gaps. This is why I wanted to teach.

These foundational connections created a cultural understanding of what it meant to be a family that emotionally impacts me to this day when I think about it. My life early on was filled with love, support, understanding and kindness. However, many pieces of this brief biography, if you will, are not conventional from a "traditional" perspective, from my parents not being married, to having had a child at such a young age, to calling my grandparents Helen Mom and Benny Dad, to having my mother's last name and not my father's.

I only became aware of my unconventionality after I started school. Each question at school about my difference or unconventionality was, in a way, an indictment to a certain extent of my family and me. Ironically, to my parents and grandparents, school and education were always the answer to the barriers that we experienced as Black people.

Throughout my life and educational experiences, I have had to explore the interplay between my personal and racialized identities and the ways in which they have othered me. My family knew we were different in the eyes of the dominant culture, and sought to prepare us to resist this judgment, this indictment, by pushing education as a solution to our oppression because it represented hope, and a mechanism to speak back to the oppressors through our success, accomplishments, and credentials.

I share this story because, for one, it captures the significance of education to my family, and, secondly, it demonstrates a cultural, communal approach to supporting its members, as demonstrated by the Black community. However, how many Black people were, and continue to be, sacrificed through these processes of socialization, and removed from ourselves by our schools to an acceptable "Blackness" by the system, whether intentionally or unintentionally? This is why an exploration of those teachers that allow students to use their cultural identity and experiences as a point of entry to access the curriculum, is necessary for African Nova Scotian learners to respond to our racialization from those seeking to maintain the status quo. We are entitled to an education that critically challenges dominant narratives and stereotypes about who we are. We deserve to be able to participate in this conversation on an equal footing with the institutional mechanisms. Equitable practices need to be applied to contribute to this effort. As King (1963) said, "I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character." We have not yet arrived at the place of King's dream. Racism has been and is still deeply embedded in our education system.

Statement of the Problem

My membership in the world of education as a teacher has helped me see more specifically how vulnerable learners are marginalized, and the ways in which voices challenging inequitable practices are ignored or silenced. My narrative is but only one account of the cultural dissonance experienced by vulnerable learners that our education system is unprepared to teach. However, there are many narratives that support this position, and it is evidenced by the historical confrontations between members of the African Nova Scotian communities across the province in response to racism experienced at school. For years, African Nova Scotians have encountered barriers and challenges in the education system (BLAC Report, 1994; Edwards, 1999; Frank, 1998; Green, 1980; CBC News, 2008) enduring alienation, racial, cultural oppression, and inequities in their formal education experiences (Lee & Marshall, 2009; Parris & Brigham, 2010). Many have called on the government to redress inequities by utilizing government commitments for educational reforms, to enable African Nova Scotian learners to reach their full potential.

While the government has acknowledged the impact of systemic racism on opportunities for people of African ancestry (Minister's Panel on Education, 2014; MacEachern, 1995; Department of Education, 2010) and instituted recommendations to respond to these systemic barriers (BLAC Report, 1994; Nova Scotia's Action Plan for Education, 2015; Lee & Marshall, 2009), race-based student performance/achievement/opportunity gaps (Thiessen, 2009) and school climate concerns (Cambridge Educational Consultants, 2010) continue to persist. These include racism and its manifestations, teacher insensitivity and low expectations, and inadequate curriculum (Black Learners Advisory Committee Report, 1994; Lee & Marshall, 2009). The curriculum, which includes the resource materials, teaching approaches and the relevancy of the

lessons, has inadequately reflected the needs of Black learners, contributing to students feeling unmotivated and/or reluctant to continue in the school system (Dei et al., 1997).

Many students of African descent struggle in school environments that threaten their self-image (Asante, 2007; Woodson, 2023). The BLAC Report (1994) describes a situation where, for more than 200 years, the Black population of Nova Scotia has been systematically denied an education on an equal footing with the white population, leading one Canadian historian to write of Nova Scotia that, "In education we find the most significant manifestation of colour prejudice in Canadian history (Cambridge Educational Consultants, 1994, p. 187). The provincial Minister of Education at the time, wrote the following response after receiving the BLAC Report (1994):

> I find in the BLAC Report on Education a disturbing portrait of a severely disadvantaged community of Black Nova Scotians. I have no doubt that, as BLAC suggests, this results in large measure from systemic racism and reflects the historic failure of the educational system to address the needs of the Black community. Thus, the Report's focus on institutional and systemic barriers is appropriate. It requires that the Department of Education and Culture's response ensures the issues raised are addressed in a fashion that will result in real change with lasting benefit to Black Nova Scotians. (MacEachern, 1995, p. 1)

A summary of the fundamental inequities outlined in the 1994 BLAC Report are captured in the African Nova Scotian student support worker guidelines, standards and evaluation (2011), identifying the following disparities:

- a lack of Black role models in the school environment
- the alienation of Black students in the total school environment
- a lack of visibility of Blacks consistently in the curriculum

- minimization of Black contributions to society
- a lack of a clear understanding of Black culture, behaviour, and activities by the teachers
- a low expectation for Black students
- a lack of relationship between the school staff and the Black community
- teacher insensitivity toward Black students
- ineffective discipline procedures
- a reluctance of administration to deal with social confrontations
- the high drop out rate of Black students
- the lower graduation rate of Black students
- the inability to motivate Black students
- the Black students guided to select non-university programs
- a disproportionate number of Black students in resource programs. (p. 1)

In response to these inequities, in June of 1995, the Black Learners Advisory Committee submitted its report containing 46 recommendations to address these concerns. The government amended the Education Act (1995) in an attempt to address both the dearth of culturally relevant materials in Nova Scotia schools, and to institute policies and programs to support this measure. As per Section 140 of the Education Act, 1995, school boards shall provide and implement programs and policies promoting African-Canadian education, and include in learning materials, information respecting the history, heritage, culture, traditions and contributions to society of African people. Additionally, the government solidified the Black Learners Advisory Committee into a permanent Council on African Canadian Education, designed to promote the community's interest and advise the Minister of Education. The Education Act, 1995 states that:

> 139 (1) There is hereby established a Council on African Canadian Education; (3) The Council shall (a) promote the rights and interests of African-Nova Scotians by providing recommendations to the Minister on programs and services in public schools and on adult education; and (b) perform such other duties as determined by the regulations. (p. 72).

Extending out of these amendments and recommendations from the 1994 BLAC Report, was the establishment of an African Canadian services division at the provincial department of education, the regional educators' program with the Black Educators Association, the provincial incentive program for Black students, the establishment of a position for an African Nova Scotian school board member; the race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights coordinator, school boards, and the student support worker program. These are all a part of a comprehensive strategy to utilize education as a key element for African Nova Scotian learners to acquire opportunities for a better life (Johnson, 1995).

However, recently collected data indicate there are still very disturbing signs of inequities between learners of African ancestry and learners of European descent (Jeffrey & Borden-Colley, 2014). Victor Thiessen (2009) submitted a report to the Nova Scotia Department of Education which indicated that inequities continue to persist in the education system. Thiessen (2009) shared in the main findings of the report that:

> Sizable gaps characterize the performances of learners of different cultural heritage. On all assessments, learners of a European heritage obtained the highest average scores, were most likely to be in the top 25 percent of achievers, and least likely to find themselves in the bottom 25 percent. African Nova Scotian learners typically fared worst on the provincial assessments, followed by First Nations and then Acadian learners. (p. 1)

Further to the identified concerns stemming from student performance gaps, additional data centering on school climates also indicated gaps between African Nova Scotian learners and European learners that advantaged learners of European descent (Cambridge Educational Consultants, 2010). In other words, as it relates to school climate questions, learners of European descent were more likely than African Nova Scotian learners to give more favourable responses to these questions, indicating disparities in comfort level and acceptance at school. The Tripod survey targets and condition analysis reports, are provided to Tri-County regional centres for education by the DEECD. They provide the basis for more recent understandings of African Nova Scotian learners identifying the climate in schools as less welcoming to them, than to learners of European ancestry (Cambridge Educational Consultants, 2010).

A presentation by the Department of Education called the Achievement Gap Initiative (AGI) Student Self-Identification Survey (SSIS) Provincial Data for the Nova Scotia School Board Association (NSSBA) (2011) isolated questions from the Achievement Gap Initiative data that corresponded directly to race. It highlights the disparity between white and Black learners in the belief in the necessity to have conversations about race in school. In response to the statement, “Our school would be better if we talked more about race and ethnicity,” the percentages of those who both agreed and strongly agreed were as follows: “Fifty-one percent of students of African descent, fifty percent Mi’kmaw descent students and thirty-five percent of students of European descent” (Department of Education, 2011, p. 3). These data connect to my own understanding of our education system regarding the disproportionate desire of learners of African and Mi’kmaw descent, to talk about race and ethnicity in school, either because they are under-represented or misrepresented racially.

Ultimately this expression of concern and desire to meaningfully talk about racism in our schools are currently reflected in disproportional representation of African Nova Scotian learners provincially in suspension rates (Woodbury, 2016), in placement on individual program plans (IPPs) and performance on provincial assessments (DEECD, 2018). The lack of success in responding to the current challenges that exist for Black learners requires an ongoing review of the educational approaches embedded in the number of reports and their responses to the barriers.

Purpose of the Study

How are teachers of students of African ancestry culturally responsive? What are the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia? These questions have emerged as a result of the lived experiences and extended exploration of the impact and implication of racism on African Nova Scotian learners. Statistics Canada's "Black History Month 2023 … by the Numbers" (Statistics Canada, 2023) reported that in 2021, there were 1.5 million people in Canada who identified as Black, with the largest increase by 349,000 between 2016 to 2021. Predictions indicate that the Black population continues to grow and may double to three million by 2041. African Canadians account for approximately 4.3 % of the overall Canadian population, and make up 16.1% of Canada's racialized population. The Black population is younger than the total population, with 26.1 % of that population being under the age of 15, compared to only 16.5% of those being 15 years and under (Statistics Canada, 2023).

The growing population of African Canadians nationally, with a disproportionate representation of school-age learners being 15 and under, reminds us of the significance of being responsive to systemic racism. This highlights the future impact and implications of systemic

racism on the educational and employment opportunities for Black Canadians and Canada in general if racism goes unaddressed.

The Black population in Nova Scotia, as outlined in the "Diversity of the Black population in Canada: An overview" indicated that there were 21,910 people of African ancestry living in Nova Scotia based on the 2016 census (Statistics Canada, 2019). This number represents 2.4% of the province's total population and 1.8% of Canada's overall Black population. Much of the Black population living in Nova Scotia were born in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2019) with 71.8% of this population representing a third generation or more (approximately 15,730), 10.8% being second generation, (approximately 2,360), and 17.4% being first generation, (approximately 3,820).

These statistics account for the Atlantic provinces' longest history of Black settlements in Canada, with Nova Scotia having the largest Black population in the Atlantic provinces and the fifth largest Black population in the country. This is due to the fact that Black people have been in NS since the arrival of colonial countries during contact through people like Mathieu De Costa in 1605 and the subsequent waves of immigration by enslaved Africans, Black Loyalists, Jamaican Maroons, Black Refugees, and more recent immigrants (Pachai & Bishop, 2006).

Accounting for the "routes and roots" of African Nova Scotians in the province is significant because it differentiates the collective common racialized experiences that Black people endure nationally and globally, while at the same time accounting for the nuances, complexities, and implications of these cultural and racialized experiences, which include the length of time and power differentials experienced by different people over time. These factors are central to fully understanding and being responsive to the school climate and student performance gaps experienced by African Nova Scotia learners.

Accessing and utilizing provincial student performance assessment results in order to support relevant and appropriate educational interventions, while addressing the impact of systemic racism on African Nova Scotian student performance, has been elusive historically because of the absence of a self-identification and tracking mechanism. However, in instances where there has been a collection of self-identification data relating to issue-specific studies, combined with Statistics Canada data, they have identified inequities relating to education and socio-economic status, placing African Nova Scotians at a severe disadvantage compared to average white Nova Scotians (BLAC, 1994, p. 35). As a result of the inconsistent data collection regarding student performance and self-identification and the inequities exposed when these studies are conducted, a mandate of the BLAC Report was to develop systems, statistics and relevant research to determine the effectiveness of educational services and programs for Black learners (BLAC, 1994, p. 32).

For example, in the executive summary, Thiessen (2009) indicates that analysis utilized self-identification data from a student survey in 2006-2007, aligned with 11 student performance assessments collected between 2003 and 2008 by the Department of Education. The race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights coordinators from the Tri-County, Chignecto, and Strait school boards redirected their annual regional funding from the province to support this research. The report "presents an analysis of the reading and mathematics performances of Nova Scotian public school students who identified themselves as African Nova Scotia, First Nations (primarily Mi'kmaq), Acadian, or of other European ancestry" (Thiessen, 2009, p. 1). Thiessen further elaborates that:

- Sizable gaps characterize the performances of learners of different cultural heritage", and that "On all assessments, learners of a European heritage obtained the highest

> average scores, were most likely to be in the top 25 percent of achievers, and least likely to find themselves in the bottom 25 percent. African Nova Scotian learners typically fared worse on the provincial assessments, followed by First Nations and then Acadian learners.
>
> - The performance gaps in mathematics are of approximately the same magnitude as those found for reading. Further, the relative performances of African Nova Scotian, First Nations, Acadian, and learners of European descent are the same in mathematics as in reading, with the exception that First Nations and African Nova Scotian learners are approximately equal in their mathematics performance. (p. 1)

While not a consistent and ongoing framework to gather disaggregated statistical student performance data, once again, it does evidence, validate, and affirm the concerns expressed by racialized and marginalized community members regarding the impact of systemic racism on their children.

Thiessen (2009) goes on to say that "the cultural identity performance gaps manifest in grade 3—the earliest assessments available for this report. These gaps persist through the grade 9 assessment" (p. 1) without any evidence of change. This suggests that the efforts, or lack thereof, at the school/school board level, are not having the intended impact, and are merely sustaining the status quo/current inequities. Thiessen (2009) indicates that,

> - Trends in performance gaps associated with cultural identities are not the same for students of different cultural self-identities. Specifically, the performance gaps for Mi'kmaq and Acadian learners have been declining somewhat in recent years. In contrast, no secular trend was found for African Canadians. (p. 1)

- Two additional indicators that African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaq learners experience school difficulties: a) they are especially likely to be below grade for their age, and b) a higher proportion of them require test adaptations. (p. 1)

Thiessen's (2009) findings in relation to a decline in the gaps of Mi'kmaq and Acadian learners but not for African Nova Scotians, further identifies the sense of urgency necessary to transform education in the interest of African Nova Scotian learners. These two indicators may reflect the low socio-economic status of the African Nova Scotian communities.

Lee and Marshall (2009), in referencing the African Nova Scotian community's frustration with the inability of the Nova Scotia government to account for the numbers of African Nova Scotian learners on adaptations and IPPs, recommended that "the Department of Education facilitate School Boards in collecting quantitative data on the academic performance of, and the opportunities to learn that are provided to, African Nova Scotian students" (p. 12). This recommendation had a six-month timeframe and extended the initial recommendation in the BLAC Report. As a result of this recommendation, the Department of Education implemented a concerted effort to achieve this goal. This effort included the construction of self-identification surveys for students by the DEECD to account for the ethnic, racial and cultural diversity of the province. It required the development of a communication package and educational strategy by the regional centres for education, to support school administrators and teachers in communicating the rationale for self-identification effectively. It also required race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights coordinators to allay the concerns of the African Nova Scotian community, that the data would be used to evidence deficiencies in the students, as opposed to being applied to respond to the systemic inequities. This effort ultimately established

an ability to be responsive to the questions about student performance and school climate concerns expressed by the community.

By including self-identification within the provincial assessment framework at the Department of Education, students' academic status and performance levels can be evaluated and reported to the public annually. Student self-identification for ancestry and heritage is voluntary at registration in Nova Scotia, and with an 84% response rate as of November 2022, approximately 7% of students identified as having African heritage (DEECD, 2023, para 2). The provincial learning assessment of Nova Scotia (PLANS) provides disaggregated data that identify what students should know and do independently at the beginning of each grade level and compares, in this case, how learners of African ancestry are doing compared to all other learners on the same assessment (DEECD, 2023, para. 1).

These reports show assessment performance over time, to provide teachers with information to support planning, provide parents/guardians with their child's performance in reading, writing and/or mathematics, and to support educational leadership with information to make decisions, including support for students who are historically marginalized (DEECD, 2023, para. 3). Students participating in the assessment process received one of the following four levels in each main element of the assessment: Level 1—below the expectation, Level 2—approaching the expectation, Level 3—at the expectation, and Level 4—above the expectation.

As an example, in the 2022–2023 report, 375 out of a total of 621 African Nova Scotian learners for grade six reading performance, were at or above the level of expectation (DEECD, 2023, p. 2). In other words, 60% of students of African Heritage were where they were expected to be academically. This 60% success rate of African Nova Scotian learners meeting and exceeding expectations compares to a 72% success rate of all other students meeting or

exceeding expectations for the same year in the same assessment criteria. This represents a 12% differential between the success rate in reading between students of African descent, to the advantage of the “all other students” category.

These assessments compare the same provincial performance assessment data on the same criteria of grade six reading going back over five years from 2018–2023. For example, there was a 13% differential between students of African Heritage compared to all other students meeting or exceeding expectations in 2018–2019, a 16% percent differential in 2019–2020, and a 12% percent differential between 2021–2022. The 2020–2021 assessment year on the report is marked not applicable, given that provincial assessments were not conducted that year due to the global pandemic.

This disaggregated provincial assessment report on the single criteria of reading performance demonstrates that the gap in meeting and exceeding reading expectations in grade six between students of African heritage and all other students, was identified in the 2018–2019 school year, and remained virtually unchanged through each provincial assessment up to 2022–2023. These trends seem to be replicated in other assessment criteria, including grade six writing and mathematics performance assessments, with even more problematic results, capturing the “opportunity gap” and impact of systemic racism experienced by students of African Heritage compared to “all other students” (DEECD, 2023).

In addition, it is important to identify that Mi’kmaw students who also experience very similar systemic inequities and racism are included in the “all other students” category, meaning that a comparison exclusively between racialized students and non-racialized learners would demonstrate an even wider gap between students of European ancestry and Mi’kmaw/African Nova Scotian learners respectively. Including numbers from Mi’kmaw and African Nova Scotian

learners in the “all other students” category, does not fully or accurately reflect the impact and implications of racism or white privilege on the gaps. It makes the gap between white learners and racialized Mi’kmaw/African Nova Scotian students closer than they would otherwise be, if they were left out of the “all other students” category.

With respect to the community questions of disproportional representation of students of African heritage on IPPs, and their participation in the provincial assessments when compared to “all other students” going back five years from 2023 to the 2018–2019 school year, data is also provided via the self-identification framework. In 2022–2023, the participation rate of students of African descent participating in the grade six provincial assessments for reading and writing was 93%, compared to a 93% participation rate of all other students, for which an IPP would exclude you, with no identifiable difference between the two categories of students being compared. In 2018–2019, the participation for students of African heritage was 89%, compared to a 93% participation rate of all other students, for a differential of a 4% benefit to all other students. In 2019–2020, the participation rate for students of African heritage was 90%, compared to a 93% participation rate of all other students for a differential of 3% benefit to all other students. The participation rate for students of African heritage was 94%, compared to a 93% participation rate of all other students for a differential of 1% benefit to students of African Heritage in 2022–2023.

These data provides an opportunity to analyze and provide context for the generally expected percentage of learners on IPPs provincially, and was identified by student services representatives as being at 5%. In comparing the participation rate of students of African heritage and all other students, diminishes the point that a 93% participation rate for each group, is still 2% higher than what should be expected as an acceptable percentage for IPPs. If this

understanding were applied to the 2018–2019 and 2019–2020 numbers for students of African heritage, they would be two times higher than the expected percentage of students who did not participate, with an 89 and 90% participation rate, respectively.

There is also a question relating to the rapid rate at which the gap closed between students of African heritage and all other students' IPP identification/participation between 2018–2023. There was seemingly no increase of students of African heritage meeting or exceeding expectations. This contributes to the suspicion from the community that students are being moved off of IPPs by teachers and/or schools, and placed on adaptations to avoid being reflected in the data demonstrating the disproportional representation of African Nova Scotian learners on IPPs. This perception is bolstered by the fact that the move from IPPs to adaptations has failed to reflect more students meeting expectations or at Level 3, essentially "hiding" students from where parents were looking specifically at their child's disproportional representation on IPPs. The short-sightedness, limitations or resistance relating to the depth and breadth of well-intentioned responses to opportunity gaps experienced by marginalized learners is not a new phenomenon. The promise of multicultural education to marginalized communities' critique of the systemic exclusion of the experiences of racialized groups in the curriculum and the education system itself, was also limited in its application.

Significance of the Study

This study is significant in that it highlights the themes and characteristics of a small group of teachers, who are understood by the community to be more effectively responsive to the cultural and academic needs of African Nova Scotian learners. Themes and characteristics of empathy with an ability to develop meaningful and authentic relationships with students and their community, focused on student well-being and commitment to the craft of teaching and

learning, can be highlighted during teacher recruitment. This extends beyond the Bachelor of Education programming, to include DEECD policy, curriculum development, and professional development sessions.

The current systemic prioritization of student performance in subject/content areas as a central/hierarchical criterion of entry into post-secondary is exclusionary to racialized/marginalized students whose lived experiences align with being able to "see" and respond to systemic gaps in opportunity. This is not to be dismissive of the need for standards as it relates to academic competencies; however, a necessary factor in adjudicating a more rounded teacher candidate is a recognition and contextualization of the impact and implications of the historical and ongoing systemic racism to the current inequities experienced by racialized/marginalized people with non-dominant social identities. Teachers who are understood to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners demonstrate an awareness of the systemic inequities experienced by racialized learners and a commitment to being responsive to these inequities which arguably is a degree/academic credential in and of itself.

This type of critical consciousness needs to be developed in all educators in the interest of resisting being socialized into dominant narratives that perpetuate systemic inequities. The lived experiences of my research participants contributed to or acted as a catalyst to understanding that systems and institutions create gaps in opportunities among and between people with marginalized social identities. This understanding supports being resistant to dominant narratives that project the inequities experienced by those with non-dominant identities as being culturally or personally deficient. Critically questioning the potential systemic contributing factors and seeking to address these factors is the essential starting point to

becoming culturally relevant and responsive to the social, emotional, and cultural needs of African Nova Scotian learners as opposed to assimilationists.

Limitations of the Study

One of the study's limitations was that there were a few gaps in regional representation. In the development of the study, I wanted representation from as many of the historic African Nova Scotian communities as possible to ensure that the findings were reflective of the regional lived experiences, perspectives and referrals of culturally relevant and responsive teachers from across the province. However, the resistance applied by some in leadership who asserted their authority to limit the ability to access African Nova Scotian community representatives employed in the region prevented an opportunity to organize community focus groups with parents/community members in a specific region. While the exploration of alternative workarounds provided access to conduct these focus groups with some community members from this region, the resistance from leadership created a scenario whereby moving forward with arranging interviews with teachers identified by the community may have made these teachers vulnerable to the authority of the leadership because of its resistance to the study. As a result, I decided not to pursue interviews with teachers from this region who served several historical African Nova Scotian communities.

An additional gap in regional representation also occurred in the Conseil scolaire acadien provincial (CSAP). The advocacy of the African Nova Scotian community, which developed the community infrastructure utilized to organize and access African Nova Scotian community members in the English public education system, does not apply to the Acadian School Board because of the cultural and linguistic autonomy that centres the Francophone experiences afforded this Board. As a result, I did not receive any participant referrals from the community to

teachers from the CSAP. This observation is not an attempt to malign or suggest that there is a lack of interest in, or effort currently being put forth by the CSAP to develop and implement culturally relevant and responsive supports for learners of African ancestry. Many representatives from the CSAP that I worked with have personal lived experiences with the impact of systemic attempts at cultural assimilation; this observation is simply to identify an oversight in the development of the study, which created a gap in representation from this region/board.

A final limitation was an inability to recruit or identify participants based on their social identities. I expressed a desire to achieve a balance amongst multiple intersectional social identities of participants, including diverse racial, gender, class, sexual orientation and other representations of participants to seek more diverse responses to my research questions. However, several factors emerged that limited an ability to address these inclusion criteria, including the general lack of diversity of teaching staff in Nova Scotia, the pool of potential participants referred to me by community members, the safety required for participants to fully disclose their intersecting identities, as well as those who were agreeable to participate in the study. This created some limitations regarding the representation of multiple diverse and intersecting identities and communities.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

In my review of the literature, I take a critical approach, as it works to humanize us all, as Paulo Freire writes:

> [P]aradoxical though it may seem – precisely in the response of the oppressed to the violence of their oppressors that a gesture of love may be found. Consciously or unconsciously, the act of rebellion by the oppressed (an act which is always, or nearly always, as violent as the initial violence of the oppressors) can initiate love. Whereas the violence of the oppressors prevents the oppressed from being fully human, the response of the latter to this violence is grounded in the desire to pursue the right to be human. As the oppressors dehumanize others and violate their rights, they themselves also become dehumanized. As the oppressed, fighting to be human, take away the oppressors' power to dominate and suppress, they restore to the oppressors the humanity they had lost in the exercise of oppression. (Freire, 2010, p. 56)

Freire's emphasis on mutual humanity is intertwined with an aspiration to be better human beings collectively, which is the spirit I have approached in responding to my research questions.

In undertaking this literature review, I relied on a theoretical framework that included decolonization and critical race theory to provide context to the study.

Decolonization

Decolonization is characterized as a critical response to the impact and implications of imperialism and colonialism, which requires an interrogation of the underlying assumptions, values and motivations. Decolonization requires more than a change to formal political power or positioning of individuals; what is needed is an ongoing and sustained effort to change

institutional structures in society towards a re-centering of Indigenous or, in these circumstances, African Nova Scotian ways of being (Dei, 2012; Smith, 1999).

However, systems need to fully recognize the necessity of decolonizing their institutions to create the space necessary for marginalized learners to have their interests and needs moved to the centre. This starts by having system leadership authentically recognize the need to change. It requires a commitment from educators to critically reflect on their belief systems. It requires a recognition that each student is fully capable of learning and meeting high expectations (Mackey, 2021). Circling back to Elder-Vass' (2011) emergent causal properties of systemic racism and deficit thinking, these strategies or requirements arise out of a recognition of colonization's impact and justify decolonizing the education system.

Educators must recognize and develop a social and political critical consciousness that motivates them to commit to the change necessary beyond the challenges associated with the existing inequities and barriers in the system to meet the needs of racialized learners because these circumstances are not their fault.

Culturally relevant and responsive teachers recognize the necessity to apply a decolonization lens in their process to incorporate the cultural values and beliefs of students that are not aligned with Eurocentric practices and dominant ways of being. Utilizing this lens through the data analysis process will support the interpretations of the characteristics and themes of teachers identified to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners.

Decolonization from an Indigenous Peoples' perspective has taken a "Two-Eyed Seeing" (Jeffery et al., 2021, p. 321) or Etuaptmumk approach in Nova Scotia. Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall of the Eskasoni First Nation was the first to apply the concept of Two-Eyed Seeing in a

Western setting (Jeffery et al., 2021, p. 321). Etuaptmumk is an approach of inquiry and solutions in which people come together to view the world through an Indigenous lens with one eye (perspective), while the other eye sees through a Western lens (Jeffery et al., 2021, p. 321). This approach seeks to incorporate the best of the current centered cultural ways of being and incorporate approaches reflective of the core values and principles of the Mi'kmaq that improve the collective interests of everyone. This approach requires a process of exploring and articulating core values that need to be incorporated, as well as the concession of power from the dominant culture to merge compatible ways to aspire to the best of both worlds. It is often aligned with decolonization as a framework for indigenizing colonial institutions like our education system (Stein et al., 2021).

Critical Race Theory

Critical race theory places race, racism, and power as central dominant factors in the discussion of the systemic inequities experienced by racialized people (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2021). It emerged in the 1970s out of discussions amongst lawyers, legal scholars, and civil rights activists who were concerned about the pendulum of momentum of the civil rights movement swinging away from the advances made in the 1960s, when the era was reflected in active protests, marches, and sit-ins.

These legal scholars and activists recognized the need for an alternative theoretical framework or approach to unearth and respond to the less explicit and more systemic acts of racism. The theory borrows from critical legal studies and radical feminism, to challenge and confront the systemic selective ignorance and application of power in the interest of constructing, sustaining, and reinforcing the interests of those in power (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010).

Because critical legal studies recognize that power can prioritize and emphasize a focus on one area of legal authority over another, creating more than one correct or acceptable outcome, critical race theory relies on, and borrows from radical feminism to expose the relationship between power and the defining of social hierarchies (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). For example, creating a harsher penalty for a physical response to aggression over a verbal assault and then not accounting for the impact and implications and relationship of one (verbal assault) (over/on) the other (physical reaction).

Tenets of Critical Race Theory

A central tenet of critical race theory in American and Canadian contexts, is that racism is ordinary, and not an aberration (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). The acceptance of this understanding implies the recognition that power can be utilized against racialized individuals, and does not require an explicit derogatory comment or incident to occur as validation of the existence of racism.

This ordinariness of racism suggests that the normalization of racial hierarchies. Collective colonial and imperialistic legal and educational institutions, aligned with the power to define when a violation of these hierarchies occur, makes it virtually impossible for those experiencing racism to prove its existence, let alone advocate for meaningful responsiveness. The normalization of racial hierarchies that support the invisibility of racism has perpetuated a colour-blind ideology that focuses on treating everyone the same or equally without considering the outcome that the implications and impact of racism require interventions to reconcile the inequities (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 2021, p. 27).

Starting from a perspective that acknowledges the existence of racism and the ways that it has been normalized systemically, as critical race theory does, eliminates the energy and effort to respond to “gaslighting” from those that suggest that racism is not systemic and is only

exemplified by a select few outliers as opposed to being deeply and invisibly embedded into the education system.

Another central tenet of critical race theory is interest convergence, or material determinism. This tenet suggests that because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially) and working-class whites (psychically), who make up a large segment of North American society, they have little incentive to eradicate racism (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). This tenet helps to explain the challenges associated with overturning institutional policies, practices, and procedures that benefit "whiteness" regardless of the socio-economic class of white folks.

The resistance to material determinism is made more difficult because its racism has become institutionalized, to the extent that it is not fully recognized or understood outside of explicit expressions of hate. Confronting and responding to anti-Black racism requires an honest, critical self-reflection, acceptance, and understanding of the ways that white supremacy is sustained through the employment of a myriad of complex processes. It establishes white privilege, that which is unearned positioning of power over racialized group members, attained merely through being identified, understood, and/or accepted as white. White fragility involves applying this power against racialized people, when and while expressing their frustration with racism. White privilege or oppression that asserts and insists that what is being shared is too much for them to tolerate, and white exceptionalism, which is the application of this power to deflect the responsibility to personally reflect and commit to challenging white supremacy, are more problematic and/or explicit amongst racist white people (McIntosh, 1988; Saad, 2020).

In addition, this tenet suggests that the optimal circumstances in which systems consider and/or commit to being responsive to these inequalities are in the rare circumstances that an

intervention aligns with both the needs of the racialized group and the material benefit or interests of those making the decision to support the intervention, namely white people.

Another tenet of critical race theory is that race is a social construct, as opposed to a fixed biological and genetic determinant or accurate predictor of a person's character, values, ability and beliefs (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). Of course, the position of race as a biological predictor of a person's identity has scientifically been disproved (Umek & Fischer, 2020).

Race is a product of social thought and relationships that ascribe certain characteristics, attitudes, abilities, values and beliefs to people grouped based on phenotypes, including skin colour, hair texture, physique or facial features (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). These characteristics, attributes, values, and beliefs are ascribed by those in the dominant social identity category to those “racialized” and “othered” who are excluded from the dominant category. These groupings are fluid, meaning that they can be contracted or expanded based on the needs, interests, and benefits of those holding the dominant identities.

The recognition that race is socially constructed, as opposed to being fixed biological or genetic-based predictors of values and beliefs, can redirect the efforts in addressing racism at the system level, and not at the victims of racism themselves. This refocusing is an important and significant game changer as it relates to challenging systemic racism. In other words, it moves the focus away from deficit thinking about the racialized groups, and places it instead on the deficits in the systems.

Anti-essentialism and “intersectionality,” a term introduced by Kimberly Crenshaw (1989), is another tenet of critical race theory. Intersectionality and anti-essentialism recognize that no one person possesses a singular identity in any one social identity construct and that the complexities of people’s individualized and distinct identities need to be included to fully

comprehend their experiences. Grillo (1995), in exploring intersectionality and essentialism, states that, “In the end, the anti-essentialism and intersectionality critiques ask only this: that we define complex experiences as closely to their full complexity as possible and that we not ignore voices at the margin” (p. 22). This means that people are considered and valued for the whole of their social identity categories, in the interest of accounting for and being responsive to the full breadth and depth of their lived experiences.

The final test of culturally responsive teaching is the notion of a unique voice of colour thesis, which suggests that those experiencing the oppression are best situated and most effective in communicating the specifics attached to the ways in which the systems negotiate their marginalization through counter-narratives and storytelling (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010). In other words, both the articulation of an issue and the construction of a response can more closely align with the needs of the individual because of the centrality of their first voice in the conversation.

In sum, critical race theory recognizes that: (1) race is a social construction, (2) racism is a normal element of society, (3) systemic responsiveness to racism often centres on the convergence of interests between those with marginalized identities to the benefit or advantage of those with dominant identities, (4) responsiveness to these issues requires the ability to explore the intersectional and accumulative impact of these vulnerable identities in meeting the needs of students through (5) a unique voice of colour or first voice reporting/accounting/responsiveness (Stefancic & Delgado, 2017).

To develop culturally relevant and responsive school cultures, schools need to apply a critical race theoretical lens/approach through anti-racist actions. Parris and Brigham (2010) outline the implications of critical race theory in responding to oppressive school cultures.

> A central factor of critical race theory is that it brings race and racism from the margins of lifelong learning discourse to the center with the objective of sustaining a politicized discourse by and about people of colour. Such a discourse requires a thorough examination of the historical effects of European colonialism and White supremacy and a centering of the experiential knowledge of people of colour through storytelling and autobiography. (p. 207)

The application of a culturally responsive teaching lens that centers and validates the voices of the victims of oppressive school cultures, can more authentically and meaningfully describe the impact of racism. Educators understood to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners, either implicitly or explicitly embody several combinations of these tenets and reference points, which align with their commitment to support and be responsive to the social, emotional, and academic needs of racialized learners. Culturally responsive teaching, when used to analyze educational contexts, is a significant reflection point in determining, illuminating, and/or interpreting the anti-racist approaches of teachers meeting the needs of African Nova Scotian learners in their classrooms and schools.

Extending from a fundamental tenet of a culturally responsive teaching perspective, that racism is not an aberration, but an ordinary and everyday experience of racialized people, contextualizes an important and powerful shift in someone thinking that racism is incident-specific and wrong, to a call to action, given the persistence of inequities and the consequences of inaction. This shift is captured in Angela Davis's (2020) famous quote, "In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist; we must be anti-racist."

Analyzing the Literature and Context

Many policies, practices, and procedures have ossified colonial, imperialistic and Eurocentric cultural values and beliefs at the centre of an education system built on systematically racist, sexist, and classist principles, which have worked to normalize the othering and otherness of those with non-dominant identities (BLAC, 1994; Smith, 1999). As a result, learners with non-dominant identities whose needs are not being met by the educational institution, reflected in "achievement" or, more appropriately, an opportunity gap in performance and school climate data, are characterized by the system as being culturally inferior and deficient (Delpit, 2006).

The implications of deficit thinking mean that many current educators have internalized an understanding and accepted that the student performance and school climate gaps between racialized learners and students of European ancestry are justified/explained away because of the effectiveness of deficit messaging through colonial institutions (educational, government, policing, judicial system).

The prevalence of deficit thinking lowers the systemic expectations of racialized learners and, in turn, the commitment or sense of urgency to be responsive to the social, emotional and academic needs of African Nova Scotian learners. Systems representatives often try to "cover" this negligence by performing short bursts of overt energy and effort to address racialized learners' needs while documenting the collaborative intervention as evidence of student inadequacies (Mason, 2016; Mackey, 2021).

In this educational context, the depths and breadth of understanding, adaptation and application of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy will fail to adequately address the needs of students excluded based on the value assigned to their non-dominant identity.

Responsiveness to this issue first requires an awareness of the impact and implications of imperialism and colonialism on deficit thinking (Mackey, 2021; Smith, 1999).

Elder-Vass (2011) argues that “the social power that tends to encourage us to conform to any given social norm is in fact an emergent causal power of a specific social entity, a specific group of people: a normative circle” (p. 7). The emergent causal powers that created and continue to sustain privileged identities, must be analyzed to redress inequities. Equitable, inclusive spaces must be provided for marginalized citizens when determining curriculum, pedagogical approaches, and disciplinary mechanisms in a school system. How do education systems replicate, reinforce, and normalize the location of the so-called “founding” group’s cultural values and norms? How are power and privileged positions in society sustained through the school system? How is the dominant narrative constructed, and how does it become hegemonic as it perpetuates the advantage of the normative group and rewards those who accept it while penalizing those who do not?

A necessary starting point to responding to the impact and implications of these questions is to do so with a clear understanding that it was the intentional explicit purpose to replicate, reinforce and normalize the colonial entities' cultural values, beliefs, norms, and ways of being over those “othered” by these processes. The most explicit expression of the culturally destructive, assimilationist and racist intentions from a Canadian perspective is captured in the political positioning and actions of Duncan Campbell Scott between 1913 and 1932.

Scott, a supporter of residential schools and a civil servant in the Department of Indian Affairs, supported the policy of removal of consent or by force, which forced tens of thousands of children as young as two years of age from their homes, deprived children of contact with their parents and made them vulnerable to neglect, disease, poor medical care, malnutrition,

abuse, and sexual assault with no to minimal accountability. He pushed for compulsory attendance to age 15 with the intent of killing the Indian in the child. He stated:

> I want to get rid of the Indian problem. I do not think as a matter of fact, that the country ought to continuously protect a class of people who are able to stand alone … Our objective is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic, and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department, that is the whole object of this Bill ("Killing the Indian in the Child" 2019, para. 10).

Similar declarations and assimilationist strategies of governments have been developed and applied by colonial agents in other areas around the world, evidence of active efforts to eliminate the cultural centeredness of racialized people. Over time, marginalized communities expressed resistance to these assimilationist policies and practices. These efforts culminated in the 1960s civil rights movements, which eventually required a systemic concession to this resistance through the promotion of multiculturalism some 30 years later.

Resistance to these assimilationist policies in practices were expressed by marginalized communities over time. These efforts culminating in the 1960's civil rights movements which eventually required a systemic concession to this resistance through the promotion of multiculturalism some 30 years later. Multiculturalism was adopted in Canada as an official policy in 1971 by the then Prime Minister, Pierre Trudeau, to redefine Canada as a nation of immigration in support of economic growth and development. By moving away from its historical colonial, bi-national, and assimilationist policies in the interest of encouraging diversity, more people would be able to participate in the promise of Canada. The institutionalized phase of the implementation of multiculturalism was formalizing items, including the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms in 1982, Employment Equity Act in

1986, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act in 1988 and the Action Plan Against Racism in 2005, in legislation to be more responsive to the ethnocentrism, xenophobia and racism experienced by racialized and marginalized Canadians (Akkari & Radhouane, 2022).

The institutionalization of multiculturalism in multiple human rights policies makes it easy to see its implications and application in educational directives and expectations. Multiculturalism and multicultural education are part of the foundational responses in the recommendations from the 1994 BLAC Report to the Province of Nova Scotia, and they serve as a necessary starting point for critically reflecting on the current situation in education. The recommendations to respond to the concerns identified in the BLAC Report (1994), captured in the African Nova Scotian student support worker guidelines, standards and evaluation (2011), were centered on a multicultural construct.

Banks' (1993) five dimensions of multicultural education were designed to respond to systemic inequities and achievement gaps experienced by African Americans and provide a useful framework to explore and analyze the concerns related to the schooling of African Nova Scotian learners. The five dimensions are: (1) the need for content integration, (2) knowledge construction, (3) prejudice reduction, (4) equity pedagogy, and (5) empowering school culture. Banks (1993) recognizes that there needs to be an interest and ability of educational leaders and teachers to respond to the inequities experienced by Black learners to be successful, and that a multicultural education framework compartmentalizes the five dimensions of multicultural education as a useful reference to identifying and responding to each area of inequities requiring development and implementation at school. The practical application of these dimensions will often require a carryover amongst and between each dimension to be relevant and responsive to the complexity of each issue they are being applied to address. As a result of the theory and

practice gap along with a lack of criticality to the efforts to resist multicultural efforts, there is an issue with the depth and breadth or comprehensiveness of application towards transformative results if these dimensions are applied at all (Akkari & Radhouane, 2022).

Other scholars have included a more critical stance on the application of multicultural education to extend to the full responsiveness to social justice issues. For example, Sleeter and Grant (2008) outlined five pedagogical approaches that support multicultural education, including: (1) teaching the exceptional and culturally different, (2) human relations, (3) single group studies, (4) multicultural education, and (5) multicultural social justice education. AbiHanna (2020) also found value in this framework, extending the effectiveness of implementing multicultural approaches, especially with an emphasis on multicultural social justice:

> The authors' fifth approach, multicultural social justice education, is heavily grounded in critical theory, including critical race theory. Accordingly, what may be most helpful is a re-examination and restructuring of educational systems alongside partners, such as the newcomer community who can help support schools in their attempts to implement equitable schooling experiences for all learners. To address some of the gaps left by a multicultural approach to education, it may be helpful to move toward frameworks that are more centered in critical and anti-racist orientations. (p. 50)

While this specific quote refers to the experiences of newcomer Canadians, recognizing the necessity to move towards a critical theory, including critical race theory, is still very much relevant to the challenges experienced by African Nova Scotian learners.

Sleeter and Grant's (2008) inclusion of social justice in a multicultural framework prioritizes an evaluation of the progress toward the goal of social justice as opposed to a

commitment to the principles laid out in the framework. This once again speaks to the overall theory-practice gap in previous iterations of multiculturalism (Banks, 1993) and are evidenced in the implementation and outcomes, or lack thereof, of the 1994 BLAC Report, which identified areas required to redress the inequities in education in Nova Scotia.

We must remember that teachers function within a systemic structure responsible for the policies, practices, procedures, and authorities of their school administrators, their regional centres of education, and, of course, the DEECD, which generally operate from a more conservative systemic perspective (AbiHanna, 2020). To make the point clearly and succinctly, even with the extension of a more critical and socially just element added to a multicultural approach and framework, it did and does not go far enough in being responsive to the inequities experienced by racialized learners.

It has been 29 years since the submission and acceptance of the recommendations of the BLAC Report by the provincial government at the time. Lee and Marshall's (2009) review of the 12 recommendations outlined in the BLAC Report, provides more recent analyses that highlights some of the successes associated with those directions. The Reality Check Report (Lee & Marshall, 2009) offered additional recommendations to assist in improving services and supports to African Nova Scotian learners. A number of these recommendations are specific to the DEECD and regional centres for education.

1. The Department of Education facilitate school boards in collecting quantitative data on the academic performance and opportunities to learn that are provided to African Nova Scotian students. (6 months)

2. The school boards and the Department of Education review the individual program plan for every African Nova Scotian student, and make changes in placement, where deemed necessary. (1 year)
3. The Department of Education increase the staff of the African Canadian Services Division, particularly in the area of curriculum, and fill the vacancies immediately to enable the division to fulfill its mandate. (1 year)
4. The school boards increase the number of African Nova Scotian student support workers where appropriate, in consultation with the RCH coordinator, and that student support workers be integrated into the life of schools to enable them to directly impact the educational experiences of African Nova Scotian learner. (1 year)
5. The school boards elevate the position of coordinator of race relations, cross cultural understanding and human rights, or its equivalent, to enable coordinators to influence more directly, the implementation of RCH policy and procedures at school sites. (1 year)
6. The Department of Education incorporate the implementation of the racial equity policy and diversity management into the performance management review of all division and branch directors. (1 year).

A central element of Lee and Marshall's (2009) recommendations included having adequate and appropriate representation across the education system to review, recommend, and account for the commitments made to African Nova Scotian learners as outlined in the BLAC Report.

The Nova Scotia Department of Education's (2010) response to Lee & Marshall's (2009) Reality Check Report acknowledges the need for equitable representation across the system, and accessibility of community with representatives of the education system beyond designated equity positions. It also confronts the outsourcing of responsibility of leadership in various

departments within the system, frontloading these commitments and responsibilities before, and even while strategizing with the designated equity positions. The response from the provincial Department of Education (2010) pointed out that:

> The consultants identify the following specific areas where improvements could be made:
>
> - better alignment and communication among the various groups working for African Canadian students
> - better communication between African Nova Scotian communities and schools and between communities and organizations working on behalf of African Nova Scotian students
> - continue to provide training/learning opportunities in the area of anti-racism
> - remaining vigilant in enforcing anti-racism policies
>
> The overarching conclusion that can be drawn from the report is that the task of achieving better results for African Nova Scotian students has largely been delegated to specific organizations and individuals. The challenges have not become embedded in the daily thinking and activities of everyone in the education system, from the very highest positions of administration to every person working at every level in the system—The Department of Education, organizations, school boards, and schools. Hence the title of this response to *Reality Check: Expanding from Equity Supports to Leadership and Results.* (p. 3)

In considering both Lee & Marshall's (1994) recommendations along with the response from the provincial Department of Education, two points are clear: (1) The inclusion of marginalized groups in policies, practices and decision-making processes that impact their opportunity to learn, is central to understanding what is working or not working; (2) An

accountability within the system to take responsibility for understanding, responding to, and accounting for system-wide issues, as opposed to making racialized staff and colleagues exclusively responsible.

A few interesting outcomes emerged as a response to the commitment to expand from equity support to leadership and results. There has been an increased interest and responsiveness from non-equity specific leadership to listen, collaborate, develop, implement policies, and encourage practices that are aligned with the recommendations from Lee and Marshall's (2009) Reality Check review of the BLAC Report. This is evidenced in more recent shifts to Hollie's (2018) culturally and linguistically responsive teaching and learning professional development supports for teachers across the province, being included in policy documents and professional development offerings given the expectations (Inclusive Education Policy, 2020; Teaching Standards, 2018).

Once again, there is an absence of a built-in ongoing mechanism to account for authentic and meaningful engagement with professional development sessions. Expectations for policy to ensure a level of depth and breadth of application of culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable teaching and learning principles, are not responsive to the current inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners (Whitley & Hargreaves, 2020).

Given the historical inconsistency of similar reviews of recommendations, for example, the 15-year gap between the BLAC Report and the review of these recommendations in the Reality Check Report, the African Nova Scotian community justifiably withholds a level of cynicism about the commitment from educational leadership. The community often understands this type of reaction as optical allyship (Saad, 2020). Their effectiveness is captured in the wisdom of an African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far,

go together." For this to occur, there must be resistance to liberal incrementalism and a commitment to more immediate transformative actions.

Summary

When the need arises to contextualize gaps around the relevance and opportunity for success of a specific report, or an intervention is proposed to respond to racism and the inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners in the public education system, I share with racialized colleagues and peers that, when people and/or systems believe you deserve nothing, anything that they "give" you, is more than you deserve. The situations are familiar to the dream keepers, where reports, recommendations, and interventions require people in these positions to acknowledge the impact of systemic racism, where it is seen an opportunity for white staff and leadership outsource their responsibility as educators of culturally diverse students, to racialized colleagues or support staff. They can then hold them accountable for progress, or lack thereof, which is both disingenuous and racist (Department of Education, 2010). In addition, white staff and leadership often exercise control over the timeframes, financial details, and human resources dedicated to being responsive to the inequities, which fail to result in any transformative support to the needs of racialized learners.

In acknowledging and accepting responsibility to redress these inequities publicly, those within the education system contributed to circumstances where minimal efforts were professed to be much more progressive, impactful or transformative than they could have been. It is necessary to understand the historical relationships between the lived experiences of racialized learners, and the resistance, dismissiveness, manipulative, or even antagonistic responsiveness from representatives of the institutions in navigating meaningful, authentic relationships that develop trust across these differences. The promise of these systemic interventions and

approaches to be responsive to the social, emotional, and academic needs of racialized learners requires protection from representatives of the Nova Scotia Department of Education. In the absence of any protection, these interventions become watered down or hollowed out, to the point of diminishing and/or producing diminished returns. However, in many ways, the African Nova Scotian community has come to believe that, given the pattern and history, this may be the point.

Chapter 3: Theoretical Framework

In this theoretical framework chapter, I explain how anti-racist theory, Africentricity and culturally relevant and responsiveness are central to my analysis. These theories inform the interpretation and analyses of the data collected. I examine the ways that the research participants are resisting racism, and the impact of colonial values and beliefs on the school system in Nova Scotia as they negotiate a more culturally relevant and responsive environments for African Nova Scotians. In this section, I discuss the necessity of viewing the current inequities experienced by racialized and marginalized learners, from a perspective that centers around an exploration of ways to mitigate the harm that emerged from colonial and racist policies and practices in the education system.

There is a fundamental agreement and understanding made clear from within an anti-racist theoretical framework of the implications and impact of racism, when applied to the variable inequities evident in Eurocentric, imperialistic and colonial institutions. Additionally, there is recognition that an Africentric lens is useful in identifying promising practices that emerge from teachers identified as being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. Elements of culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy serve as a useful definition that supports identifying the themes and characteristics of my research participants. Culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy is useful because it reflects the goals of academic growth and development, the ability to effectively communicate across differences or cultural competence, as well as an ongoing commitment to social and political consciousness towards our collective humanity.

Anti-Racism

An anti-racist theory in education informs action-oriented approaches and responses to the inequities experienced in the education system by racialized learners (Dei & Calliste, 2000). Kendi (2019) concurs with the notion that a passive non-racist approach is not enough to counter the existing racism experienced by racialized people. Kendi articulates that, “There is no such thing as a non-racist or race-neutral policy. Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups” (Kendi, 2019, p. 18).

Kendi (2019) further expresses the need and urgency for immediate and active disruption of discrimination against racialized people that contributes to their inequities. He calls for active discriminatory interventions against policies, practices and procedures that perpetuate or sustain these inequities toward equity:

> If discrimination is creating equity, then it is anti-racist. If discrimination is creating inequity, then it is racist. Someone reproducing inequity through permanently assisting an overrepresented racial group into wealth and power is entirely different from someone challenging that inequity by temporarily assisting an underrepresented racial group into relative wealth and power until equity is reached” (Kendi, 2019, p. 19)

In other words, Kendi (2019) is suggesting that it is not only acceptable to identify and discriminate against a social identity that provides an unearned privilege or benefit to a group of people over another group, but it is necessary. However, it is only appropriate until that unearned privilege is eliminated, and the intervention is no longer necessary. Kendi’s (2019) position that an immediate active intervention toward actions and incidents of white supremacy and racism is necessary, is often characterized as a controversial one, which continues to be resisted by those

enjoying these unearned privileges. Interventions to systemic inequities, including equity hire efforts and accountability mechanisms for addressing incidences of racism and white entitlement, are mischaracterized as reverse racism and/or a cancel culture environment.

The revelation and acknowledgement of the racial privilege and positioning of white people over racialized individuals makes the application of anti-racist policies or interventions feel like oppression because of the narratives of racism, deficit thinking, and entitlement embedded through processes of colonization. To those white individuals coming to terms with this privilege, even when they agree that racism has benefitted them and actions are required to redress the inequity, resist and resent conceding these advantages even when they align with the values that they espouse and claim to believe.

Emergence of Anti-Racist Education

Anti-racism education emerged, much like critical race theory, out of the advocacy and efforts of the Black community to address the inequities in opportunities experienced by their children with the goal to address racism and other interrelated impacts of systems of oppression (Dei & Lara-Villanueva; 2021).

This movement in the Canadian context has been attributed to more notable Canadians nationally, including Rosalie Silberman Abella, Agnes Caliste, Barb Thomas, Enid Lee, Carl James, and George Dei. More locally, the contributors/authors of the BLAC Report, including Patrick Kakembo, Robert Wright, Karen Hudson, Paul Ash, Quenta Adams-Tynes, Suzanne Jackson, Archy Beals, and other community leaders, activists, and community members (Dei & Lara-Villanueva, 2021; BLAC Report, 1994). An anti-racist theory, as described by Dei (1996), extends the discourse:

> Anti-racism education may be defined as an action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression. Anti-racism is a critical discourse of race and racism in society and of the continuing racializing of social groups for differential and unequal treatment. Anti-racism explicitly names the issue of race and social difference as issues of power and equity rather than as a matter of cultural and ethnic variety. (p. 25)

Placing an anti-racist theoretical lens in an educational context is essential to becoming more critically aware and responsive to the impact and implications of race, the process of racialization, and the racism that contributes to the systemic inequities experienced by racialized and other marginalized interlocking social identities in society. The continual/ongoing discourse and actions can work to provide the most up-to-date, relevant responses to issues of racism and education that are a fundamental starting point in this transformative process (Dei & Calliste, 2000, p. 11).

Anti-racist educators recognize race as a social construct while at the same time refusing to deny the very real social consequences of racism. They recognize that race and social difference are matters of power and equity that require a review of a person's racial identity and their ability to access both the power and resources to resist the impact and implications of racism. Echoing critical race theory’s commitment to intersectionality, there has been a more recent recognition that the struggle against racism may yield more identity-specific understandings if layered by including anti-Black racism, because of the effectiveness of racial power dynamics/hierarchies that place Black people at the bottom (Dei & Lara-Villanueva, 2021; African Canadian Services Branch, 2021).

The African Canadian Services Branch at the DEECD (2021) delivered a supplementary document to the province's inclusive education policy, to speak specifically to the harmful impact of racism generally, but anti-Black racism specifically.

> Racism and racist practices in schools negatively impact the achievement and well-being of Black students and create differential achievement outcomes and opportunities for success. All staff are called by the Inclusive Education Policy to use their power and privilege to support Black students in feeling safe, accepted and valued so they can best learn and succeed during their time in school. (DEECD, 2021, p. 1)

The ACSB recommends that staff seek to accomplish the goal of creating a more safe and equitable school environment:

> Acknowledging that anti-Black racism exists and that it is manifested through cultures of power, privilege and silence. Recognize that anti-Black racism can be subtle and exist in covert acts that are difficult to detect (microaggressions) … These daily manifestations of aggression leave many people feeling vulnerable, targeted, angry, and afraid. They also must recognize their responsibility to monitor and support the well-being of Black students in their care. (DEECD, 2021, para. 5)

Culturally relevant and responsive educators need to actively reflect on their teaching through an anti-racism lens to identify unintended biases. They recognize the necessity to do this work in the interest of creating more equitable access for racialized learners. They recognize that racialized learners are streamed into non-academic programming and that they are subject to subtle everyday racism from peers and educators that contributes to unsafe learning environments and student "pushout." It also supports a call for a collaborative effort between

white and racialized learners to work in solidarity against inequities (Dei & Lara-Villanueva, 2021, para. 3).

Akinrinola (2023) outlines several key anti-racist principles from Dei's (1996) ten basic principles of anti-racism education, that encapsulate many tenets of critical race theory. These include more practical and immediate items and reminders to use as critical reflection principles, while exploring/evaluating the implementation and effectiveness of anti-racist approaches and practices in an educational context.

Principle 1: Recognize that race is a social (man-made) ideology that has been used to separate certain groups (deemed minorities) from another group (White dominating groups). (p. 27)

Principle 2: To fully understand the social effects of race, one must take into account the varied intersections in which race is used as a tool of oppression and "othering." (p. 28)

Principle 3: Understand that the privilege of white skin has been, and is being taken for granted by many white people, since whiteness is reinforced as the prevailing social identity in our society. (p. 28)

Principle 4: Acknowledge that certain voices are marginalized and delegitimized as knowledge carriers, and the lived experiences of these voices are omitted as integral parts of the education system. (p. 29–30).

Principle 5: Realize that all forms of education must holistically engage learners in understanding and appreciating the experiences of all people socially, culturally, politically, ecologically, and spiritually. (p. 30)

Principle 6: Accept that students do not come to school as ‘blank slates’ but instead have varied identities rooted in intersections of class, gender, sexuality, faith, abilities, etc. The varied intersections of students influence their engagement with school and learning. (p. 31)

Principle 7: Envision school as an inclusive “working community” which uses culturally responsive approaches to center and address minority concerns regarding schooling, utilizing a multi-centered approach that fosters social responsibility in learning. (p. 33).

Principle 8: Acknowledge the role education has played historically in producing and reproducing the oppressive systems we now seek to dismantle (race, class, gender) within our society. Through erasure and omission, the public school has pushed out non-white narratives in Canada. (p. 34)

Principle 9: Remember that students’ schooling issues do not happen in isolation or detached from their lived circumstances (material, social, environmental). Social markers of success and failure, accepted expectations, and devalued expectations play crucial roles in students' perception of self and self-worth. (p. 35).

Principle 10: There must be consistent promotion of effective student-teacher/parent-community interactions that move away from blaming students and families for the “socio-historical and structural injustices” they face daily. Students and parents must be empowered to be a part of the decision-making processes that impact their schools. (p. 35).

The first two principles outlined by Dei (1996), refer to the centrality of an acknowledgement of systemic racism, and the necessity to explore all intersecting marginalized social identities in developing the most responsive solutions.

Principles three, four, and five articulate a necessity to critically reflect on the implications of white privilege, the impact of racism in sustaining power imbalances, and the personal responsibility to actively commit to centering the teaching and learning needs of all their students.

Principles six and seven extend the personal commitment and responsibility, to validate and affirm the uniqueness of each student by contributing to a school environment that starts with the social, emotional, and academic needs of students made vulnerable by societal systemic inequities.

Principles eight, nine, and 10 acknowledge ownership of the education system's role in reinforcing and perpetuating these inequities. They commit to a relationship between home and school that informs the cultural values and beliefs of the communities being served by the education system, and sustain this relationship on an ongoing basis.

Combined, all of these anti-racist principles provide an important analytical lens for my data analysis process. Culturally relevant and responsive teachers are committed to teaching and learning practices that are responsive to the principles of anti-racism, given the deep commitment required to redress the inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners. According to Dei and Lara-Villanueva (2021):

> Anti-racism education is about recognizing. Through teaching, the meaningfulness of race while examining the links between racism today and Canada’s history of colonialism … due to Canada’s colonial history racism has been structurally embedded as a practice

> in schools. This is generally acknowledged as systemic racism and is reflected in the various ways that power and privilege work to discriminate against students who belong to minority groups. (p. 1)

Recognizing that the inequities that exist in Canadian society are rooted in colonial institutions, historical and ongoing efforts to downplay or redirect attention from the impact and implications of racism is a part of the normalization or acceptance of racial inequities. These inequities are counter to the multicultural identity that some Canadians claim or try to reflect to the rest of the world. The need for a critical race and anti-racist theoretical perspective is imperative to contextualizing the lived experiences of students and what educational leaders must navigate in seeking to support them.

Africentricity

As a theory, Africentricity puts people of African ancestry unapologetically at the centre of any analysis of their lived experiences as subjects, not objects (Asante, 2007). In short, the intent of this position is captured in the saying, “nothing about us, without us”, meaning that in the Nova Scotian context, determining what is in the best interest of African Nova Scotians requires their equitable representation and decision-making power and authority. This positioning enables a deeper and more accurate analysis of the cultural, historical and ancestral experiences/expressions of Black people when or wherever they are in the world (Hunn, 2004).

Africentricity challenges the premise that dominant cultural groups are endowed with the authority to legitimize what knowledge and ways of being are most valuable to all students in the education system. (Asante, 2007; Hunn, 2004). Africentricity is further characterized in an educational context to deflect/challenge systemic resistance through misrepresentations and

mischaracterizations of the intentionality of an Africentric approach. Ringstaff (2023) explains that:

> Essentially, Africentricity is not anti-White but grounded in the legacy of Black culture and excellence … It calls for the recentering of content that focusses on the Black experience, African perspective, and liberation of the Black person and community. Afrocentric education is designed to liberate Black students who have been historically marginalized and disenfranchised through their indoctrination of European history and culture which has contributed to slavery, racial segregation and discrimination. (p. 4)

In this way, Africentricity is a decolonizing lens because it seeks to confront the embedded assumptions, attitudes and beliefs that were constructed through imperialistic and colonial beliefs and values that othered and marginalized racialized peoples propagated through political, educational and judicial institutions.

The extended value of Afrocentricity beyond the decolonizing element is its symbiotic relationship with indigenizing the curriculum, because it provides a specific movement from decolonization to expected elements of the curriculum that make it Africentric. Additionally, relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners, Ringstaff (2023) offers that:

> An Afrocentric curriculum consists of four key goals towards affirming Black students' lives, including the following: challenging racism and hegemony, providing differentiated learning styles, promoting positive self-concept and collective identity among Black students, and providing a model for multicultural education. (p. 4)

These key goals associated with an Africentric curriculum will be significant to critically reflect on identifying and affirming the themes and characteristics of teachers who have been

identified as being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. The reference points of challenging racism and its normalization and embeddedness in our schools/society, the demonstration of differentiation of teaching and learning approaches represented by teachers meeting the inclusion criteria, the promotion of developing a positive self-image despite racism, and the development of a collective communal identity out of asking what it means to be Black/African Nova Scotian are central to analyzing and interpreting participant interviews.

The amalgamation of critical race, anti-racist, decolonization and Africentric lenses in my theoretical framework in support of my data analysis and interpretation, supports comprehensive, culturally relevant and responsive teaching and learning approaches. Culturally relevant and responsive teaching and/or pedagogy reflects the goals of academic growth and development or achievement, the ability to effectively communicate across differences or cultural competence, and social and political consciousness towards our collective humanity. These theoretical lenses support identifying the characteristics and themes of my research participants. The core alignment among each theoretical perspective demonstrates the necessity for a critical reflection and analysis of race and racism on the opportunity gap experienced by African Nova Scotian learners. The fundamental acknowledgement of current inequities from Eurocentric, imperialistic, and colonial institutions, and the recognition that actions to decolonize them using an Africentric lens being useful in identifying promising practices from these participants, is motivating and empowering.

Culturally Relevant and Responsive Teaching

Choosing to teach in a culturally relevant and responsive way, utilizes the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse learners, to make learning more

appropriate and authentic when monitoring the responsiveness to their needs. It may be an effective approach to respond to opportunity gaps and school climate concerns (Gay, 2010). Ladson-Billings' (1995) fundamental premise of culturally relevant teaching is helpful in articulating a criterion useful to encompass a more holistic approach to teaching. She says, "I suggested that culturally relevant teaching must meet three criteria: an ability to develop students academically, a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness" (p. 483).

The introduction of culturally responsive and relevant pedagogy in the mid-1970s has taken different forms and names, as Currie (2018) explains:

> Names such as culturally responsive education, culturally appropriate pedagogy, culturally congruent pedagogy, culturally relevant teaching, and culturally responsive teaching all use different terminology and present different nuances, but all promote the importance of recognizing, acknowledging, and in various ways including the range of cultures that exist in any classroom. (para. 1)

In recounting the origin and exploration of ways to resolve inequities in the educational experiences of vulnerable learners over the years, Currie (2018) points to the understanding and significance of refocusing the perception of inadequacies away from students—the victims of systemic deficits—back onto the educational system itself. The capacity for accountability to trickle down or be deflected to the most vulnerable, reflects the common and collective necessity of creating a space for cultural values and beliefs of learners that differ from the dominant group. This is despite the variances of interpretations and nuances of the theoretical interpretations between and amongst researchers.

Gay (2010) defines culturally responsive teaching as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for the students. In other words, being culturally responsive teaches through the strengths of these students by exploring the relationship between them and the curriculum content, which is connected to pedagogical strategies. To delve deeper into the importance of content integration is to comprehend the relevance of multicultural education beyond the notion of an "add-on," (Banks, 2008, p. 135) which is already being offered to create an opportunity for those holding non-dominant identities to understand and make meaning of their lived experiences and the world around them through their schooling. Ladson-Billings (2009) offers culturally relevant teaching as the most appropriate way to respond to this so called "achievement gap," characterizing culturally relevant teaching as:

> A pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills and attitudes. These cultural referents are not merely vehicles for bridging or explaining the dominant culture; they are aspects of the curriculum in their own right. (p. 20).

This definition challenges the often dominant notion that the achievement gap is a result of a deficiency in those learners not performing well. Instead, culturally relevant teaching recasts the breakdown in the failure of Black learners to meet Eurocentric expectations on the failure of the education system to adequately and appropriately include the cultural values, beliefs, interests, and lived experiences in the schools' curriculum and pedagogical approaches. Simply, it demands the full inclusion of all students in schools through a pedagogy that is empowering, relevant, and responsive to the multiple needs of students.

McAuley (2018) describes the differences between culturally relevant and responsive teaching as slight differences of origin and intentionality, suggesting that Ladson-Billings' (2009) focus is on addressing the collective inequities in education experienced by learners of African ancestry from a group perspective. This relates to Gay's (2010) articulation of teacher responsiveness being more student-focused/centered. McAuley (2018) also points out that:

> While Gloria Ladson-Billings (1995) refers to "Culturally Relevant Pedagogy" as "a pedagogy of opposition specifically committed to collective, not merely individual, empowerment," Geneva Gay (2000) uses the term "Culturally Responsive Teaching" to describe "using the cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives of ethnically diverse students as conduits for teaching them more effectively. There are reasons for merging the two to emphasize that "educators must explore how they look at, understand, interact with and engage in meaningful curriculum tied to who is in the classrooms and schools." (West- Burns, 2018). (para. 9)

While this interpretation of the origins and intentionality of Ladson-Billings' and Gay's theoretical articulation of culturally relevant and responsive teaching is nuanced, the core commonality is the focus on including those cultural, racialized, and ethnically diverse groups currently excluded in the curriculum and pedagogical approaches of schools. McAuley (2018) in citing West-Burns (2018), goes on to say, "There are reasons for merging the two to emphasize that "educators must explore how they look at, understand, interact with and engage meaningful curriculum tied to who is in the classrooms and schools" (para. 9).

It is a timely reminder of the necessity for educators to explore how they look at, understand, interact with, and engage in meaningful curriculum related to who is in the classroom. It also identifies a necessity for teachers to recognize that they need to focus both on

the needs of students as individuals, as well as beyond their connection to the group. This zooming in on individual students negatively impacted by having non-dominant cultural identities and experiences, enables teachers to see and support variances in the needs of individual students, while zooming out to capture and identify the needs of the group collectively. This movement resists tendencies to stereotype groups of people in relation to their belonging to a particular group, while validating and affirming their individualized connection to the group. In this instance, the merging of the two terms makes them both stronger because Ladson-Billing's description of culturally relevant pedagogy as a pedagogy of opposition committed to the collective, is a great evaluative tool for the successful implementation of students' cultural characteristics, experiences and perspectives in a classroom or school. However, these terms can be used interchangeably or together, as I am apt to do, going back to the core intentionality of inclusion and the commonality between the two goals of each theoretical interpretation and/or their individual relationship to a specific intention.

Ladson-Billings (2009) asserts that the dynamic of race-based gaps contribute to negative perceptions of people of African descent, which are rooted in the racialization of Black people as inferior, the impact of racism, and low teacher expectations. While Ladson-Billings is specifically referring to the experiences of African Americans, this sentiment is applicable to the African Canadian experience (Munroe-Anderson, 2018). According to Ladson Billings (2009),

> One perspective on these low expectations and negative beliefs about African American students comes from mainstream society's invalidation of African American culture. This invalidation of African American Culture is compounded by a notion of assimilationist teaching, a teaching style that operates without regard to the students' particular cultural characteristics. According to the assimilationist perspective, the teacher's role is to ensure

> that students fit into society. And if the teacher has low expectations, the place that the teacher believes the student "fits into" is on society's lower rung. (p. 24)

Table 1 reinforces the characteristics of culturally relevant teaching, and makes them explicit by contrasting characteristics from an assimilationist perspective.

Table 1

Conceptions of Self and Others

Culturally Relevant	Assimilationist
Teacher identifies as an artist and teaching as an art.	Teacher identifies as a technician and teaching as a technical task.
Teacher identifies as part of the community and teaching as giving something back to the community, and encourages students to do the same.	Teacher identifies as an individual who may or may not be a part of the community, and encourages achievement as a means to escape community.
Teacher believes all students can succeed.	Teacher believes failure is inevitable for some.
Teacher helps students make connections between their community, national, and global identities.	Teacher homogenizes students into an "North American" identity.
Teacher identifies teaching as "pulling knowledge out"—like 'mining.'	Teacher identifies teaching as "putting knowledge into"—like 'banking.'

(Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 38)

Table 1 succinctly captures the tension in systems between the two approaches. It demonstrates how those resistant to change outright ignore the core intentionality of a theoretical interpretation towards more equitable environments for all learners, choosing to maintain the status quo instead. For example, the application of culturally responsive teaching and learning more recently delivered through a concerted effort between the DEECD and the regional centre for education enlisted the support of Dr. Sharroky Hollie. Hollie (2018) has deliberately worked to differentiate the distinctions between culture and race, to challenge those who continue to resist being responsive to the needs of marginalized learners, due to a fear of saying something wrong and being characterized as racist. The distinction is necessary because of the success of a Eurocentric system in conflating elements of differing groups of people's ethnicities, their values and beliefs, or their culture within their socially constructed racial identity. Hollie (2018) defines race as a "socially constructed story of human geography and denotable phenotypes or variations

among peoples. It has nothing to do with our behaviours culturally" (p. 231). He goes on to define culture as:

> A set of guidelines, both explicit and implicit, that individuals inherit as members of a particular group that tells them how to view the world, how to experience it emotionally, and how to behave in it; it is learned behavior. (Hollie, p. 229)

While I agree with Hollie that culture and race are separate and distinct entities as defined, the impact of colonial/imperialistic and anti-Black racist policies, practices, and procedures have placed the cultural values and beliefs of white people in more privileged and powerful positions socially and institutionally than other racialized groups. As a result, we cannot use the technical distinction between race and culture made by Hollie to permit teachers who are uncomfortable with confronting race, to hide in the individualistic implementation of culture as it pertains to the students they teach, without exploring or including the impact of racism on their cultural perceptions and experiences as racialized learners (Singleton, 2006; Hollie, 2018). The depth of which race and culture are conflated through the process of racialization in Nova Scotia, has become indistinguishable, to the extent that teachers need to continuously and actively interrogate their tendency to default to race as culture, or culture as race, and be deliberate in their response to the anti-Black racism that learners experience every day.

The European American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness (2019) refer to Delgado (1995) in explaining their terminology:

> We use the term "white supremacist consciousness" not to refer to a group of people but to a system of thought. White supremacist consciousness describes a way of thinking that takes for granted the legitimacy of an American society dominated by white norms and values. In other words, white norms and values are normalized, thus making their

> supremacy over other groups norms and values implicit. It is this normalization that maintains the institutionalization of privilege based on race we learn about this highly charged phrase from people of color, drawn from the discourse of Critical Race Theory. (para. 4)

In addition to the ongoing narrative, many white educators who are challenged to be more culturally responsive to the needs of vulnerable and marginalized learners have run to and sought shelter in this specific distinction between race and culture. These teachers focus more or exclusively on the cultural side of the coin because it permits them to avoid engaging in conversations relating to their own privilege and the impact of racism on those racialized (Saad, 2020). It creates a safe buffer between systemic expectations of teachers to be more inclusive through exclusively cultural criteria without acknowledging the complexity of this social construction and the impact of systemic racism.

While it needs to be acknowledged that the application of some of the culturally responsive elements will have an impact, it will never fully address the cultural needs of racialized learners living in a racist environment because it does not fully respect or include their lived experiences and the necessity of anti-Black racism. The application of culturally relevant and responsive teaching must always scrutinize the impact of racism on the perceptions of culture and cultural values because of the success of Meta/dominant/master narratives that conflate perceived cultural inferiority with people's racialized identities as captured by Ladson-Billings third criteria, the development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness. This critical reflection/scrutiny must explore how racism/racialization takes cultural values and belief systems that differ from the dominant/European values and ascribe it to the perceived inherent inferiority of marginalized people.

To assume that “race” is merely a social construct that has nothing to do with people's abilities to succeed is to ignore the very fact that society has identified race and racialization as ways to include or exclude groups of people (Brigham, 2013). This should compel us to attempt to figure out a way to navigate this dynamic without feeding into and/or perpetuating the lies and mischaracterizations about people who are racialized. The impact of race, racialization, and racism is this unhealthy relationship that first must be acknowledged before it can be meaningfully dealt with.

Summary of the theoretical framework

In this chapter, I described how my critical theoretical framework aided me in analyzing and interpreting the data. I relied on critical race, anti-racist, decolonizing and Africentric lenses to understand the impact of colonialism, imperialism and Eurocentrism on the power imbalances between white and African Nova Scotian communities. The opportunities and ability for African Nova Scotian learners to resist or counteract the oppressive mechanisms or systemic indifference to their needs are essential to establish before reflecting on ways to be more responsive. This is a significant starting point because it contextualizes the ongoing vulnerability of the Black community, despite its incomparable advocacy and gains made in the development of an anti-Black racism infrastructure that has emerged through the recommendations from the BLAC report and subsequent interventions and reports. Layering these critical lenses over a culturally relevant and responsive pedagogical framework or approach provided a comprehensive and nuanced analysis of the research data.

Chapter 4: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe my methodology and methods. My research is a qualitative study informed by principles embedded in critical ethnography. I start by positioning myself as a researcher because, as Banks (2008) states, “Positionality reveals the importance of identifying the positions and frames of reference from which scholars and writers present their data, interpretations, analyses and instruction” (p. 64). Africentricity unapologetically places the lived experiences of people of African Ancestry at the centre as subjects, not objects of any analysis and interpretation (Hunn, 2004; Munroe-Anderson, 2018). I then demonstrate the relevance of Africentricity to both my positionality as a researcher and its influence on the construction of my methodology and methods used to conduct the study. I discuss the origin and purpose of my research question as it relates to the centrality of education to respond to systemic inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners and communities. I then outline why I decided to conduct a qualitative study through critical ethnography. Following that, I explain the methods used to conduct this research and how I organized the project's phases. My data collection process was divided into two phases. In phase one, I prioritized the first voice of the African Nova Scotian community through regional focus groups. I outline the ethics review of phase one and my recruitment strategy, recruitment criteria and my experiences and observations during the process. In phase two, I conducted one-to-one interviews with teachers who were referred to me from phase one. Below I clarify these two phases. I also describe the research participants in a section called “Participants.” In that section, I share the inclusion criteria for the research participants and the individual teacher participant profiles.

My Position as Researcher

In recognizing my own unique positioning in my research, as a racialized African Nova Scotian researcher who has past and current personal and professional experiences with the

public education system, it is important that I be open and transparent about what I hope my research will provide. The best way to honestly and authentically situate myself in relation to the study is by using critical ethnography to reflect on my positionality exclusively and not as a data collection tool. The central intent of critical ethnography is to be sensitive/aware of the limitations of the dialectical relationship between the impact of social structure on the relative autonomy of marginalized people with the purpose of liberating people from sources of repression, dominance and oppression (Anderson, 1989). Because qualitative research is rooted in a social constructivist epistemology, meaning that understanding is developed through social experimentation rooted in trial and error, it directly aligns with my theoretical lenses that include decolonization, Africentricity, critical race theory, anti-racism and culturally relevant and responsive teaching. As a result, my methodology and analytical lenses are epistemologically consistent when examining responses to the research questions.

Critical Ethnography

Castagno (2012) describes critical ethnography as:

> A form of research that attempts to account for and highlight the complex relationship between structural constraints on human action and autonomous, active agency by individuals and groups. By structure critical ethnographers mean the economic, political, social, historical and cultural institutions and norms that operate in all contexts. By agency critical ethnographers mean the ability of individuals to make choices and shape their experiences so that they are not completely determined by structures. (p. 374)

Castagno's (2012) description of the role and purpose of a critical ethnographer captures my desire and interest in exploring the complexity of the systemic inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners in the education systems' colonial and imperialistic origins. These

complex systemic inequities were identified both through the literature review and my respective experiences in education and can be used to identify and mine what is working to counteract these oppressive mechanisms.

A critical ethnographic approach is the most appropriate tool/way to challenge the systemic deficits that are often projected on learners made vulnerable through their historical and current racialization in service of maintaining the status quo. In responding to opportunity gaps that are often characterized as race-based gaps impacting opportunities for marginalized learners, Creswell (2013) claims that:

> The critical ethnography is a type of ethnographic research in which the author advocates for the emancipation of groups marginalized in society … The major components of a critical ethnographer include a value laden orientation, empowering people by giving them more authority, challenging the status quo, and addressing concerns about power and control. A critical ethnographer will study issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization. (pp. 93–94)

As Creswell (2013) states, the major components of critical ethnography, which includes taking up issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization, provide an opportunity to respond to the marginal location of non-dominant identities. The intent of exploring the specifics associated with power relations and imbalances is to determine if our social values are reflected in the actions and results of our collective institutions and, if they are not, to determine ways to redress inequities. Madison (2005) states that:

> The conditions for existence within a particular context are not as they could be for specific subjects; as a result, the researcher feels a moral obligation to make a

> contribution toward changing those conditions toward greater freedom and equity. The critical ethnographer also takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken for granted assumptions bringing to light underlying and obscure operations of power and control. (p. 5)

The other essential element which speaks to what I have done in the first phase of my research process, is to work to empower members of the African Nova Scotian community to speak their truths. As a beneficiary of the gains made as a result of the wisdom embedded in African Nova Scotian community elders and leaders' advocacy over the years, it only makes sense to involve the community in my research process. As a researcher and an African Nova Scotian community member, I feel a deep moral obligation to explore responses to the current inequities experienced by Black learners, with and through community mechanisms that empower our collective voices. This commitment is inspired by the legacy of resistance and advocacy of the African Nova Scotian community, who have and continue to, call out the ways that power is applied to sustain the status quo.

> What does it mean for the critical ethnographer to 'resist domestication? It means that she will use the resources, skills, privileges available to her to make accessible—to penetrate the borders and break through the confines in defence of—the voices and experiences of subjects whose stories are otherwise restrained and out of reach. This means a critical ethnographer contributes to emancipatory knowledge and discourse of social justice. (Madison, 2005, p. 5)

Defining and describing my ontological, epistemological, axiological, and paradigmatic standpoints, supported my positionality within the qualitative methodology and philosophical

assumptions inherent in the study. My position as researcher, enabled me to glean insights through the administration of the research questionnaire, and the relationship with fellow educators working in the current system.

Ontology

My ontological view of the world is that what is "real" to people is influenced and constructed by how our interlocking identities form our understanding of the world. Our understandings or realities are shaped through our experiences over time, and with respect to the impact of power, including our own and those around us. Our understandings and realities are based on how our interlocking identities are impacted by our history and the influences of power in either privileging or marginalizing our identities. These experiences can create both similar and multiple perspectives amongst and between various groups.

These multiple perspectives are a result of our experiences in a given social context, and this social context is tremendously important in articulating our reality. Dei (1996) speaks of the complexities of interlocking elements of identity in the construct of what he calls integrative anti-racism practices, which is reflective of my ontological perspective. Dei (1996) states:

> Our social world is structured by power relations of race, ethnicity, class, gender and sexuality. Individuals do not simply and solely fit into one specific category as an oppressor or oppressed. One can be oppressed and an oppressor at the same time and at different times. (p. 60–61)

Epistemology

My epistemological perspective is connected to the opportunities to express our multiple perspectives and realities in a way that we are "heard" or accounts for our values and interpretation/s of the world. Knowledge is co-constructed in that our understandings are shaped

by our interactions and experiences with others with similar and not so similar identities. Our identities allow us vantage points to "see" and/or understand things in ways that many may or cannot, and these vantage points can extend all our thinking. Knowledge is the accumulation of our respective historical contexts, social location, and the impact of our interlocking identities, against an interrogation of what social values we aspire to as a community.

Axiology

From my axiological perspective, knowledge claims should be shared socially, through dialogue, to determine and debate their value to the overall good of society. These knowledge claims should be applied critically to interrogate common and co-constructed social values that align with democratic and egalitarian principles. If these ideas or knowledge claims marginalize people, they should be challenged and, wherever possible, corrected. I believe all people should be provided equitable opportunities to reach their full potential, with respect to self-actualization, the ability to be authentic, possess social mobility, and have the opportunity to improve their place in society. An interrogation of the current values and principles in Canadian society, which espouse democracy and equity, conflicts with the founding values of imperialism and colonialism, which shaped this country. Serious questions and explorations are required to legitimately aspire to who we claim to be as Canadians, and this includes a recognition of the power imbalance between colonial institutions and the people who represent them.

My experience as a school student, teacher, RCH Coordinator and principal~~,~~ factors in my research approach. In other words, I utilized my vantage points to interpret the responses from the participants. I fall within what Kincheloe (2001, as cited in Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) characterizes as an interpretive and critical bricoleur:

> The interpretive *bricoleur* understands that research is interactive process shaped by his or her own personal history, biography, gender, social class, race and ethnicity, and by those of the people in the setting. The critical *bricoleur* stresses the dialectical and hermeneutic nature of interdisciplinary inquiry, knowing that the boundaries that previously separated traditional disciplines no longer hold. (p. 6)

I understand the importance of privileging the voices of the students and parents in discerning what schools need to do to meet their needs. The historical trials and tribulations of people of African descent in the province of Nova Scotia have been relatively well documented.

In my literature review, I linked the literature and the various government-funded reports to the current experiences of members of the African Nova Scotian community. This link provides an opportunity to contextualize the issues and the needs of the Black community and think critically about the effectiveness of systemic response to these needs over time. The understanding evolving from this information helps to establish criteria/characteristics to define what aspiring culturally responsive teachers need to do to support learners.

The understanding of the most recent gaps in support or effective teaching that the community has experienced and witnessed is central to identifying teachers that learners and the community feel reflect and represent these criteria. The identification of specific teachers by the African Nova Scotian community responds to potential personal biases or preconceived notions I may project upon a potential research participant because of the number of internal "vantage" points that I have as a fellow educator. I have worked to establish a vigilant reflexivity throughout the process as a personal mantra to come back to the importance of voice. While it is important to me that I do not superimpose my thoughts, opinions, and perspectives over the recommendations and insights of my community focus group and teacher participants, my

analysis, findings, and recommendations will undoubtedly be informed/influenced by my experiences.

Insider and Outsider

My location in this research study is as both an insider and an outsider. Griffith (1998) references the debate about the values, virtues and relevancy of the claims of insider-outsider researchers, and explains that:

> Essentially, the insider/outsider debate circles around the researcher's relationship to those she studies. Where the researcher enters the research site as an insider—someone whose biography (gender, race, class, sexual orientation and so on) gives her a lived familiarity with the group being researched—that tacit knowledge informs her research producing a different knowledge than that available to the outsider—a researcher who does not have an intimate knowledge of the group being researched prior to the entry into the group. (p. 362)

I agree that being an insider produces a different knowledge and provides the potential for new interpretations and understandings, especially in a context where there are clear imbalances between the over-representation of Outsider interpretations and the lived experiences of the Insider. However, I do not accept an inherent superiority or validity of the Insider researcher based solely on their location or perspective as an Insider. I am an insider to both "communities" because I am both a teacher and a member of the African Nova Scotian community. However, I am an outsider to both communities because, unfortunately, there are not many teachers of African descent, and therefore, not many people of African descent are teachers. In other words, the notion of being an insider and outsider as it relates to research is complex. Griffith (1998) further explains:

> The interaction of individual biography and social location shape the research relation in complex ways—ways that do not permit an easy translation of historical familiarity into epistemological privilege … Thus, the debate depends on the recognition of different knowledges embedded in both the researchers biography and the social relations of power and privilege in which the researcher is located. (pp. 362–363)

For example, as a member of the African Nova Scotian community, I am an "insider" in the sense that my lived experiences and cultural values and beliefs, in many instances, align with the Black community of Nova Scotia. However, because African Nova Scotians represent such a small percentage of teachers, I am an "outsider" to the African Nova Scotian community based on this criterion. Historically, the cultural values of teachers have reflected colonial, imperialistic and Eurocentric values and beliefs because most teachers are white and are often located in a more privileged position than Black teachers. Smith (1999) states that:

> Insider research has to be as ethical and respectful, as reflexive and critical, as outsider research. It also needs to be humble. It needs to be humble because the researcher belongs to the community as a member with a different set of roles and relationships, status and position … The role of an "official insider voice" is also problematic. The comment, "She or he lives in it therefore they know" certainly validates experience but for a researcher to assume that their experience is all that is required is arrogant. (p. 139)

This is such a significant point to the integrity of my research in answering/responding to my question, because the origin of my interest and concern emerges from a very visceral and personal place because of my lived experiences, both personally and professionally. Smith's (1999) articulation of the need to stay humble in not overemphasizing my experiences as

universal is a strong reminder to stay honest about this to avoid allowing my personal perspective to be/become the overriding voice or perspective.

Design of the Study

My dissertation is entitled, African Nova Scotian Dream Keepers, because dreams can inspire people to work towards something that seems currently unattainable to them. While all parents hope their children will be better off than they were, the historical experiences of people of African ancestry demonstrate that this hope is more out of reach for them than it is for those with more privileged social identities and who are members of the dominant group (Thiessen, 2009; DEECD, 2023).

Therefore, I aimed to identify and interview teachers who work to keep the dreams of African Nova Scotian learners alive, by recognizing their cultural contributions to the learning process and identifying strategies to expand this impact toward academic success and future opportunities. I wanted to learn from teachers of diverse backgrounds and social identities, inclusive of race, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, ability, or religion throughout the province about the strategies, approaches, and ways they were able to meet and be responsive to the needs, interests, and backgrounds of their students. I also wanted a representation of teachers with elementary, middle, and high school backgrounds from multiple grade levels across urban, suburban, and rural settings. I hoped to access a diverse pool of participants that would provide some core principles, themes, and approaches of culturally responsive.

However, the most relevant element to my inclusion criteria associated with being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian students, was community member referrals. This became the central most significant factor because culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy acknowledges the cultural exclusion of learners of African ancestry as a

central contributing factor to the student performance inequities and school climate concerns experienced by Black students.

The framework organized through the inclusion of these understandings aligned with the historical and ongoing atmospheres of education experienced by racialized learners. A culturally relevant and responsive teaching approach offers much in exploring and identifying the promising practice's themes, characteristics and approaches of teachers identified that support Black learners despite these histories and conditions to answer these questions.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

I used a qualitative research methodology since, as a researcher, I am "interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences" (Merriam, 2009, p. 5). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) share that:

> Qualitative researchers stress the socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and what is studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry … They seek answers to questions that stress how social experience is created and given meaning. (p. 10)

Qualitative research methodology provides the opportunity to develop a research structure and approach that enables research participants to speak to their own understandings and interpretations of their lived experiences. In addition, there is limited quantitative data regarding student performance and school climate concerns experienced by African Nova Scotian learners (Lee & Marshall, 2009).

The concerns regarding the negative disproportional representation of African Nova Scotian learners in student performance and school climate incidences have historically been

expressed through education committee reports, community leadership and definitively in the BLAC Report (1994) during the time of segregated schools to the early to mid-1990s. However, the sense of urgency in being responsive to these issues was easily deflected or dismissed as the result of racism and subsequent deficit thinking regarding the capabilities and value of racialized learners. And, while more recently collected data validates and affirms the African Nova Scotian communities' concerns of negative disproportional representation of African Nova Scotian learners in student performance and school climate areas, it does little to support the exploration of what teachers are currently doing successfully in support of being responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. Creswell (2009) says that, "the idea behind qualitative research is to purposefully select participants or sites (or documents or visual material) that will best help the researcher understand the problem and the research question" (p. 178).

Qualitative research provides several characteristics that support the development of a structure and strategy that is best situated to support exploring the answers to the question/s as framed by the researcher themselves or the *design that develops.* For example, qualitative research supports the collection of data in the very or natural environment that the issues take place or where the question is situated. In addition, it supports the inclusion of the interviewer or researcher as a key instrument, through their presence in conducting the interviews firsthand as opposed to relying exclusively on external data, collected, or interpreted by researchers in ways that do not always account for the factors/influences or approaches that the researcher sees as problematic or biased. Qualitative research also allows for the ability to include multiple sources of information in reviewing, analyzing and interpreting data, which is significant to testing, contextualizing, or interrogating the findings. This approach also supports an inductive data analysis, that builds categories or that develops themes which emerge out the exploration of the

data. This encourages and provides the researcher space to accept new understandings and information, from the data beyond their own preconceived notions or biases going into the project. Qualitative research focuses on the meaning of the participants, or that centres the understanding or meaning taken from the participants as opposed to meanings and understandings as exclusively interpreted by authors and researchers who are not reflective of the communities they are researching. Finally, qualitative research is reflective of an interpretive approach because it supports accounting for the differences in interpretations by the participants, researcher, and readers (Creswell, 2013).

These interpretations can offer a counter-narrative to more dominant systemic interpretations that do not include or account for power imbalances between system representatives, those with dominant social identities and those impacted by their decisions. These counter-narratives may illuminate the potential biases attached to self-interest in characterizing their policies, practices and procedures as being in the best interest of all students even when they are not. First voice opportunities that centre the experiences of underrepresented students' communities and educators can lead to systemic understandings beyond the hierarchy regarding what is and is not currently working in our education system (Stefancic & Delgado, 2010).

This study takes a critical ethnographic viewpoint informed by a critical race, anti-racist, decolonizing, and Africentric perspectives, because it enables the researchers to advocate for the emancipation of marginalized learners while also taking up issues of power, empowerment, inequality, inequity, dominance, repression, hegemony, and victimization. The focus is on a decolonizing and Africentric approach because the aforementioned inequities, or power

imbalances, often are the result of the characteristics of colonization (Creswell, 2013; Smith, 1999). Chilisa (2019) explains that:

> Decolonization is thus a process of conducting research in such a way that the worldviews of those who have suffered a long history of oppression and marginalization are given space to communicate from their frames of reference. It is the process that involves "researching back" to question how the disciplines –psychology, education, history, anthropology, sociology, or science—through an ideology of Othering have described and theorized about the colonized Other, and refuses to let the colonized Other name and know from their frame of reference. (p. 14)

This general extension of the othering, as described through anti-colonial and decolonizing approaches, requires a bit more specificity as I relate to the unique experiences of racialized groups within a colonial structure.

This experience warrants an anti-racist approach that will support a better-informed response to the uniqueness of the saliency of race as a marginalizing factor. Dei (1996) describes an Anti-racist approach (1996) as:

> Anti-racism is a critical discourse of race and racism in society and of the continuing racializing of social groups for differential and unequal treatment. Anti-racism explicitly names the issues of race and social difference as issues of power and equity rather than as matters of cultural and ethnic variety. (p. 25)

This methodological approach provides an opportunity to identify the limitations of the current responses to redress inequities because it is included in the analysis process, which challenges the effects of colonial, imperial, and racist mechanisms.

Research methods vary within critical ethnography and can include interviews, focus groups, and processes of immersion in the local context to generate insights that attempt to explain the environment by privileging participant perspectives (Castagno, 2012, p.383). I have selected two methods to explain the social phenomenon relating to the challenges experienced by African Nova Scotian learners: community focus groups in phase one of my research and in-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviews with teacher participants in phase two.

Sample and Population

The foundational hypothesis of my research is that culturally responsive teaching, defined as using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective, is an approach that can respond to the achievement gap and school climate concerns (Gay, 2010). Research that explores and identifies the ways that culturally responsive approaches are already practiced by teachers in Nova Scotia, will contribute to the knowledge and understanding of the evolving needs of members of the African Nova Scotian communities (Lee & Marshall, 2009) and identify promising practices to address opportunity gaps. My theoretical perspective required an engagement with and inclusion of the African Nova Scotian community in the process.

In this study, I sought to privilege and prioritize the voices of members of the African Nova Scotian community, who have firsthand experiences encountering challenges within the education system. To accomplish this, I developed the study and data collection in two phases. First, I conducted community consultations with families from the Black community to discuss notions of "success." I explored the characteristics that the community believes make an effective teacher utilizing Ladson-Billings' criteria as a definition of culturally relevant and responsive teaching. I asked these community members for suggested names of teachers who

they believe are supportive of African Nova Scotian children. This positioning of African Nova Scotian voices at the centre helped me to determine who I should interview.

"From the vantage point of the colonized, a position from which I write, and choose to privilege, the term research is inextricably linked to European Imperialism and colonialism" (Smith, 1999, p.1). The African Nova Scotian community consultations shed light on the impact of systemic racism. The second phase of this research study was to approach potential research participants for the study, based on suggestions from community members.

Phase One: Community Focus Groups

The first phase involved organizing community engagement in historical Black communities across Nova Scotia, namely, in Weymouth Falls, Southville, Danvers, Hassett, Jordan Town, Acaciaville, Conway, Gibson Woods, North Preston, East Preston, Beechville, New Glasgow, Upper Big Tracadie, Mulgrave, and Whitney Pier. I contacted African Nova Scotian community leaders and organizational representatives, and shared an information letter with them about my research (Appendix E). The community leaders or representatives who agreed to help organize focus groups, assisted with logistics where members of those communities could come together over a meal. In the community focus groups, I explained my research question, and briefly shared information about what culturally relevant and responsive pedagogy. The community focus group participants then reflected on the teachers whom they believed to be culturally relevant and responsive, either from their own and/or the educational experiences of their children, grandchildren, foster children, or nieces and nephews.

Organization of Community Focus Groups Recruitment

I sent the information package outlining the community consultation to my educational partners. These educational partners included the Council on African Canadian Education

(CACE), the Black Educators Association (BEA), the African Canadian Services Division (ACSD), the Delmore "Buddy" Daye Learning Institute (DBDLI), the Office of African Nova Scotian Affairs (ANSA), the African United Baptist Association (AUBA), African Nova Scotian education committees and their respective educational employees, representatives, and partners. The information package included an introductory community focus group email (Appendix E) that both introduced me and defined and discussed the intention of the research project. I also included a community participant's information letter and consent form (Appendix B) to outline expectations of community participants in supporting community outreach and engagement efforts. After identifying a regional connection and a number of community members to participate in the focus groups, I travelled to each region to share my research proposal and respond to any questions or needed clarifications in person. I sometimes approached and requested a local representative to assist me in facilitating the discussion. This gave me the opportunity to request community participation in identifying potential candidates for my research. This approach ensured that there was community collaboration in the process of identifying teacher participants. It also increased the likelihood that the teacher participants would want to be involved in my study knowing they were endorsed by the community.

I scheduled the interviews outside of the regular workday, in order to maximize teacher participation. I decided to do this because of my personal awareness of and experience with, the ways in which Eurocentric/colonial institutions obstruct opportunities for their employees to speak freely without intimidation about their experiences. Instances of full disclosure from staff can further expose or exacerbate the number of reviews and reports that have already identified/evidenced the persistence of systemic racism and inequities in the education system through the DEECD and regional centres for education.

As a representative of a regional centre for education, I have been denied the opportunity to speak candidly in meetings with representatives outside of our centre of education, especially when there is a higher-ranking representative. I have witnessed requests from researchers to involve teachers in their research not have their request approved, because of the risk of identifying areas of negligence and inadequacies of the RCE or school. The fear is that this new data/information may evidence inequities and embolden community advocates to request/demand resources and support that the system is disinterested in or unable to provide. The researcher is often given bureaucratic redirections, for example, waiting on a lead from the centre to facilitate and manage connections with the school or teacher, knowing that centre employees were overwhelmed and would be reluctant to volunteer for this role or filling out centre-constructed consent forms that had requests that had been addressed in ethics approval. These centre requirements create unacceptable interruptions to the timeframes available to the researcher which discourages or makes impossible the ability to conduct their research, when or if they have not been rejected outright.

In this research, I experienced complications when attempting to organize a meeting of African Nova Scotian parents, asking them to identify potential teacher participants. An African Nova Scotian student support worker assisted in this effort, by distributing the participants' research material, identifying a location, and arranging a caterer from our community to provide the meal. To ensure that they were adhering to regional policy, the student support worker forwarded my request to their supervisor, who suggested that because my research would result in a dissertation, I would need approval from the regional executive director (formerly known as a superintendent). I would have to fill out a form, and the school board/education centre would assess the risk associated with my research.

I refused to do this for several reasons. First, I think it demonstrates how systemic and institutional racism operates to minimize any accountability to the African Nova Scotian community, out of simple fear that systemic deficiencies may be revealed about support for Black learners. Second, it was disturbing and paternalistic that the regional director of education assumed and utilized their authority, to attempt to deny me the opportunity to access the African Nova Scotian student support worker's connection to the community in conducting my research. I told the regional director that their obstruction would be denying members of the African Nova Scotian community in the region an opportunity to participate in the study, by identifying successful teachers and potential strategies and programs that were working for African Nova Scotian learners). I asserted that there would be potential harm to the Centre because my focus was on speaking with successful teachers from their Centre.

I also explained that I had secured an IURN grant to conduct this research, which meant that senior members at the DEECD understood the value of my study. I expressed the irony that the deputy minister, the regional executive director's boss, approved funding for my research to identify responses to the very systemic inequities perpetuated through obstruction of my access to the facilitation support of the African Nova Scotian student support worker and the families connected to their caseload. In addition, I felt that this decision by a Regional Executive Director of European ancestry undermined the infrastructure built by the African Nova Scotian community.

The regional executive director, during our conversation, agreed that they did not have the authority to restrict my access to the community and teachers but still insisted that because the African Nova Scotian student support worker was their employee, they could still assert their control of the situation. While I felt that I would have been justified in following through with

the original plan to meet with parents through the arrangements made by the African Nova Scotian student support workers, I decided against doing that, since I did not want to create any problem for the employee.

Community Focus Group Participants

The participants in the focus groups were of African Ancestry and from the African Nova Scotian community. They had firsthand experiences with the education system as students themselves or as the parents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews of students currently in the education system.

Participants' educational experiences extended over three to four generations and were offered during these sessions. In all the African Nova Scotian community focus groups, participants began their discussion with their negative experiences at school and negative interactions with teachers. The retelling of these negative stories often carried an emotional intensity. For the community focus group participants, school is believed to be a central institution to respond to racism.

As a result of the systemic racism experienced by the Black community, there is a significant emphasis placed on youth getting their education and being “successful” at school to ensure good job opportunities and social mobility. The community deeply understands the economic impact of a high school diploma that leads to access to secondary educational opportunities. Systemic racism and resulting exploitation can become a lived, cyclical, and intergenerational experience of vulnerability, and marginalization.

The focus groups with the African Nova Scotian communities were powerful because the reflection of their educational experiences exposed many vulnerabilities and also provided a supportive context to share their experiences. At the beginning of each focus group, I explained

the purpose of the research and the study questions, including an explanation of the criteria for the teacher participants I was looking to interview. After my initial presentation, participants had the opportunity to discuss the questions in groups or with partners.

Using digital recorders, I audio-recorded the focus group, and tried to ensure that everyone had an opportunity to meaningfully contribute to the conversations. During the open discussion, I circulated around the room to hear the conversation and respond to any questions or clarifications needed in real time. I recorded the focus group discussions to support the development and co-constructed understanding of what a successful teacher looked like from the perspective of the community, utilizing Ladson-Billings' criteria as guideposts.

At the end of each session, we sought to identify key characteristics of the culturally relevant and responsive teachers from each community participant meeting. While the focus groups varied in terms of meeting locations and size, the most powerful component was the consistent characteristics of these teachers across all communities. During their participation in the focus groups, it became evident that these teachers have high expectations of students, engage in effective and authentic communication with students/parents, participate with students through extracurricular activities and community events, have a passion for and knowledge of their subject areas, have an interest and ability to address issues of race/racism and provide emotional support and encouragement to their students.

I was encouraged by the level of engagement of the focus group participants in reflecting on the questions, and drawing on their lived experiences in determining and identifying which teachers they felt best reflected these characteristics. The focus groups echo the testimonies and information in the historical reports about systemic inequities, and the long-standing and continued challenges faced by African Nova Scotian learners. However, there was also a sense of

hopefulness within the focus groups when the participants articulated the imagined ideal teacher that could address these concerns.

After I received referrals for potential respondents from the focus group participants, specifically teachers in the school system working full-time, part-time, or as a substitute, who have taught or are teaching African Nova Scotian students. I looked up the contact information of potential teacher participants in the phone book, or through community facilitators, community participants or educational partners. I sent them a participant's recruitment email (Appendix D) via email or post, outlining the purpose of my research. I provided potential participants with an opportunity to speak on the phone, in order to clarify any questions or concerns regarding participating in the study.

From the pool of potential participants, I selected those that appeared to reflect a cross-section of regional, grade level, and gender representation. I provided each potential respondent a consent form, and those who chose to participate, signed the form and became a part of the research group. Initially, I wanted to interview approximately 15 teachers, based on trying to identify three teachers representing elementary, middle, and high school from each of the five regional centres of education with African Nova Scotian communities from across the province, while reflecting on social identities, including race, gender, class, rural, and urban geographical representation. However, while the intention was to have teachers with as many diverse social identities as possible, there were several challenges from a logistical perspective. For example, the diversity of representation was limited to the number of participants identified by the community focus groups, and by those willing or available to participate in the interviews. I ultimately secured the participation of 10 teacher respondents.

Phase Two: Participant Interviews

Beginning phase two, I sent along a teacher participant's information letter and consent form (Appendix A), gave each teacher participant the interview questions (Appendix C), and invited the teachers to an interview in a comfortable and confidential space. The interviews consisted of an in-depth one-to-one semi-structured interviewing process to provide room for participants to explore their thoughts, feelings and beliefs in response to the guiding questions in an open-ended way, within the parameters of the overall context of the research questions. This interview process consists of a combination of more and less structured interview questions, that both specify data required from all participants while being flexible enough to move in the direction the answers take you in exploring potential new insights. There was no predetermined wording or interview order in my semi-structured interviews (Merriam, 2009). The in-depth one-to-one semi structured interview is compatible with a critical ethnographic approach, because it privileges participant perspectives generating insights that attempt to explain and respond to the questions (Castagno, 2012).

After each of the teacher research participant interviews was recorded, the recordings were transcribed by a university-approved transcriptionist, and the transcripts were stored on my password-protected laptop, on One Drive, in accordance with the secure data protocol. I then did a thematic analysis of the transcripts to identify points of interest, and participant responses that most directly aligned with or provided insights to answering the research question.

Thematic Analysis Process

Braun and Clarke (2006) describe thematic analysis as:

> A method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data. It minimally organizes and describes your data set in (rich) detail. However, frequently it

> goes further than this, and interprets various aspects of the research topic (Boyatzis, 1998). The range of different possible thematic analyses will further be highlighted in relation to a number of decisions regarding it as a method. (p. 79)

As outlined earlier, the community focus group was an essential part of the referral process in identifying teacher participants. The community focus groups were recorded in the interest of validating and affirming the participation and contributions of the community to the teacher selection process. By centering their voice in outlining the ways that they felt that the teachers they referred matched the criteria of being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian students, all teacher participants selected and available for interviews were effective in demonstrating many of these competencies to the community.

However, while the first voice element was crucial to the referral of teacher participants, this phase alone would not capture the ways that these teachers negotiated being culturally relevant and responsive to African Nova Scotian students within the classroom or school. As a result, I did not transcribe these discussions but utilized the discussions to inform and support the exploration of my research question, coding and thematic analysis.

At the end of each of the community consultations, I would ask, 'In what ways have these teachers demonstrated to you that they meet the criteria of supporting students academically, developing cultural competence and facilitating a socio-political consciousness?' Community participants provided examples throughout the meeting in their groups, and I would move around the room listening to and discussing their responses, as they described what the teachers were doing that convinced them that they met the criteria.

At the end of each session, I summarized for participants, what they described as evidence that these teachers were culturally relevant and responsive, and asked if there was

anything that I missed or left out. Community comments about the characteristics of culturally relevant and responsive teachers included, having high expectations, engaging with the community, passion and/or enthusiasm for the subject matter, effective communication with parents/guardians, a sincere interest in students' learning, emotional support, and safety. From this discussion, I began generating highlighted segments from the interview transcripts to capture elements of emerging themes.

Ultimately, this generated several characteristics of the participants, about what these teachers do that demonstrate the ability to do their jobs effectively, while meeting the needs of their students. However, this process of coding did not provide me with the ability, in their current form, to organize or group of them in a way that adequately responded to my research questions. I referred to Braun and Clarke's (2006) phases of thematic analysis as a starting point to further analyze and development themes more relevant to the research questions.

Table 2

Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of the Process
1. Familiarizing yourself with the data.	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, taking note of initial ideas.
2. Generating initial codes.	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
3. Searching for themes.	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.

4. Reviewing themes.	Checking if themes fit in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic map of the analysis.
5. Defining and naming themes.	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
6. Producing the report.	The final opportunity for analysis, revisiting the literature/data analysis concerning the research questions, and producing a scholarly report.

Using these steps in organizing the thematic analysis, I read the transcripts, reviewed the audio recordings to correct any inconsistencies in the transcription, and wrote summaries of each interview to capture its essence. In the second round of analysis, I applied the research questions to coded segments to determine if a broader theme could summarize the research questions. In reflecting on the highlighted points in the first round, I inquired about how teachers are culturally responsive to students of African descent. In response to the question, I coded what these teachers had been doing specifically, which was having high expectations of their students, developing meaningful relationships, and supporting students' emotional and academic needs. The first round of coding, however, did not answer the question as to their motivations for these actions.

Deeper analysis of the second question about fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy, specifically in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia, revealed an underlying complexity. Subsequently, I extended my interpretation of the question to probe further, in an effort to identify characteristics of these teachers doing this culturally relevant and responsive work, and to explore what it is that makes them so extraordinary.

Following this process, I reviewed the updated transcripts again, coding the participants' responses to questions and identifying the themes and characteristics of teachers who are culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. I identified four themes: 1) efforts relating to the expression or understanding of empathy through experiences or exposure to marginalization, 2) the significance of relationships, 3) well-being, and 4) a commitment to teaching and learning.

The development of these themes cemented the link between the why and what they were doing. Because they had personal experiences with or exposure to marginalization, they recognized the significance of authentic and meaningful relationships with students and the community. They were aware of a responsibility to be mindful of the well-being of African Nova Scotian learners given the African Nova Scotian learners' experiences with systemic racism, and they remained committed to teaching and learning. I then reorganized my coding by highlighting segments of participant responses that included experiences and exposure to marginalization, evidence of authentic and meaningful relationships and the well-being of their students, and their ongoing commitment to teaching and learning when their efforts did not go as planned.

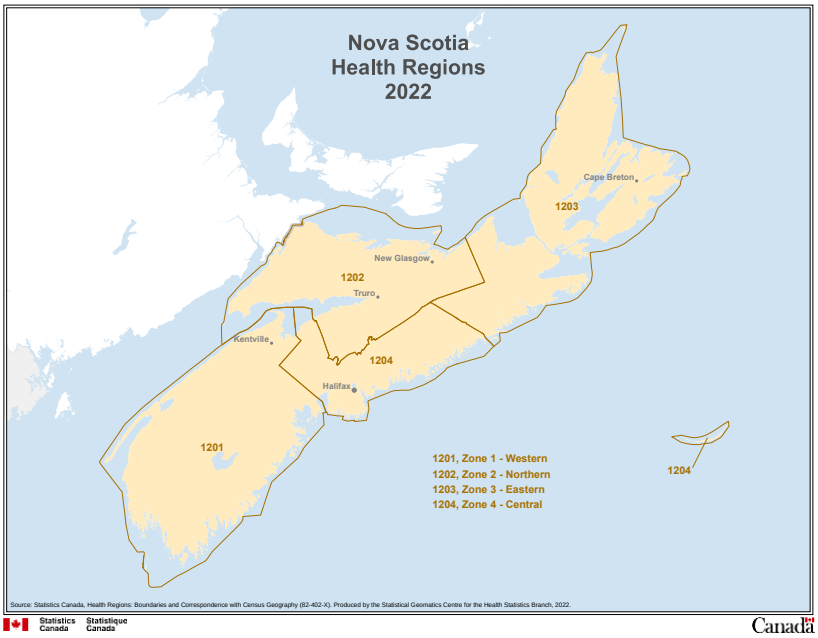
As a result of the discovery of this link between the why and what, responding to my questions became a bit more fluid in being able to say that these teachers who have been identified as being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of students have had experiences and exposure to marginalization (expressed empathy), they are committed to meaningful and authentic relationships, they are focused on the well-being of their students and are committed to teaching and learning from a personal and professional perspective, and they critically reflect on ways to improve.

In reviewing my thematic analysis with my supervisor, I was challenged to explain situations whereby teachers have experiences and exposure to marginalization but fail to make the effort to acknowledge and commit to responding to the needs of marginalized students like these participants have. This ongoing analysis and critical reflection enabled me to reconsider that the core characteristic of what was happening with these teachers was their ability to empathize. These conversations and critical reflections supported the ability to evolve these themes to more stable framing and supportive literature to bolster/evidence these claims.

Participant Profiles

Zones identified by the Nova Scotian Health Authority are the Central Zone (Halifax area, Eastern Shore and West Hants), Eastern Zone (Cape Breton, Guysborough and Antigonish areas), Northern Zone (Colchester-East Hants, Cumberland and Pictou areas), and Western Zone (Annapolis Valley, South Shore and Southwest).

Figure 1: Nova Scotia Health Regions



Using pseudonyms to protect the identity of the 10 participants who agreed to be interviewed, four individuals identified as having African ancestry: Erica, Nancy, Becky, and Nicole;, and six were of European descent: Margaret, Daniel, Corey, Neil, Fran, and Megan.

Margaret is a white teacher, who teaches High School in the Central Region of Nova Scotia. When she was a child, she attended elementary school in the Sackville area (Central zone) before moving to New Brunswick during her Junior high years. Eventually, Margaret's family returned to Nova Scotia where she attended and graduated High School.

Margaret was a competitive soccer player throughout High School and planned to attend a local University to study math and science, with a goal of pursuing a career in sports medicine. But because her friends were taking commerce, Margaret started in the commerce program but quickly learned that this was not her calling.

After being hired to put on soccer clinics/training camps for children, teaching was always something at the back of her mind. Upon graduating with an undergraduate Bachelor of Arts degree with a double major in history and sociology, she completed her Bachelor of Education from a different University in her region and started teaching.

Margaret has taught seventeen different subjects at her current high school over the last 20 years. She also accepts Bachelor of Education students (pre-service teachers) in her classroom for their practicum to provide them mentorship and direct teaching experience. Margaret describes herself as a highly organized and well-prepared teacher. She prides herself on providing students with a good overview of the material and provides clear expectations. Margaret has high expectations for all her students and believes that all students can learn. She characterizes herself as strict and fair. Margaret recognizes the importance of engagement and is always working on developing her knowledge and understanding in the interest of supporting more students in her classroom.

Nicole is African Nova Scotian. She teaches elementary and junior high school in the Eastern zone. Nicole was born and raised in a historic African Nova Scotian community in her region. Growing up she was very involved in the activities in the community as well as her church. After high school, Nicole went to a University in her Region where she obtained a Bachelor of Arts degree. She completed a Bachelor of Education from a different university in the Eastern zone. She was recently accepted into a Master of Education at the same university.

Before becoming a teacher, Nicole was a student support worker, where she acted as a liaison between the school and the community to advocate for the academic support and well-being of learners of African ancestry. After graduating from the Bachelor of Education program in 2011, she taught English Language Arts and Art in middle school. Currently, she is a fifty

percent Student Success Teacher, ensuring the academic success and student well-being of African Nova Scotian learners with her own room for pull-out support and an ability to liaise with community representatives and education committees.

Nicole participated in the Black Educators Association's cultural academic enrichment program (CAEP). She always knew that she liked working with children, and honed her skillset as a tutor in the program. Experientially, she knew what it felt like to feel excluded from the curriculum because of the underrepresentation of people of African ancestry in the education system, as well as a lack of culturally affirming materials. Her involvement in the African Nova Scotian community, the support she felt through her reading of the BLAC Report (1994), and the subsequent application of recommendations, like the regional educator program and the CAEP program, invoked a feeling of wanting to give back, and become a part of the solution for students from her community. These support mechanisms and experiences have created a strong commitment to her community, and a connection to a sense of legacy that she brings to her classroom as a teacher.

Becky is an African Nova Scotian teacher who was born and raised in an historic African Nova Scotian community in the northern zone. She currently teaches elementary students. Becky moved back to her home community after the birth of her daughter while attending university out-of-province for her undergraduate and Bachelor of Education degrees. In addition, Becky has two master's degrees—one from a university in the eastern zone, and one from a university in the central zone.

Becky has teachers in her family, including aunts and both of her parents. She has internalized a deep connection and sense of responsibility to her community because of the love, support, resiliency, and strength that has evolved out of her lived experiences. Her relationship

with elders from her community through her grandmother, church members, and the legacy of her father as one of the first cohorts of African Nova Scotian teachers in her region. She has learned of the historical systemic challenge and realities experienced by Black educators, and seeks to create more opportunities for African Nova Scotian learners. She also acknowledges the privilege that she experienced as the daughter of two teachers at the school she attended growing up, and witnessed the deferential treatment of racialized students who did not have this same access to support.

For over a decade, Becky has taught elementary school. During this time, she has seen a drop in student performance amongst African Nova Scotian and other marginalized learners. She wanted to intervene to correct this issue. She made a request to the administration of her school to take all the racialized learners into her classroom to respond to student performance and school climate/behavioural problems. There was initial resistance to this proposal from her colleagues because of how it might reflect on them if she did meet with success in providing meaningful interventions that addressed these gaps. However, it was a high-stakes endeavour to make this request for Becky because of the potential message it would send if she were unsuccessful in meeting these learners' needs. In other words, it may simply validate the deficit thinking about Black learners. The Administration reluctantly supported this intervention, and preliminary data indicates that it is making a difference for the students.

Corey is a white, Jewish man who has been teaching for the last 15 years at the secondary level in the Central zone. He was born and raised in an Acadian community in New Brunswick. He learned Spanish at University and did some travelling prior to entering his Bachelor of Education, where he lived abroad in several Spanish-speaking countries, such as Mexico and

Spain, for a few months at a time. He currently teaches History, Social Studies and Spanish/French at the High school where he has been teaching for the last 13 years.
Corey earned his teaching degree in a one-year BEd program at a university out of province 16 years ago. He did his degree in French and his teachable subjects were in Mathematics and French.

Corey comes from a family of teachers; his father is a professor, and his grandmothers and uncles were teachers. In High School, he was a strong student academically and became interested in social justice issues. He critically challenged the information presented by his teachers and started to feel that he could explain certain concepts as well as or better than many of them. As a result of these experiences and having volunteered and worked at camps for youth, he decided to pursue teaching as a career.

Corey's early interest and connection to social justice and the demonstrated application of these values and beliefs through his work at his current school led a colleague to suggest Corey teach African Canadian Studies.

While acknowledging that as a white, middle-class, bilingual man, there are many privileges that he enjoys, Corey acknowledges that his awareness of oppression, discrimination, and systemic inequities are tied to the anti-Semitism experienced by his ancestors. However, he uses this personal connection and understanding of marginalization as a point of entry, empathetically, to discuss openly and honestly the lived experiences of his students. Corey feels that his honesty fosters an authentic relationship where Black students feel more comfortable in challenging and contributing to class conversations because of the upfront disclosure of his whiteness. He also recognizes his responsibility to create a safe place for this dialogue and challenges his learners of European ancestry to critically reflect on their privileges.

Daniel is a white, French Acadian, male retired teacher who taught Physical Education and Science at the Middle school at a consolidated School in the Western Zone. He grew up in the Acadian community, just at the edge of several white and Black English-speaking communities in and around the Western Zone area. He started teaching in the early 70s and taught for 32 years before retiring.

Growing up, his family struggled financially after his father's illness when Daniel was about 9 years old, and he had to look after himself. Prior to becoming a teacher at the school just outside of his home community, he recalls his interactions with members of the African Nova Scotian community fondly as he would ride his bike into town and play baseball on an integrated team with members of the Black community. He credits these lived experiences and interactions as breaking down many of the more strongly held stereotypes that existed at the time about people of African ancestry. He also worked manual labour positions on seasonal pulp wood boats, which continued his exposure to people outside of his home community, including workers from overseas and members of the surrounding Black communities. He feels that this was a particular advantage because when he started teaching at the local school, he knew many of the parents of students in his class, and they knew him.

As a physical education teacher at the school, he also coached basketball and volleyball, which allowed him to develop deeper connections with and understanding of his students' lived experiences and personal circumstances.

Daniel's firsthand lived experiences and relationship with members of historically marginalized learners are key contributing factors to balancing his high expectations of all his students with fair and equitable treatment as a teacher. Because he demanded much from his students, he put in the time and effort into preparing for his lessons, often arriving early in the

morning and not returning home until the business of the school day was complete. He made sure that there was minimal downtime for students during his class and sought to extend student understanding beyond the curriculum. He felt that relationships ought to be two-way, and while he created space for students to share in his class, he showed up to extracurricular events to support and share personal stories about his life. In certain circles, he would share his experiences with alcoholism, and in understanding the vulnerability of some students and their families, he would quietly advocate for learners who may be struggling by resisting unfair characterizations of students in the staff room and in general to create a safer, more welcoming school environment.

Erica is an African Canadian teacher who has been teaching grades 1 and 2 at an Elementary school in the Northern Zone for six years.

Erica grew up in Ontario and is the daughter of immigrant parents, her mother is Jamaican, and her father is Nigerian. Upon moving to Nova Scotia, she married her husband, who was an international student from the Bahamas. The combination of her interests in cultural studies, her travel, and her familial cultural diversity created an interest in teaching.
Erica was uncertain about what career path she should pursue after completing a degree in Psychology and recognized that this was not her calling. Upon returning to university and completing her English degree she considered becoming a teacher. She moved to the Northern Zone, where she worked as a student support worker before studying for a Bachelor of Education degree, which she completed in 2013.

In reflecting on her childhood, she said the praise that she received from her grade one teacher, who acknowledged Erica's ability as a writer, gave her the boost of confidence she needed to see herself as a writer. This understanding of the positive influence and impact that

teaching can have on the confidence and self-worth of students is what inspired Erica to teach and what she seeks to bring to her teaching. She recognizes the significance of getting to know her students, their interests, their passions, what they are good at, and using their interests to deliver the lesson while developing their strengths and their weaknesses. She recognizes that there is no 'cookie cutter' approach that will meet the needs of all the students in her classroom and commits to diversifying her approach to support the improvement of her students. She teaches her students as opposed to teaching the curriculum.

Fran is a white teacher who is currently the attendance support worker at an elementary and high school in the Western zone. She has been teaching full-time since 2006 but has taught on and off since 1997.

Fran grew up in an English-speaking colonial community approximately half an hour's drive from where she currently teaches.

Fran always knew she wanted to be a teacher, just like her first-grade teacher. She still has drawings she made in grade one class that show how, even at that early age, she wanted to be a teacher. Upon graduating from High school in 1992, Fran had to decide if she would teach at the elementary or secondary level. She earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English with a double minor in History and French. She immediately got accepted into the Bachelor of Education at the same university in the Western Zone. Fran returned to teach at the same high school that she graduated from only five years after leaving her high school for her grade 11 English teacher, who recently retired that same year. This experience was a bit surreal and awkward because many of her former teachers were still there, and the students were not much younger than her and remembered her time when she was a student.

Fran then worked at a school in the Central zone at the elementary level, where she taught French immersion students who were bussed in to her school to access French immersion while local students were streamed into the English program. She credits this experience as being very eye-opening for a kid coming from her home community where the double standard was not so explicit. As a result of a lack of permanent contract offers in teaching at the time, Fran left teaching. She worked at several different jobs, one that had her travelling to remote communities up north, to teach a Human resources management course which was for municipal certification. In each community, locals would want to show off to her the cultural piece that made their community unique and special. After doing some travelling, she realized that she wanted to return to teaching and moved back to Nova Scotia.

At her current school, she has taught resources, Options and Opportunities, Drama and English/Language Arts, including English 12: African Heritage. Her preparation for teaching English 12: African Heritage called on her to explore and reflect on the systemic inequities experienced by representatives of marginalized communities, and her approach to teaching this course is rooted in exploring unearned privileges. Fran is heavily involved in extracurriculars as she feels this is what helped her figure out what she wanted to do with her life. She has been the graduation advisor for students at her school since her arrival there in 2006 and finds that her authentic engagement with students in helping them explore what they want to do when they graduate, checking in with and pushing students to achieve their goals is a major factor in deeper more meaningful relationships.

Megan is a white teacher, who teaches social science courses at a High School in the Eastern Zone. Megan started her teaching career at a Catholic school in Ontario. She was excited

to return home to Nova Scotia to teach in her home community in 2006 and has been working at her current school since then.

Megan became a teacher because she loves children. Her father, a foster child, did not have the opportunity to attend teacher's college but always instilled the importance of education to his children while they were growing up. Sometimes, on Saturdays, her father would take his children on road trips to the city to visit museums, and because he loved to teach, she loved to learn. Her Dad spoke positively about his experiences in high school, and teaching was represented to her and her sisters as an opportunity to positively impact people's lives; all her siblings became teachers as well.

Megan received her Bachelor of Education degree at a University in the Western zone in 2005. In 2014 she completed her master's in education degree in Administration from a University in the Eastern Zone. She sees herself as a lifelong learner and is currently enrolled in a second master's degree program in supporting learners with diverse needs and exceptionalities at a university in the Central Zone.

Megan believes that students enter her classroom with many different experiences that need to be valued and respected. She specifically wants to get to know each of her students so that she can determine how to best connect with and create safe learning environments for all her students. She wants to particularly encourage students who have something to say but are not always afforded the time and opportunity in class to express a perspective that is rooted in their unique lived experiences. She is self-reflective about her own lived experiences, works to recognize her privilege, and is willing to hear students out about what they need from her to be successful. She has grand expectations for her students and challenges them to think critically.

Nancy is an African Nova Scotian teacher who was born and raised in a historically Black community. She teaches elementary school in the Central region of Nova Scotia. Nancy has taught for 11 years, starting in and around the Central zone, and over the last five years has taught learners in and from her home community.

Upon graduating from High School, she started out going to school for journalism and thought about teaching as a career while working summers at a day camp. As a child, she recalls playing school and recalls always being the teacher. While working at the summer camp Nancy really enjoyed working with the kids and seeing their growth over various stages of development. As a teacher she has developed a strong commitment to her students and passion for teaching.

Nancy received her Bachelor of Education from a university in the Central Zone and completed a master's degree in Africentric policy and research. She is currently enrolled in a second master's program in culturally relevant administration and leadership at a university in the Eastern Zone.

Nancy recognizes that her students have their own set of values and beliefs. They come with their own knowledge and experiences to any given situation and say that it is important for classroom teachers to be able to respond to the needs of the students in front of them. She indicates that relationships are central in getting to know your students and that through these relationships, you can manage incidents better when they occur and can work to bridge student interest with curriculum outcomes. She says in the process of understanding the values and beliefs of your students you must not be indifferent, dismissive, or disrespectful to where they are coming from, even when it does not line up with your values and beliefs as a teacher. Nancy indicated that the teachers who motivated and inspired her were those who were looking to

access her brilliance; they made her feel like she had something unique to contribute, and this is how she wants her students to see and understand her interactions with them.

Neil is a white teacher of Syrian ancestry who teaches at a High School in the Eastern Region of Nova Scotia. He has been teaching for 14 years, 13 of which have been at his current school.

Neil went to a University in the Eastern Zone for his undergraduate degree, where he double majored in political science and English. His political science major focused on children's rights and human rights. He then graduated from Memorial University in Newfoundland through a pilot program with a university in the Eastern region with a Bachelor of Education in secondary intermediate studies. He returned to teach at the same school that he attended while in High School. His family, including his grandparents on both sides of the family, all live in the same community and only a few houses from each other.

While growing up his grandparents were always focused on encouraging everyone to get their education. He would hear his grandmother speak about her brother, who was a teacher and principal out of province, and the respect she had for teachers and his accomplishments created an interest in teaching. In addition, Neil was also inspired by several of his grade 11 teachers, whom he witnessed make strong connections with students through supporting student events, and this had an impact on his connection to his school and community.

As a teacher, Neil feels that strong connections with students in your classroom are important, which means demonstrating an interest in who they are outside of your classroom. He talks about the importance of showing up to community and extracurricular events. He feels this demonstrates a level of care about who they are as an individual and not exclusively their capabilities as a student taking your course/class. At the beginning of the school year, Neil takes

an interest inventory with his students to explore and determine what sparks their interests, including sports, groups that they belong to, and what makes them proud about their culture, family, ethnicity, school, and community. He says that it is important to build on this over the course of the school year and that a teacher needs to wrap their interests up in the delivery of their curriculum while creating a safe place and a sense of pride and ownership of the classroom community.

In Chapter 5, I outline the emergence of the theme of experience with exposure to marginalization, and the development of empathy and/or compassion as a point of entry into identifying the characteristics and approaches of teachers, identified as being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners.

Chapter 5: Results and Discussion

Results

My study shone a light on the relationships between teacher participants, African Nova Scotian focus group (community) members, and community representatives working inside and outside the education system on behalf of ANS learners. These relationships, particularly with the six white participants, reflect the power of community first-voice insights and expertise to develop the necessary communication and understanding between home and school. This ongoing relationship is a finding in and of itself because it identifies the deep sense of trust established through meaningful and authentic relationships, exemplified by the reciprocal relationship between the methodology, which prioritized community voice as central to the process and participant responses to the significance of relationships with students and their families to being culturally relevant and responsive. In addition, this finding also challenges and debunks the dominant perception that teachers who do not share a common racialized or cultural background with their students are unable to be culturally relevant and responsive to their social, emotional, and cultural needs. The processes of being in relationship with and applying the expertise and insights of African Nova Scotian Community members and support staff exemplifies authentic allyship. The following thematic analysis captures participant pathways to becoming more aware of and responsive to students' needs.

The results of the thematic analysis using the process described in the previous chapter, resulted in the emergence of four dominant themes and commitments:

1. Commitment to treating everyone with empathy.
2. Engaging and connecting with students and community.
3. Concern for students' well-being.

4. Commitment to responsive teaching and learning by reflecting on and modifying teaching practices and/or approaches.

Theme 1: Commitment to Empathy

Warren (2018) draws on literature to capture both the emotional and cognitive elements of empathy, which is defined as involving both empathetic concern for and perspective-taking of students. “Davis (1994) characterizes *perspective taking* as “the tendency to spontaneously adopt the psychological point of view of others in everyday life,” while *empathic concern* is “the tendency to experience feelings of sympathy and compassion for unfortunate others” (Warren, 2018, p. 171).

In response to the question of "What is it about you, that makes you able to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners you teach?”, many participants shared a personal experience with or exposure to marginalization, which they said impacted their understanding of the barriers, challenges, and inequities experienced by their students. They say that these experiences provide them with a point of entry that helped them to challenge dominant narratives and deficit thinking towards learners made vulnerable by our colonial and systemically racist institutions.

This personal experience or understanding of the impact of marginalization encouraged the participants to critically reflect on and interrogate the school curriculum, content, incident management, assessment strategies and pedagogical approaches of the educational system/s. The participants say that this has led them to have the confidence to challenge standard beliefs and dominant cultural values which in turn helps them to generate a safer place for marginalized learners. Additionally, the participants say that this experience with marginalization initiates an

interest and desire to know more about the history and experiences of African Nova Scotian learners and their families.

The participants refer to experiences and incidences that capture moments of vulnerability and marginalization that they indicate have stayed with them in a way that they can access and use to help them develop understanding and empathy for their students and to focus on and commit to vulnerable learners in their classrooms. Those experiences and exposures are associated with racism, ethnocentrism, sexism, and classism.

Experiencing Racism

Three of the Black research participants, Becky, Erica, and Nancy expressed how their direct experiences with racism influenced their selection of curriculum and teaching approaches and how they responded to racial incidents in their classrooms. These particular responses are centered on experiences with racism. For example, Becky describes her direct experience with feeling "othered" because of her racial identity. In response to my question, "What do you think makes you culturally responsive?" she replies:

> I think my experience in school, in general. I'm from [rural Nova Scotia] … so my entire life I was the only little brown girl in the school—my brother and I, and I know what it's like to have teachers come up to you and say, we're going to talk about slavery now, if you want to leave the room.

I asked, "If you want to leave the room?" "Yeah, if you want to leave the room during the slavery talk, you know, it's your peach crayon. Do you know what I mean? So, it's like, I never want to make my kids feel that way.

Becky is describing a sense of isolation as one of two learners of African descent in her predominantly white school and the challenge of being taught by a teacher who was unprepared,

ill-equipped or unable to create the appropriate classroom environment to learn about the topic of slavery. Becky refers to the peach crayon, as the default skin colour crayon since there were no other colours in the box specifically referenced to represent other skin tones. To Becky, the peach-coloured crayon symbolizes how racialized groups are not considered, excluded entirely or if they are included, they are an afterthought in a default normative "white" society.

While Becky's teacher attempted to protect her from possible discomfort from learning about the topic of slavery, this interaction seemed to only serve to further marginalize and exclude her from the class. In addition, it is ironic that Becky's teacher thought it important to protect her as a Black student from the difficulty of discussing the topic of slavery because her ancestor's role in this dynamic was as the victims of this atrociously violent and dehumanizing institution. Yet if any group of students ought to feel uncomfortable about the topic of slavery, it more likely should have been the white students in the classroom.

Becky's reflection and observation capture the significance and impact of power imbalances between dominant and marginalized groups/institutions in influencing the ways in which we socially interpret and come to understand who and how people "should" feel about and respond to human rights, violations and exploitation. Becky captures the power, impact, and influence of white supremacy in dominant messaging, in that our education system and in turn societal interpretation of where the discomfort and shame belong about a history that does not align with more recent dominant messaging about multiculturalism can be minimized, redefined or redirected to misrepresent the truth about who ought to own the shame of slavery. This is a sign of the impact of the current miseducation of our education system.

As a teacher, Becky's firsthand experience with these deficiencies as a student created a desire not to allow the system's deficiencies to be projected onto her students like her teacher did

to her and her brother. Becky links her experiences of marginalization and vulnerability with a legacy of resistance and resiliency of members of her Black community. For example, she says

> I see the hardships and I hear of the hardships—I spent a lot of time in church with a lot of older ladies, so the struggles that they had to go through. And I heard about my father's struggles at Willow Street, you know, not having toilet paper, people calling their dogs nigger and saying, "Nigger, go home!" So, I heard my whole life, all of that and also positive things.

Becky's own experiences with racism and the racism that her ancestors, including her grandmother and her father, experienced make her realize that she does not have the luxury or privilege to minimize or ignore racism wherever it turns up.

Erica, who is of African descent and grew up outside of the province of Nova Scotia, provides another example. She shares an experience of marginalization as a high school student when her teacher expressed suspicions about whether Erica had written the work she had submitted. She explains,

> [My Elementary teacher] told me I was a writer. So, that's how I expressed myself. I loved to write. So, when I was in high school, I started running up against barriers because then I would have teachers be like, of, you're plagiarizing your work. So I would hand in my paper, and I just remember this one particular teacher wrote on my paper that I had plagiarized it. So, anyway I had to go back and talk to this teacher about that because that was my genuine, that was the way I wrote. And then afterwards, she did apologize for accusing me of plagiarizing because then she realized, because we had another assignment where we had to just write there on the spot..... And so, she was like, "Yeah, I realized after I saw your other paper that you didn't plagiarize. You just have the

> vocabulary." And it's like, it's just interesting that for whatever reason she didn't think that I could be capable …

I inquired about why she did not think you could be capable? She responded by saying:

> Well, you know what? At the time, I had no sweet clue. I didn't even make any connections there to race or anything like that. Now looking back, I think that [my race] very well could have been the reason why. But, yeah, at the time I just didn't really think about it.

Erica's experience demonstrates the power that teachers have in either inspiring students to internalize a sense of pride and identity around their strengths or to cast doubt on a student's ability to the extent that they could be deterred from pursuing a subject or skill for which they have an ability and passion.

Nancy shares a similar experience of racialized isolation and exclusion as one of only a few African Nova Scotians in her French immersion math class.

> I had a teacher in high school, and I can't remember his name but to this day I remember him as being like the worst math teacher ever, that I ever, ever had. And every day I would go into that class, I would feel like I can't do this, I can't do math. As a teacher right now, my favourite thing to teach is math. I love math and I try to share it with my students. I never would say, oh, sometimes we're not math people. Never, ever would I do that to students because I felt like all through my career and up to that point, and I failed his class. I remember it was like by one percent, and I was so upset. I just wanted to get out of his class. I had to take the class again, but I ended up taking it up with a teacher who was much better.

Nancy's experience identifies the challenges confronted by learners of African ancestry when they attempt to exist in places within which they have historically and systemically been excluded. The unspoken assumption about French immersion in Nova Scotia is that it is an academic stream within the public education system that addresses the needs of middle to upper-class white parents. By putting their children in French immersion, parents are hoping to provide their children with an advantage of becoming bilingual in the two "founding" languages of Canada, with smaller class sizes, access to full Public School Program requirements, access to funding above the provincial contributions for class field trips and French/Acadian cultural events. My oldest daughter, who started school in the English program in Halifax before French immersion was offered provincially, upon moving to Digby, experienced the resentment of students who were not in French immersion (referred to as the "English Muffins") based on what they perceived as the privileges of French immersion students.

Nancy's anxiety about her ability to succeed in French immersion may have been the result of her internalizing a sense of deficiency based on the teacher's perception of who belongs in the program and her capabilities as a Black learner. In addition, she indicated that in the following year, she had a teacher of African Ancestry who helped her believe that she could be successful in French immersion mathematics, and she stayed enrolled and succeeded in the overall program. Nancy's feeling like she was not being appropriately taught, encouraged or supported by her previous math teacher created unanswerable/unverifiable questions behind the teacher's motivation for not committing to her learning in the same way that she felt that he committed to other students.

In many instances, racialized and gendered students are often left to consider the motivation behind differential treatment without the ability to verify if this treatment/negligence

is because of racist and sexist ideologies of the teacher unless it is explicitly expressed or something else. This uncertainty regarding the origin of the unfair treatment "may set in motion a domino effect that negatively influences Black students' engagement with school and undermines their connection with supportive adults" (Griffith et al, 2022, p. 1063). In other words, the criteria utilized to validate and affirm whether racism and sexism are at play in our education system disproportionately places the responsibility for racial and gender disparities between students with dominant identities on the students made vulnerable through racialization despite the evidence of this systemic failure captured by student performance data (DEECD, 2021; Thiessen, 2009). In addition to incidences of racism, another participant discussed and reflected on their experiences with ethnocentrism.

Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism is the tendency to perceive the values and perspectives of one's own cultural group as natural, normal and/or superior to those of other cultural groups. In addition, ethnocentrism asserts that one's race, ethnicity, and cultural values are entitled to be prioritized at the centre of all systemic institutions based on their perceived inherent superiority over other groups. Ethnocentrism contributes to incorrect assumptions about those "othered," which can, in extreme cases, lead to acts of hatred, discrimination, violence and war (Worthy et al., 2020).

Participants Corey and Neil articulate their personal learning and understandings through the decentering of a Eurocentric curriculum as a result of teaching *African Canadian Studies 11*. These Africentric courses served to challenge dominant narratives and provided these teachers an opportunity to extend their ability to understand and empathize with their racialized students. This happens by personally connecting the course content and students' lived experiences with their non-dominant identities. These non-dominant identities deviate from religious, ethnic, and

gendered vulnerabilities and experiences that create opportunities for these teachers to imagine what it would feel like for students to exist in hostile classrooms and schools.

Corey describes himself as being from “a historically oppressed group,” which he explains is “because I’m Jewish and I’ve got holocaust survivors [in my family], and people in my family died in the holocaust. But you know, I walk through the streets here, I go to a job interview, and I’m just a white guy who speaks English.” Corey says his awareness of his Jewish ancestors’ survival of the Holocaust, and experiences with anti-Semitism help him understand the dynamics of power, violence and discrimination. While Corey recognizes that his lived experiences provide him privileges on other axis of his identity, e.g. as a bilingual, able-bodied, white man, his ethnic identity helps him understand how people in positions of power can socially construct differences that can lead to oppression and dehumanization to the extent that a groups “othered-ness” can create very hostile and dangerous environments for them. An awareness of the dangers associated with ethnocentrism and racism is a foundational element to interrogating dominant messaging that contributes to racist perceptions of Black people. The saliency of race for people of African ancestry eliminates the ability, in many instances, to avoid the discrimination of racists because there is no choice in disclosing the part of your identity that makes you vulnerable to people's prejudices.

In response to my question, "What do you believe makes you able to be culturally responsive to your students?” Corey explains that,

> I think there’s a large component of self-awareness […] of realizing that who you are does matter. And […] I’ll talk about the context of teaching African Canadian studies because, you know, it’s a very […] particular course. I’ve had to be aware from the beginning that being a white person teaching that course means something. And I could

> say the exact same thing as a Black teacher standing in front of the room, but students perceive [what I am saying as a result of my whiteness] very differently because of course, the history [of racism] that we have in Nova Scotia and throughout the Americas of the African Diaspora. And so, just kind of always keeping the element of self-awareness, I think is really important.

As a teacher of the African Canadian Studies 11 course, Corey says he is required to explore the impact of race and racism on the current challenges experienced by African Nova Scotian learners. For Corey, the exploration of the historical and contemporary issues in the curriculum requires an acknowledgement of his location in the conversation as a white person and the political implications of his identity in order to have open and honest conversations with his students. As the teacher, Corey acknowledges the potential discomfort that learners of African ancestry may have sharing their experiences in an education system that downplays and minimizes the voices of Black learners. Corey empathizes as a person with similar historical marginalized experiences to strategize ways and approaches to develop more impactful and meaningful interactions and lessons with the most vulnerable students in his class and bridge these interactions to growth amongst all his students.

Neil who taught African Canadian Studies 11 at his school, much like Corey's previous example, believes that teacher self-awareness is a central component in authentically and meaningfully engaging students in his classroom. Many learners of African ancestry have no choice in disclosing their racial identity and his ability to share his ethnic ancestry at his own discretion is very different in the sense that he can choose to disclose in environments where he feels safe and supported. Neil explained that,

> My identity culturally or with ethnicity shapes who I am familywise, and I can bring that into the classroom, but not in a way that I can relate to students who have faced struggles or injustices, or anything like that, But I'm very open about telling them where I come from, my roots, [and] being raised as somebody who values human rights and accepts everyone. I try to bring that into my teaching.

In navigating the challenges of creating safe and affirming environments for all his students, but specifically learners of African ancestry, he seeks the advice and support of the African Nova Scotian student support worker, the regional coordinator of African Canadian education, and notable community members whom he often invites to be guest speakers in his classroom. The guest speakers provide intergenerational support and a first-voice perspective on what is being discussed in the African Canadian Studies course.

Corey and Neil demonstrate how they combine their experiences and exposure to marginalization with their personal non-dominant ethnic ancestry, which contributes to their deliberate decentering of the Eurocentric curriculum through the teaching of African Canadian Studies 11.

Sexism

Sexism is characterized as the beliefs and attitudes or ideology that hold one group (usually male) as deservedly superior to the other (usually female) and that justifies oppressing members of the other group based on their sex or gender, whether conscious or unconscious. Sexism includes the ways that oppression operates in institutions (Napikoski, 2021). Experiences with sexism reveal the impact of systemic injustices perpetrated against people with non-dominant identity criteria.

Margaret describes her experiences as a female athlete/soccer player with the inequities she encountered in education systems that did not value girls' soccer enough to develop and resource a team. She shares that,

> As a female soccer player, my dad always encouraged equality with sports as well. So when we lived here, I grew up playing with boys because there were no female teams. I was on one girls' team when I was younger here [in NS], and then moved to New Brunswick, [I] then [went] back with boys because there were no girls' teams [in NB]. [for] under 14. That's the age you go to Nationals, and they wouldn't let the girls play on the boys' teams.

Margaret's exclusion from an opportunity to participate on a girls' soccer team at her school is indicative of the systemic gaps that emerge out of gender stereotypes and sexist systemic perspectives that sports are more important for boys to have access to than girls (Cougle, 2021).

As a result of this gap in opportunity for Margaret, her father's advocacy provided her with an opportunity to play on the boys' soccer team, with one exception during her early years in Nova Scotia, where she played on a girls' team. However, upon moving back to New Brunswick, she was switched back to a boys' team because the issues of exclusion of girls' teams at the junior high and high school level were inter-provincial and once again, the boys' team was the only available team, which required her getting permission to participate. Ultimately, these gaps caught up with Margaret's opportunity to play the sport she loved at the highest level because while she was permitted to play on the boys' team in the public school system, she was prevented from playing with the boys on the under-14 national team.

Margaret's experience and exposure to sexism created a point of reference which she says enables her to see and understand systemic barriers that her colleagues may not either

recognize or have a lived experience with. In comprehending what is at stake for those learners marginalized by the education system, through her teaching she commits to pushing and pulling students through the challenges that they may experience as a result of racism and deficit thinking, much like the way her father took on the inequities of the system to support her in her goals of continuing to play competitive soccer. However, I do wonder how her mother or a female guardian who advocated for her to play on the boys' team would be received by a representative of the education system.

Sexism in educational institutions manifests on multiple different levels. While sexism may not be as overt as the incident described by Margaret, the more subversive expressions of sexism can inflict as much or even more damage because of the inability to identify, name, and respond to it. As outlined and discussed previously, vulnerabilities associated with non-dominant identities can take many forms, and the following two participants identify issues of class and their socio-economic status as key to understanding the need to be responsive to the needs of learners, given the systemic gaps created by lack of resources.

Classism

Classism is the differential treatment, and systemic oppression of perceived subordinate class groups to reinforce and sustain the advantage and benefit of the dominant class. Classism manifests by the assignment of negative cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs of those holding marginalized identities that rank people according to their economic status, family lineage, job status, level of education and other divisions (Quintana, 2015).

Participants Megan and Daniel both express points of vulnerability as it relates to their or their family's socio-economic status and the significance and impact of the opportunities that financial barriers create for students. They both say that this understanding enables them to

empathize with students and motivates them to help navigate and support students experiencing poverty or financial challenges with non-dominant identities, including family lineage or perceived cultural deficits associated with classism.

Megan's experiences and exposure to marginalization, which facilitate the ability to empathize, originated with her connection to her father's experiences as a foster child growing up with limited accessibility to socio-economic opportunities. She indicated the level of respect and admiration that her father had for his teachers, who provided a sense of stability and support for him as a child and a love for learning that he passed along to his children.

> I have been raised my whole life with the value that everyone and their experiences are important. So, you have to look at everyone individually—so, that's always been my dad's belief, and my dad has raised us to believe every story, everyone's experiences are valuable. So, I think my upbringing has helped me and guided my teaching practices of being welcoming, accepting everyone, and sharing learning together.

Megan's perspective about looking at people as individuals helped her understand and recognize that dominant narratives that generalize people are inaccurate. Her curiosity about exploring and trying to understand people's lived experiences is important to Megan because it helps her resist generalizing groups of people without taking the time to hear their stories and try to understand who they are and where they are coming from.

Daniel's also contextualizes his ability to empathize with students through his early experiences with economic insecurity. He says, "I was born and raised by a fairly poor family. When I was nine years old, my father got sick, and I had to learn to take care of myself quite a bit."

Additionally, he refers to his addiction to alcohol, which created an additional layer of understanding of the implications and impact of labelling people who are struggling, whether it be socio-economically or with an addiction.

> I'm sober for 32 years. And when I sobered up, I … started to go to Alcoholics Anonymous, and you find out so many things in those places. You find out about how [alcoholism] affects people. Alcohol is a problem with some parents. And there's an effect on kids. It's a family disease … I want to tell you … there were two girls [who] were giving an awfully hard time to some teachers, and they were bad, and they were hard to control. And I was in Alcoholics Anonymous for about six months, and this mother appeared there. She was sobering up. Those two girls started to be probably the two nicest students. Not long after, when [their mother] sobered up, she sobered up for two years and she had a relapse. She drank again … I've been in the staff room, and I remember [the staff members talking about] these two kids and it wasn't positive talking. They were destroying these two kids, and I know why they were acting that way, but I can't tell you, you know? So, I was going in the staff room some, but I wasn't spending my whole time there because of things like that.

As a result of his firsthand lived experiences with poverty, struggles with addiction, and the labelling or social ostracization that occurs as a result of the lack of empathy, he resists the temptation to judge. Daniel's ability to take the perspective of the two students before and after their mother's relapse enabled him to try to understand the complex reasons for the student's behaviours, empathize with the struggles the students were experiencing, and create a space or opportunity for healing and redemption for the girls.

A simple independent lived experience with or exposure to marginalization or oppression by a teacher does not inherently create the sense of empathy necessary to commit to being responsive to the needs of vulnerable learners. Most of the participants in this study expressed a specific experience as a contributing factor to their awareness of becoming more empathetic and responsive. While I have utilized Becky, Erica, Nancy, Corey, Neil, Margaret, Megan and Daniel as more explicit exemplars of this connection to their responsiveness as one of several contributing factors, Nicole and Fran may have accessed their empathy for and responsiveness to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners through any one of the other identified themes in the data. These themes include a relational engagement with and connection with their students and community, a sincere care and interest in the students' well-being and a commitment to their students through reflecting on and modifying their teaching practices/approaches.

In expressing her righteous anger about the inability of many teachers to direct their responsibility to meaningfully intervene in the interest of vulnerable learners, Delpit (2012) said that:

> The problem is that the cultural framework of our country has, almost since its inception, dictated that "black" is bad and less than and in all arenas "white" is good and superior. This perspective is so ingrained and so normalized that we all stumble through our days with eyes closed to avoid seeing it. We miss the pain in our children's eyes when they have internalized the societal belief that they are dumb, unmotivated, and indispensable. (p. xvii–xviii)

The default position of our society is that any deficits of racialized learners are the result of their racial and cultural inferiority rather than recognizing that there could be deficits in the educator and/or education system itself. This means that for many educators, there is a built-in

rationale that minimizes the likelihood of examining their own shortfalls or that of the curriculum or systemic inequities in the education system or society at large. Empathy provides the participants Becky, Erica, Nancy, Corey, Neil, Margaret, Megan and Daniel an ability to see and understand the impact of ignoring and invalidating their students' lived experience with racism and commit to doing something about it.

In many instances, the participants' experiences with and exposure to marginalization, increased the potential for empathic concern for vulnerable learners, more so than those who may not have had such experiences. In addition, these experiences and exposures to marginalization lead to perspective-taking that extends empathic concern, and spurs them to seek solutions and take action to improve the circumstances for the vulnerable learner. As Warren (2018) explains:

> The process of empathizing begins with an *observer*—the individual who observes a condition and is tasked with making a decision about how to respond to the perceived needs of the individual under duress. The application of empathy ends when the *target*—the individual on the receiving end of an empathic response—confirms that the observer's actions effectively alleviated their personal distress. (p. 171)

The fact that these teachers were referred to me as being culturally relevant and responsive by representatives from the African Nova Scotian community, means that, to a certain extent, these teachers alleviated a level of personal distress of some students, parents, and/or guardians in a way that was observed or heard about by community members. Ultimately, a culturally relevant and responsive education system would begin to see what marginalized learners have to offer with respect to their experiences, as an "asset" in responding to systemic inequities. This change

in perspective could contribute to valuable insights into strategies, themes, characteristics, practices, and approaches to effective solutions to issues that could be scaled up.

The centrality of empathy is significant in countering the indifference experienced by learners made vulnerable or marginalized because of systemic and oppressive mechanisms because it serves as a catalyst for these teachers to be self-reflective, deliberate and specific about determining ways to respond to these inequities. This will involve putting a legitimate and consistent effort toward making an engaging and accessible curriculum for Black learners, as opposed to teaching the curriculum and not the student.

Hilliard III (1991) when asking the question about whether we have the will to educate all children, argues that dominant colonial hierarchal perspectives prevent many educators from believing in the genius potential in all students, despite the impact and implications of racism, classism, and sexism on those students most likely to possess these abilities.

> It is hard to take seriously the idea that the masses of our children are geniuses when we embrace the wrong pedagogical paradigm—in spite of new rhetoric to the contrary. We have maintained historical commitment to the same paradigm that we had when public school education began in the U.S., ascribing genius to a select few. (Hillard III, 1991, p. 34)

If many teachers believe that genius is limited to only a select few, they are predisposed to taking a “wait and see” approach for genius to emerge or be revealed to them. This is in stark contrast to a commitment to intentionally and meaningfully teach all students according to their needs from the beginning. This foundational belief as described by Hilliard III, explains the approach of some teachers who seem more aligned with the idea of sorting or ranking students, rather than engaging and teaching them.

Hilliard III (1991) highlights several exemplars where the shift in perspective regarding the capabilities of all students resulted in an increase in success. This demonstrates that a change in basic assumptions about students' capabilities could yield results. Hilliard III (1991) refers to the work of Professor Abdulalim Shabazz, particularly during the years 1956 and 1963, when he was linked to the production of more than half the African-American holders of the Ph.D. in mathematics:

> At one point, when stimulating the faculty to greater productivity and in response to some expressed doubts by some faculty members about the abilities of Clark Atlanta University students to do higher mathematics, Shabazz challenges his peers to "give me your worst ones, and I will teach them!" (Hilliard III, 1991, p. 32)

Hilliard III (1991) describes the influence of the belief in the success of students resulting in a drastic turnaround in the success for the university, when professors were challenged to hold higher expectations of their students. If educators internalize their responsibility to support all students' understanding by being more proficient and responsive educators, it affirms the benefit of holding higher expectations for all learners, coupled with a commitment to discovering gaps in their understanding (Hilliard III, 1991).

While Hilliard III's narrative around the emergence of this paradigm is in an American context, it resonates with the colonial and imperialistic educational foundations in Nova Scotia, Canada (BLAC Report, 1994). It has been too easy and too long-lasting for schools and teachers to deflect their responsibility of meeting the needs of African Nova Scotian learners, while instead, centering the general dominant cultural values and interests of white settlers of European ancestry in the educational environment. As a result, even though they have data that demonstrate the vulnerability of African Nova Scotian learners, there are minimal to non-existent

accountability mechanisms that track the success of interventions, or commit to an ongoing re-investment in strategies, solutions, and necessary resources to address these inequities (Lee & Marshall, 2009).

Many of the participants say they are continually working towards successfully meeting the ever-evolving and complex needs of all their learners. The participants expressed an awareness and willingness to access professional development support and training and meaningfully apply what they learned, which are the most important first steps in that work.

Intersectionality is a central tenet of meaningfully responding to the implications and impact of race and gender as captured by Crenshaw's (1989) seminal work, "Demarginalizing the Intersectionality of Race and Sex: Feminist Theory and Anti-Racist Politics," where she is credited with coining the term. Crenshaw speaks to the socially constructed limitations of trying to be responsive to multi-marginalized identities of race and gender, as a result of the system ascribing the next most privileged identity construct as the basis for the exploration of the topic. She argues that the system has treated conversations around race and gender as mutually exclusive areas of exploration. Simply put, exploring racism exclusively through a man's perspective or sexism through a white woman's perspective, fails to centre or account for Black women's experiences with racism and sexism. Crenshaw explores these gaps in understanding through an exploration of the way the courts frame Black women's stories of being raped (Crenshaw, 1989). However, the significance of intersectionality is essential in exploring the full depth, breadth and implications of the number of social forces, identities and ideological instruments through which power and disadvantage are expressed and legitimized (Crenshaw, 2017) and has been extended to areas including anti-Black racism (Dei, 1996) and Black woman feminism (hooks, 1981).

Summary of Theme 1: Commitment to Empathy

Systemic responses to student performance gaps are often formulaic as they seek out all encompassing programming solutions that do not account for the diversity of their students. While these solutions may be responsive to the academic needs of learners who are on the less vulnerable social identity continuum, they often fail to be comprehensive enough to meet the needs of our more/most vulnerable learners.

Many teachers lack the social awareness and understanding of the ways that systemic inequities contribute to school climate concerns and the opportunity gaps for racialized learners. As a result, they perpetuate these inequities by failing to account for the needs of racialized and marginalized learners when the program being implemented does not account for the complexities associated with learners with non-dominant cultural identities.

However, these teacher participants are seeking to be culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners because they possess the necessary empathy to commit to the social, emotional and academic needs of their students. The willingness to express empathic concern for and perspective taking of the emotional needs of their students enables these teachers to cognitively explore ways to be responsive to these needs. This type of empathy acts as a catalyst to resist the racism of lowered expectations and deficit thinking. Their experiences and exposure to marginalization, as demonstrated throughout the teacher participant responses, have provided a point of entry for these teachers to tap into our collective humanity by committing to being responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. I will now discuss the next theme of teacher participant connection to and relationships with students and community to effective teaching and learning.

Theme 2: Engagement and Connection with Students and Community

Edwards and Edick (2013) express the significance of relationships to effective culturally responsive teaching by outlining the processes of relationship development for teacher candidates and the application of each principle in supporting student learning. While the four principles include interaction, accommodation, ownership, and opportunity, the starting point for the implications of the initial teacher participant responses is orientated in the foundational interactions.

Edwards and Edick (2013) characterize interaction as an underacknowledged and appreciated starting point in teacher training programs, pointing out that:

> Most teachers will agree that getting to know students is important for effective teaching and learning. When a teacher knows his/her students well, he/she can go beyond the idea of "treating others the way you'd like to be treated" and toward a more responsive practice of 'treating others the way they'd like to be treated.' Interaction requires multiple methods for gaining knowledge from students and their families. … Interaction is key, as it provides both a channel for the teacher to understand student motivations and a means for the teacher to show respect for students and their worlds. (p. 3)

Teacher participant responses from the interviews strongly align with the initial principle of interaction because being accessible to students both in your classroom and through extra-curricular activities provides opportunities for the teacher to understand their students' motivation and demonstrate that they value who they are and their interests.

Interactions

When students can bring their full selves to an educational environment, a deeper understanding of the challenges they are experiencing can be identified and resolved. Corey identifies the significance of building trusting relationships with students, and offers that:

> It's all about relationships and gaining trust because why would these African Nova Scotian students trust you with anything, if you don't care about them? You [must] take the time to build the relationship with them, and the same with parents.

Corey acknowledges two key components in this response. The first is understanding the historic and current systemic inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners, which means that a sense of safety and belonging cannot be assumed by the teacher. The second is recognizing that developing and sustaining relationships between the teacher and student, built on trust, requires an ability to model what is expected of your students. This means being willing to be vulnerable in front of your students, sharing with them who you are as a person beyond your role as a teacher, showing them that it is all right to try and make mistakes, to forgive, to acknowledge when you are wrong, to be open to alternative perspectives or understandings, and be willing to show the ways you have incorporated and are using new learning in your life/practice.

Brantmeier (2020) describes the premise of what he has characterized as a pedagogy of vulnerability, as simply opening yourself up, sharing, co-learning, and admitting you do not know everything, and being human. Share your story, and if the educator opens their identity and life up for examination as part of the lived curriculum of the classroom, students will model that self-examination and go deeper in their learning. Learning becomes valuable beyond the classroom, and new meaning is constructed in the process.

While these relational elements take time and there is sometimes an institutional tension between a teacher's obligations to the subject, course or curriculum, the moral responsibility to care for the student supersedes these conflicts. In addition, the investment of time towards meaningful relationships is worth it as it is the foundation with which any necessary deviation from an assumed response to an issue or challenge impacting the learner can be meaningfully addressed (Noddings, 2012). This understanding and prioritization are particularly relevant in responding to the needs of racialized learners. Corey mentions that, "I'm teaching [African Canadian Studies 11] because one of our African Nova Scotian staff asked that I [teach] this course as a social studies teacher—which I consider is a sacred trust." The African Nova Scotian staff members' acknowledgement of Corey as being someone who can meaningfully engage, interact with, and teach African Nova Scotian students is a powerful endorsement of trust in his ability to be fair and equitable to Black students. Corey sees this endorsement as an honour and a sacred trust and accepts a deep sense of responsibility to do his absolute best for his students and the community.

Becky, in recognizing the significance of relationships to effective teaching and learning, decided to request from her administration an opportunity to take/teach all the racialized and lower-income learners into her grade five classroom. Becky made this request out of frustration with systemic inequities and in an attempt to be responsive to the emergence of an identified race-based gap in student performance that started in grade three after their time in her class in grade primary (Thiessen, 2009; DEECD, 2020). Becky's request was perceived to be controversial initially, as several of her colleagues questioned what it might imply about their ability to teach racialized learners, if Becky was successful. However, despite this resistance

from several peers, her request was supported by the administration, and she was able to develop this class.

Becky speaks of the power that her familial, historical, and cultural connection to the community has on allowing students an opportunity to open up about who they are and express thoughts and ideas that may be misinterpreted or dismissed by other teachers. Becky says,

> There was a kid on a major [complex] formalized behaviour plan, and the first day of school he came to me. He said, "My Nanny told me that your Nanny didn't clean white people's homes for me to sit here and act like a fool". And I said, "Yeah, she didn't". So, he's been amazing all year. It was a hard sell though.

The significance or impact of this program extends beyond the reported academic success because of the opportunity it provides these learners to engage with and interact with a teacher who has personal connections with them beyond the school. This relational connection and understanding contributes to a sense of trust from the home and, in turn, the students' regarding the intentionality of the teacher over previous/past experiences of parents with the education system and the impact of deficit thinking on initiating an interest in exploring a relational connection. I cannot help wondering how a culturally unresponsive teacher would interpret this comment by the student.

However, the most extraordinary thing about the circumstances of this situation is the faith and investment in the abilities of the students that Becky has committed, to tying their success to her capabilities as a teacher. Her accountability is to the success of her students, and not protecting or defending her place in the system. She has made this choice clear through her request to teach these learners made vulnerable by systemic and institutional racism, and much

of this confidence is based on her ability to relate and connect with her students. Noddings (2012) states that:

> *Believing* can be a powerful strategy in learning, involving listening receptively, becoming absorbed, fascinated. Receptive listening (attention) is at the heart of caring for human others, but it is also central to hearing the message from books, art, music and nature. (p. 775)

This receptive listening and the subsequent caring connectivity evolved out of Becky's belief in her students, and her ability or willingness to listen to and hear students' stories as previously described.

Becky's risk-taking provided space for this boy's story to exist at school. In addition, the intergenerational connection in the boy's family allows a dialogue between himself and his grandmother in connecting and extending his understanding of the significance of education without invalidating lived experiences with inequities and anti-Black racism. Through this relationship, the student has a strong personal sense of location and a sense of a legacy of resistance shared between him and his Nanny. This connection with his grandmother is ongoing and can be used to centre the boy's lived experiences. The quote demonstrates his internalization of a deep sense of responsibility to do his best when a trusting relationship is established, validated and affirmed between him, his family, and the teacher. The implication of this specific relationship between Becky and the boy has implications for the impact on opportunities to learn for marginalized learners if schools provide safe, culturally affirming spaces for students and, in turn, the cultural, values and beliefs of the community to exist in schools (Hollie, 2018).

However, I cannot help wondering if this student would have shared this conversation with his grandmother to another teacher. Would Nanny have projected the sense of responsibility

on her grandson to do his best, if she did not trust the intentions of the teacher? And if he did share this with another teacher, would they have validated his and his Nanny's perspective about the historical mistreatment, marginalization, and oppression of Black people or denied it? The student's comment to Becky about the internalization of his responsibility to learn based on his conversation and commitment to his Nanny to be good and act right identifies what he stands to lose if he is characterized as a "failure" by the system that he is trusting to care for and teach him. To him, "failing" will have meant that he failed to act right, take his education seriously, and lose unknown opportunities that getting an education affords him as a young Black student according to the significance of "school" to his grandmother and community.

Understanding the harm and trauma that occurs when a student personally commits themselves to living up to expectations that are not appropriately supported systemically, is important in recognizing the collective responsibilities as educators to prevent this systemic negligence as an internalized deficiency of the child. In addition, as identified in the expression of traumatic experiences by African Nova Scotian community members regarding their personal experiences and incidences of racism in the education system during the community focus groups, it is particularly important for the education system to recognize and acknowledge that there is significant work required to respond to this trauma experienced by elders in the community and commit to a process of truth, reconciliation and healing to account to the community and demonstrate a sincere interest in changing the system.

Becky's efforts to develop an Africentric classroom, which provided opportunities for her students to study and explore the world through a lens that validates African heritage and the perspectives of people of African descent (Asante, 2007), met with success. She says,

> Yeah, it was amazing … Reading levels went up, behaviours went down. The problem is—it's not a problem. The issue is with me; only with me. So, when kids go to music, they're horrible. When the kids go to gym, they're horrible behaviour-wise. The only sub that they listen to is my dad. So, my dad comes in, your old-fashioned black man teacher, he's firm, gym teacher, no one's breathing. So, we have come across that problem, but the whole relationship piece, it's really helping our kids.

The significance of an authentic cultural connection between the teacher and student is represented in Becky's high expectations for her students. She uses her authority to direct students to what it takes to be successful in the classroom.

In response to the question about the interaction between the content, curriculum, teaching approaches and relations with students and the community, Erica says,

> Well just being able to make connections with students first of all, because they won't learn from you if they don't know that you value them, that you take the time to know who they are. And also, not just valuing the students, but valuing their lived experiences and their family connections. So rather than passing judgment on their family situation, getting to know them kind of breaks down those barriers, and then parents, the walls come down too when you take the time to know them.

The cultural discontinuity between the home and school requires a prioritization of the development of a relationship between teachers and their students to support an ability to re-align the curriculum and instructional practices with the student's cultural needs.

This is a significant starting point for teachers resisting deficit thinking, and gaining the necessary knowledge to make their course offerings interesting and engaging, based on the connection between their students, their families, and the community (Cholewa et al., 2014).

They say that, “Teacher and teacher educators also noted the importance of culturally responsive teacher-student interactions and classroom management. This includes creating caring student teacher relationship through emotional connectedness, holding high expectations, asserting authority, and maintaining culturally congruent communication” (Bondy et al., 2007; Brown 2003; Cholewa et al., 2012; Weinstein et al., 2003). In addition, Erica used this information to support her personal development and understanding of the lived experiences of the cultural, and the racialized experiences of African Nova Scotians:

> I learned a lot when I moved to Nova Scotia, because I didn’t know really a whole lot about the distinct cultures that were here in this community. And … I was learning as I was going. So, I found that that was helpful in knowing the history and knowing some of the barriers of marginalization, and just learning about the systemic barriers that there have been. It helps you kind of put things into perspective and see where people are coming from because, even though I'm a person of African descent, I still had- my barriers [that] were different.

Erica has identified the importance of signifying the difference between race and culture. Racialization and racism have contributed to the confusion that race and culture are one and the same because racists deliberately work to conflate the two (Hollie, 2018). They do this by working to assign differing, negative, or undesirable actions, values, or beliefs of the dominant group to individuals based on their assigned racialized group to sustain their power, dominance and control over this group. They go on to suggest that these differing traits are biologically born into people of the same race group through stereotypes and dominant messaging to the extent that, over time, this perception becomes a generally accepted social construct (Brigham, 2013; Miles & Brown, 2003; Winant, 2004).

Race alludes to the physical characteristics associated with a particular group of people that is more indicative of the geographical origins of the person than any inherent cultural expression amongst that group of people (Hollie, 2018). For example, a Black person born and raised in Japan while racially identifiable as Black, originating from the African Continent, would more likely be more intricately connected to the values, beliefs, traditions, or culture of Japan than any one African country or culture. However, because of their racialization through global anti-Black racism efforts, they may have common lived experiences with racism as other Black people across the world.

Erica is a person of African ancestry and may have common racialized experiences as other people of African ancestry globally or nationally. The regional context, environment, and history contribute to variations in experiences, which impact cultural values and beliefs based on where and when they grew up. Erica did not assume her experiences with racism or cultural values and beliefs were the same as those experienced by ANS. Hence, she put effort into educating herself about the historical context and confirmed these understandings with people in the African Nova Scotian community.

The opportunity that interactions provide in exploring and developing a deeper understanding of the lived experiences of the students, and in turn, the communities, is significant in interpreting and understanding the differences between cultural expressions that differ from dominant perspectives. These understandings that can only be developed through relational interaction with students, provides one with an ability to accommodate situations when a circumstance may be situationally inappropriate, but not intentionally disrespectful.

Accommodations

Daniel talks about establishing relationships with the African Nova Scotian community growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. He played on a racially mixed baseball team as a child, and those relationships with African Nova Scotian teammates helped him to better understand and dismiss the stereotypes he had learned.

In many ways, from a socio-economic or class perspective, he felt he shared many similarities with the experiences of his racialized peers. Before becoming a teacher, Daniel worked as a labourer on pulp wood boats with coworkers from neighbouring segregated and racially isolated communities. He claims this was also helpful for him because when he started teaching, he became known to more parents of racialized students because of having played on teams and worked with members of the community.

This relational connection contributed to him being a "go-to" person, more so than other teachers at the time, because of his awareness and understanding of the community. He recalls an interaction with a former work partner who was a parent of one of his students:

> I was coming down the corridor and he was right beside the office and [he shouted], Lord Jesus Christ, Daniel!", as loud as he [could] and everybody stopped. You weren't supposed to do that at school. ...It was just the last time I saw him. He [has since] passed away ...But what I am trying to get at is before I even [became a] teacher in [the community], I was acquainted with a lot of African Americans... and I worked there 32 years. I was coaching a lot of teams' basketball and volleyball [every] weekend.

Daniel's relationship and interaction through working with different groups of people as a labourer solidified his understanding of and connection to, and membership in the community that he would eventually serve as a teacher. This sense of belonging and connection to the

community is demonstrated through the authentic reaction from a Black community member who exclaimed out load and inappropriately in the context of school, “Lord Jesus Christ.”

However, this reaction speaks to an authentic reaction to seeing someone who you feel you know, in a place, school, that you know to be “one of you” from a class/community cultural perspective. Daniel’s awareness of the meaning of this interaction to not devolve into rejecting, reprimanding or explaining the inappropriateness of the comment to simply accepting this reaction for what it meant, “Man, I did not expect to see you here and is it ever nice to know that you are here, someone that I know”. Daniels's recognition of the authenticity and sincerity of this cultural exchange between him and the parent from a class perspective is important to being culturally responsive to the needs of your learners. Daniel’s relationship enabled him to sort out the intent and the meaning of the interaction and validate it for the love and greeting it was meant to express, over the external perception around any inappropriateness associated with the interaction, before trying to correct what was inappropriate about the exchange.

Edwards and Edick (2013) in discussing the second principle of culturally responsive relationship development of accommodation supports that:

> Critical to valuing individuals is seeing the differences that exist and accepting the multiple realities of the students. If teachers do not perceive each student as a unique individual they are likely to treat all of the students the same which discounts actual differences. The ability to teach from the perspective that each student is unique allows the teacher to capitalize on the knowledge, skills and beliefs that each student brings to the classroom. The result is an enriched classroom that accommodates and celebrates individual differences. (p. 6)

This is, in many ways, what the students who referred me to Daniel were trying to say, which is that he gave them the benefit of the doubt when their cultural values, beliefs and expressions did not align with the dominant culture, and we want him to be acknowledged for his commitment to us as students.

However, once again based on the community focus group participants I am compelled to say that the opposite of this type of acceptance is the exploitation of the power and authority of the role to reject your student's identity and differing cultural values and beliefs to the extent that they are forced out of the environment all together captures the experience of a significant amount of participants (Black Learners Advisory Committee, 1994; Dei et al., 1997).

Teacher investments in students beyond the regular call of duty demonstrate an interest in students beyond their responsibility to teach and the value of each student beyond their academic performance in any given class. The ability for teachers to continue to interact with students in more informal situations provides them with a chance to develop a fuller appreciation of who students are and what they have to offer through their interests and talents. The trust that evolves out of this extended interest and relationship between teacher and students creates opportunities for teachers to accommodate students in ways that would be problematic in formal settings. This relationship also enables teachers to facilitate the critical reflection required for students to begin to take ownership over navigating being situationally appropriate independently. The ability to facilitate this is particularly important for those students who struggle academically**.**

Ownership

Fran reflects upon the significance of student and teacher engagement beyond the confines of a classroom, and expresses the significance that these extracurricular opportunities

played in exploring her own identity as a student and her commitment to participating now as a teacher:

> I'm always involved, I feel like extracurriculars are what helped me figure out what I wanted to do, and helped me become who I was and that was always an important piece for me to give back to, in that way, And I find that if you get to know kids outside of your classroom, then they don't give you the hassles that they might give somebody else because they're like Ms. Fran's got me. Ms. Fran's got me, and as a grad advisor especially, which I started doing almost immediately.

Fran's investment in students beyond the classroom paid dividends in resolving a conflict. It demonstrates the significance of the emotional capital earned from students trusting that, as a teacher, you will fully hear them out, facilitate the conflict resolution process equitably, and consider the facts before making a final decision.

In these environments, students can take ownership of their learning because they can co-construct an understanding of their world through interactions with their peers and teachers, and prioritize what they need to know to be responsive to the issues of the world, as they negotiate and understand them. Edick and Edwards (2013) report that:

> Teachers capitalizing on interactions and accommodations are now able to move toward the third area of using culturally responsive teaching which builds significant relationships in the classroom: ownership. Students who feel their teacher knows them both academically and personally are now poised to take ownership of their own learning. Teacher preparation programs must provide teacher candidates with opportunities to reflect on how their students not only learned because of the teacher candidate, but how the student took ownership of his/her own learning to do so. (p 8)

It is difficult for students to take ownership of their learning when there is not a meaningful and authentic relationship between students and teachers. Meaningful and authentic relationships afford an equitable opportunity to speak, be heard, understood, challenged, and corrected in the context of a safe, trusting, and respectful environment. In addition, as previously described, these types of relationships provide insights into the lives, perspectives and challenges experienced by students both in and out of "school" proper. Through these understandings, accommodations can be made by educators to account for differences in cultural values and beliefs between teachers and students when appropriate. These teacher participants, in a multitude of ways, have exemplified meaningful strategies and approaches to culturally relevant and responsive classrooms, none of which would occur without a sincere desire and interest in developing authentic relationships for the purpose of being more understanding and supportive of marginalized and vulnerable learners.

Opportunity

The interest of the participants to authentically engage in meaningful relationships with their students is essential to being culturally responsive to the needs of their students. Returning to Edwards and Edick's (2013) description of culturally responsive teachers requires a reflection of each principle. These principles included a commitment from teachers to interact with students regularly, an ability to accommodate appropriate responses to issues/incidences and to develop a level of ownership of students for their learning and relationships with their peers.

The successful interplay, overlap, and application of these three principles inform and impact the outcome of Edwards and Edick's (2013) final principle of the process—opportunity:

> Culturally responsive teaching relies on a solid pattern of interaction, accommodation and ownership so that students feel comfortable working together, knowing their opinions

> will be valued, and expressing themselves in multiple ways. When these elements are in place, students can challenge perceptions and reflect on their learning, thus creating opportunities that otherwise might not be realized. When students begin to do this type of higher order thinking that asks them to synthesize and evaluate, opportunity is created. (p. 10)

A central factor in the successful application of all four principles to culturally responsive teaching, is the reliance on a solid pattern of application of the first three principles of interaction, accommodation, and ownership, in order to provide the opportunity that culturally responsive teaching is to learners. A half-hearted, performative, superficial and disjointed application of these principles will not be a significant enough intervention to break the historical and ongoing messaging to racialized and marginalized learners to convince them that the classroom space is now safe.

Noddings (2012) articulates the limitations of empathy without an extension of an ethic of care through authentic relationships:

> The *carer* is first of all *attentive* … the attention of the carer is receptive. Its objective is to understand what the cared-for is experiencing—to hear and understand the needs expressed. From the perspective of care ethics, the teacher as carer is interested in the *expressed* needs of the cared-for, not simply the needs assumed by the school as an institution and the curriculum as a prescribed course of study. (p. 772)

This defining or outlining of the relationship between student and teacher extends beyond a literal interpretation of what it means to be empathetic, which imagines what someone feels like by interpreting things from the carer's personal perspective and seeks to empower the person

cared for to speak for themselves through a relationship, about how they feel about any given incident or issue.

In other words, as a teacher, it is not enough to assume you understand what a student is experiencing but rather provide an opportunity for the student to articulate the how, when, where, why, and what of their own experience/s. This opportunity is ongoing, requires dialogue, and is fundamentally relational. The maintenance of the caring relationship is based on the validation from the cared-for that, even in disagreements there is a level of respect of the fairness of the process that the relationship is maintained, if the maintenance of the relationship is not affirmed by the cared-for the process has not been successfully completed (Noddings, 2012).

Summary of Theme 2: Engagement and Connection with Students and Community

Maxwell's (1989) quote, "Students don't care what you know until they know that you care," became a daily mantra in my Bachelor of Education program. When Pierson (2013) was told by a colleague that, "They don't pay me to like the kids. They pay me to teach a lesson. The kids should learn it. I should teach it, they should learn it, case closed," she responded with, "You know, kids don't learn from people they don't like." Both examples capture the significance of relationships in engaging learners with what you are trying to teach, and the necessity for a reciprocal relationship of trust, respect and understanding between the teacher and student. Comer (1995) summarized the significance of meaningful relationships when he said, "No significant learning can occur without a significant relationship" (para. 1).

In improving teacher success in supporting students, a principal component demonstrated by many of the participants was that they worked to develop authentic relationships with their students. These relationships evolved because of meaningful interactions with students that supported a deeper understanding of student interests, needs and abilities. These authentic

relational interactions enable students an opportunity to share their values, beliefs, and perspectives, be challenged critically about alternative perspectives, and push back on thoughts or ideas from the teacher or peers that are inconsistent with their own, in ways that are not characterized/misinterpreted as disrespectful, insubordinate, or invalid. These interactions and the relationships enable the teachers to accommodate issues or incidences that are cultural or "situationally inappropriate" but not malicious.

In other words, authentic relationships provide space for learners to navigate their full selves in a trusting, caring and safe environment where you as a person and your ideas belong. While ultimately there will be differences of opinion, the interaction must still demonstrate and maintain a caring relationship (Noddings, 2012). As a result of the establishment of trust and belonging of teachers with their students, they learn to take ownership of their roles and responsibilities in sustaining effective and positive relationships with people, which creates more equitable opportunities to grow and learn. While well-being is a natural outgrowth of safe, caring and supportive relationships, a specific focus on well-being is central to negotiating the needs of African Nova Scotian students given the historical and ongoing systemic inequities/trauma.

Theme 3: Concern for Students' Well-Being

A focus on student well-being and the needs of the whole child has more recently become a focus of educational student services, programs and support at the provincial level. In 2020, the newly developed inclusive education policy defines the focus on more inclusive school environments in the following way:

> Inclusive education is a commitment to ensuring a high-quality, culturally and linguistically responsive and equitable education to support the well-being and achievement of every student. All students should feel that they belong in an inclusive

> school—accepted, safe, and valued—so they can best learn and succeed. Successful inclusive education requires safe, caring schools that welcome parents/guardians, families, and include the broader community as key partners in education. Parents/guardians are particularly important in identifying the strengths, interests, and challenges of their children and in working with teachers and others in the school to determine the best way to support all students. (p. 1)

What is well-being? Trainter et al. (2018) explain that it is subjective and focuses on maximizing positive emotions and minimizing negative ones, with a eudaimonic view that centers well-being as an aspiration of living according to one's values and beliefs in fulfilling one's potential.

> Well-being occurs as a result of living according to one's genuine values and beliefs, and through actualizing one's true potential (Ryan & Deci, 2001). Thus, well-being is not simply the seeking of pleasure but the exploration and expression of one's true self. In fact, such growth may even involve short term pain in order to move toward greater authentic actualization. For example, learning and growth may involve studying difficult subject areas, or completing challenging assignments. These tasks may not feel pleasant in the moment, but may ultimately lead to a greater sense of personal fulfillment. In an educational setting, eudaimonic well-being can be enhanced by providing students with autonomy, by ensuring that activities are meaningful to students, and by supporting the exploration and expression of each student's sense of identity. (Trainter et al., p. 18)

Eudaimonic well-being accounts for the cultural relevance of educational activities as well as freedom of expression in interpreting a subject/topic, which is particularly relevant to all learners. It is particularly relevant for Africa Nova Scotian learners because of the historic and

systemic exclusion of them from participating in the development of institutional policies, practices and procedures that fail to address their needs. Eudaimonic well-being acknowledges the diversity and divergence of the cultural values, beliefs and understandings of racialized learners, from dominant Eurocentric values, beliefs and attitudes about African Nova Scotians in the education system. It recognizes the needs of racialized and marginalized learners who experience and are impacted by the dominant colonial and Eurocentric perspectives of teachers and educational policies that sustain inequities.

The inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian learners have been captured in the historical and ongoing educational reports regarding opportunity gaps of Black learners. However, these reports seldom contextualize the unique and multigenerational experiences with the impact/implications of an accumulative trauma. As a result, the reports fail to explore or establish the responsibility of the system to ensure the safety and well-being of Black learners.

> Cultural trauma refers to a collective interpretive process of meaning-making that follows a horrendous event that has affected a social group and differs from the psychological concept of trauma that describes an individual's psycho-emotional state. The social theory of cultural trauma has shed light on how the collective memory of slavery shapes African Americans' identity formation through the interpretation of its meaning and significance for the present and the future. The implications of cultural trauma processes experienced by other Black Diasporas with their own unique historical trajectories have been less examined. This article proposes to focus on African Nova Scotians' collective memory and cultural trauma process, who with 400 years of presence in Atlantic Canada, constitute the largest multigenerational Black Canadian community. (Jean-Pierre, 2021, p. 1153).

In several ways, the participants demonstrate an awareness of the significance of well-being to opportunities to learn, away from the impact and implications of systemic racism. These participants commit to the well-being of their students by demonstrating a sincere interest in and efforts towards their well-being. They seek to build a classroom community that is safe, positive, and engaging through the development of trust and belonging, and they consistently reflect on student well-being as it relates to curriculum selection, delivery, and classroom management.

Concern for the Well-being of Students

One of the interview questions asked, "What information is most important for learners to know and why?" I then asked participants to indicate whether there was a difference between what information white students and African Nova Scotian learners needed to know. Becky answered:

> I do think for Black students or African descent learners, they also need to learn […] about society and how society views them. How to handle themselves if they get in situations where they're—this is going to sound like fearmongering, but how to handle yourself if you're pulled over by the police. How to handle yourself in racial situations, learning about pride in yourself, pride in everything about you, knowing where you came from, all of that I think is so important for our learners, so that when they do go into the world, you know, they have to have their basic functioning literacy and all of those things, but also this sense of self.

Becky's interest in student safety and well-being included an assessment of what information is most important to the needs of her students beyond the confines of the Eurocentric school curriculum and influenced her adaptation of the curriculum. As a result of dominant narratives that minimize the experiences of racialized individuals' encounters with racism, her

understanding of the impact of racism, not only validates and affirms her students'/community's experiences with racism and the police, but also locates support in negotiating ways through these experiences/realities in the school curriculum.

In addition, Becky asserts that understanding this history of systemic racism can empower racialized students with the knowledge and understanding to push back on deficit thinking and systemic racism. Becky's willingness to have courageous conversations about race, racialization, and racism is an important starting point in developing a collective awareness of the legacy of racism in her classroom. It also, through more equitable and inclusive curriculum content can respond to dominant narratives of "cultural deficit" directed at African Nova Scotian learners and reframe/reinterpret this narrative as a narrative of resistance and resiliency. These efforts align with Ladson-Billings' (2009) criteria for the development of a social and political consciousness regarding systemic inequities and cultural competence in exploring the ability to communicate across differences more effectively.

Becky's mindfulness about the potential backlash regarding dominant perspectives about race is captured when she proactively claims that "this is going to sound like fearmongering" before discussing or validating the Black community's experiences with policing. Becky's anticipation and proactive defensiveness of her claim mean that she has received pushback from colleagues when validating the Black community's experiences with police harassment. For Becky, a classroom community cultivates the development of processes that respect and protect the dignity of all students so that they can bring their full selves.

Classroom Community Development

These teachers were focused on building a safer, positive, and engaging classroom community through the development of trust and belonging. Megan, in response to the question, "Tell me what being culturally responsive means, in your own words," describes the necessity to be open to

engaging with and learning from her students, given her place of power and privilege in the relationship said:

> I see it as every student enters our space each day with many different experiences, and as a teacher we have to learn from each other's experiences. And I understand that culturally, I am very privileged...and many of my students that do not have the same opportunities as me. So, I look at their lives and I'm respectful and I learn from their culture. So, overall, just simply to sum it up—it's respectfully learning from others and their culture...Understanding and acknowledging that not every student has the same experience. Therefore, trying to create equality and also acknowledging my own ignorance.

Megan's response expresses several ways of being that are significant to developing a positive more equitable classroom community. She recognizes that there is much to learn from her students and is mindful of respecting the lived experiences and understandings that differ from her own. In committing to respectfully navigating cultural differences between herself and her students is an expression of care for those students with non-dominant social identities because it creates a space and opportunity to be and contribute. Megan, in attempting to facilitate opportunities for underrepresented students to participate in their class, has contributed to a sense of belonging for students who may have otherwise felt excluded.

This commitment to building a more inclusive/equitable classroom community provides a blueprint for negotiating power imbalances between groups of students with marginalized social identities, facilitating more equitable spaces for students to give voice, and supporting subsequent strategies that support this commitment to maintaining each student's dignity.

Megan seems to recognize that even in classrooms where the teacher deliberately tries to create more equitable and safer environments this effort may still fall short. Racialized and marginalized learners may still need to negotiate when and how they will engage in classrooms given that this classroom climate may not extend to the whole school. Racialized and marginalized learners do not have the benefit of privileged social identities and may lack adequate support from their teachers to compensate for the power imbalance between their perspectives and dominant perspectives.

Like Megan, who acknowledges the importance of her identity to critically reflect on ways to create safe, positive, engaging, more inclusive and equitable classroom communities, Becky is more specifically focused on the development of a safe space for her students, saying:

> So, for me, it [my identity] influenced my teaching because it really made me want to give our Black kids here a safe space where they're wanted. I want them to do well. I didn't want—I just want it better than it was.

Becky may be better positioned to speak to the development of safe classroom spaces for African Nova Scotian learners based on her own personal lived experiences as a student in the very education system that she currently teaches. In this context, Becky's experiences are an "asset" to her understanding of what needs to be done to create a safer place for Black learners as compared to those who must imagine what it feels like to experience a lack of safety.

Having an understanding and a sense of the impact of systemic racism is a central element in being proactively prepared to navigate the safety and well-being of students in your class. This is something that these participants have demonstrated as it relates to the preparation of teaching sensitive subject matter that contextualizes the historical and ongoing systemic inequities experienced by people of African ancestry. However, facilitating this learning in a way

that provides room for students to ask difficult and challenging questions, while also having the knowledge and ability as the teacher to interrupt and intervene when comments are insulting, disrespectful or malicious, is essential.

Sustained Student Engagement and Well-Being

These participants consistently reflecting on student's well-being through lesson planning, delivery, and classroom management. Corey, in reflecting on curriculum delivery, student safety and well-being, talks about the process that he uses to review the content, as well as the potential impact of the way the material is delivered.

> So, we get quite a few things [resources and materials] for African Canadian Studies (ACS) and can't use them all, and I think thinking about the impact of those things is important too, in the way that I present them. I mentioned earlier, teaching the class in what is like a sensitive way, so for example, teachers have recommended that I show [the movie] Roots, and I have, and the students love Roots. We watch the first couple of episodes of Roots, and it really took me a little while to recognize that watching Roots is very different, depending on who you are and how that feels for you. So, setting students up for that and setting students up for any sort of either images that we see, or descriptions that are difficult, choosing what is necessary to present as an image, how much emphasis—like obviously, we learn about slavery, but how much emphasis do I put on that versus talking about resistance and resilience?

There is a level of conscientiousness that is embedded in Corey's process of determining what to prioritize in his curriculum delivery and approach. In the quote, he is considering the permission that he is granted by the DEECD/school to show portions of the movie, Roots (Margulies, 1977) with the responsibility to his students to contextualize slavery, and the trauma

of these events on Black students. In addition, he is also mindful of the ways these images might unsettle his students collectively, and the potentially disproportionate impact on racialized students given the impact of systemic, historical, and ongoing anti-Black racism.

While taking up challenging topics like the enslavement of Africans and the civil rights movement there is a call to balance the possible trauma associated with being exposed to violence perpetuated on Black bodies portrayed in a film like *Roots* with narratives of resistance, resiliency, hope, and Black exceptionalism. Neil also talks about their advice about balancing the needs of racialized learners:

> I don't want the students of African descent to be sitting in the class, and [the students] have talked about this too—and then some students are looking at them when you're talking about Jim Crow laws and segregation. It's just you have to find balance, but you have to be super sensitive to the students and respectful that might really relate to the topic or if not relate, kind of see themselves in the subjects that we're talking about, I guess. So, focus more on the empowerment and looking at people like Viola Desmond, El Jones and stuff like that, so that the kids are like, all kids, but especially the Black Canadian students in my classroom are like, yeah, we can do that. So, finding a balance.

Neil acknowledges, through the support/direction of first voice representation of both staff and students, the tendency of some teachers to disproportionately focus on the traumatizing elements and experiences of people of African ancestry. When this disproportional focus on slavery or segregation is not appropriately managed or balanced, it can perpetuate the trauma experienced by Black students who continue to encounter anti-Black racism in many forms, or it can oversimplify the impact of these institutions on the lived experiences of Black people in the present. It can contribute to a single narrative that suggests that the central identity of people of

African Ancestry was their enslavement. It can also fail to present Black people as active agents or subjects in their resistance and resiliency to their ongoing oppression and presents them as passive bystanders in narratives of white benevolence, altruism and courage.

These topics, slavery and segregation are extremely significant to contextualizing the ongoing systemic inequities that have emerged from these historical events. However, these topics require a temporality in linking relevant outgrowths of these inequities to today and the actions of resistance or accomplishment of individuals who continue to represent the best of our ancestors' fortitude and brilliance in response to this ongoing oppression.

Summary of Theme 3: Concern for Students' Well-being

There are many elements for teachers to be mindful of as it relates to supporting the safety and well-being of students in their care. However, it is particularly important to support the safety and well-being of African Nova Scotian students given the impact of multigenerational cultural trauma resulting from the historical, ongoing and unresolved systemic racism experienced by Black learners (Hamilton-Hinch et al., 2021; Jean-Pierre, 2021). More recent calls from educational policies to support the well-being of African Nova Scotian learners by being culturally relevant and responsive to their social, emotional and cultural needs is an acknowledgement of the failure of the education system in protecting Black students (Inclusive Education Policy, 2020). It states:

> A focus on equity by supporting success for students who are historically marginalized and racialized (African Nova Scotian and Mi'kmaw students) or who come from other groups that have been traditionally under-represented and under-served, including, but not limited to, students with special needs and those struggling with poverty. (p. 1)

Claims of systemic racism and calls for systemic interventions and commitment from educational institutions to be more responsive to the needs of racialized learners are not new.

However, more recent research on the brain has identified the impact of a lack of safety and well-being on the ability and opportunity of students to learn. According to Hammond (2015),

> The brain is guided by two interconnected prime directives: minimize threats and maximize well-being. Our culture and experiences within the social political context program our brains regarding how it interprets what is threatening and what is an opportunity for authentic connection with others. We are hardwired to connect with others. Our nervous system is designed to guide us toward avoiding threats, approaching rewards and things that will make us feel good, and attaching to others for safety and companionship. Our challenge as culturally responsive teachers is knowing how to create an environment that the brain perceives as safe and nurturing so it can relax, let go of any stress, and turn its attention to learning. (p. 50)

It is important for teachers to recognize the importance that providing an opportunity for all students to live by their own cultural values and beliefs has on their sense of safety and well-being at school. In addition to the impact of the lack of safety on the ability of students to learn from a social-emotional/school climate perspective, there is also the physiological impact on the brain's ability to accept information and student academic performance when students feel stressed and detached from their learning. Megan, Becky, Corey and Neil have demonstrated an awareness of the significance of well-being to the opportunity and ability of African Nova Scotian learners to succeed. These teachers demonstrated a sincere interest in the well-being of their students because they were willing to critically reflect on and commit to what students

needed beyond strict adherence to the curriculum content and Eurocentric pedagogical approaches. Some recognized their own privileged social identities as potential barriers to seeing, understanding and responding to issues and have created opportunities for student voice and contributions to the classroom. They utilized these understandings to develop safer and more equitable, culturally relevant, and responsive classroom environments/communities. They accessed their marginalized lived experiences to identify and eliminate barriers. They also welcomed first-voice experiences in negotiating a balance between curriculum outcomes and the impact of subject matter and content on the multigenerational cultural trauma experienced by African Nova Scotian learners. The awareness of and commitment to being responsive to the needs of these students contributes to a personal sense of well-being from students. There is much carryover amongst and between these themes, and this is also true between well-being and the next, a commitment to teaching and learning.

Theme 4: Commitment to Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning

This commitment is necessary in order to provide equitable opportunities for all students engaging with, and learn from the material being delivered. Teachers need to critically reflect on the diversity of values, beliefs, needs, understandings and interests, over a simple delivery of the curriculum. Default Eurocentric curriculum content and pedagogical approaches have contributed to the ongoing inequities experienced by racialized and marginalized learners because they were designed to support the narratives and understandings of those with the most privileged social identities. When educators fail to provide meaningful and authentic opportunities for students with non-dominant identities to access and engage with the material being delivered the students both feel and are excluded from the classroom. A commitment to teaching and learning requires an understanding, interest and ongoing effort from teachers to

extend the material provided by the education system to better reflect and engage underrepresented learners. This requires a commitment from teachers to create and adapt the material provided by the education system to better align with and reflect the lived experiences of their students with marginalized or vulnerable identities. Celik and Yildiz (2017) discuss the significance of a commitment to teaching and learning to student success, explaining that committed teachers are,

> Those who have excitement, passion, desire, enthusiasm and energy. Thanks to these adjectives, such educators are ready to challenge to alter the things in their environment; create a difference in terms of their methodology and profession of teaching. Due to their commitment to the teaching and learning, they will be able to generate something new, something permanently changing and something authentic. (p. 94)

Many of the participants in this study expressed a commitment to teaching and learning by critically reflecting on the validity of current content and curriculum offerings to their most vulnerable students. They are willing to extend the outcomes and content offerings of their lessons to best align with their students' interests, needs, and lived experiences. They are willing to review, revise, and recreate classroom material, lesson plans, and engagement opportunities in support of student engagement and learning.

Critical Self-Reflection

Participant internalization of moral and ethical responsibility to support students is critical about the ways systems replicate oppression and seek to create spaces/opportunities for improvement. Nicole explained that cultural responsiveness is an approach and process that requires an ongoing reciprocal relationship between students and their teachers.

> I think it's just creating windows and mirrors so [in the mirror] students can see themselves reflected in our classrooms and in our schools, and then creating windows for them to see out, stuff that's not their own experience. It's just responding to the needs of your students, whatever that may be, whether it's the social, emotional needs of our students, the cultural needs of our students, the ability of our students. It's just acknowledging that and responding to it, so that they can be successful.

Through Nicole's analogy of the windows and mirrors, she is stressing how important it is for her to help her students to see themselves included in the classroom curriculum so that they know who they are and where they come from matters in the classroom. This process is particularly important to the development of an ability to effectively communicate across differences or cultural competence as defined by Howard (2003), which is a central element to being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of students (Ladson-Billings, 1995).

Nicole's commitment to being responsive to the social, emotional, and cultural needs of her students demonstrates her moral and ethical responsibility to all her students. Becky also connects her commitment to teaching and learning to the internalized moral and ethical responsibility to her students. Becky suggests that being culturally responsive is:

> In my heart, my little teacher heart […] means taking the students' cultural […] their racial identity or their economics, taking that and going from there. I look at my classroom right now. I have 30 kids in here. I have all the African Nova Scotian students in the school, [and] the rest of my kids are either First Nation or ESL students. So, what I try to do is, I look at the outcomes and I think, how can I make this of interest to the kids in front of me? How can I make them relate to it? How can I make them buy into it? I know that a lot of our [teacher] guides and a lot of the [curriculum] materials we have

> from the department [of education] might have your token Black face or your token Asian face, but how can I really get these kids to buy in?

Becky's recognition of the failure of programming support from an institutional perspective motivated her to make a request to the principal to take as many students with vulnerable social identities as possible into her grade five classroom. She committed to focussing her energy and talents on compensating for the systemic failure of meeting the needs of racialized and marginalized learners by locating, organizing and developing teaching materials and curriculum content that she believed would be relevant to the interests, lived experiences and academic needs of her students. This type of meaningful curriculum extends beyond what Becky describes as "token" representations in schoolbooks and department resources.

Becky reflected on a teacher whom she admired and respected, and who was willing to take "risks" in seeking out content material and resources to support the interests and needs of his students.

> So, I did have some really great high school teachers. I had a really great English teacher, [Mr. X] at [my rural high school], and he was totally outside of the box. He was the teacher that I think that—everyone wanted him because he seemed to get [understand] Black kids. So, there are all kinds of Black kids in there, everyone was in, and there were gay kids in—that's when it was just kind of okay to be gay, do you know what I mean? It was just okay then. He had that little sticker on his door. So, he was a very risk-taking teacher, so he was positive—what was the question? So, to me, I think I saw him, I saw that he took risk, he took crazy risk. He let us do a Maxine Tynes presentation. Who knew about Maxine Tynes back then, but [Mr. X]? We were doing some poetry stuff, and

> it was me and another Black kid, and we said, can we do Maxine Tynes? She's not in the book. And he's like, I don't care who you do. We're like, oh, okay, yeah.

Becky felt that this teacher validated and affirmed the experiences of his students, engaged their interests and provided a level of autonomy in exploring ways to approach and represent their learning. For the participants who have internalized a moral and ethical responsibility to commit to the social, emotional and cultural needs of their students the centrality of a social and political consciousness and empowerment is worth the risk. This internalized responsibility to the needs of their students contributes to the next characteristic of participants, which is lesson pre-planning and preparation.

Pre-planning and Preparation

Participant anticipation and consideration of complex needs of students lesson pre-planning and preparation process. Nancy's position is that students' behavioural problems occur when the curriculum content is not connected to the lives of the students.

> If you're really deliberate and intentional with your planning about what you're doing, then you won't run into those [behavioural challenges]. Everything that I did in my classroom was planned out. I spent hours up at night planning, and it wouldn't even be like planning the lessons. It's planning how things were going to run, whether it was from how I was going to introduce something, you know, the breakdown of it, how it would build to whatever would be the end result. Everything was planned out and I'd make sure that the students knew why we were doing everything.

Nancy believes that this intentionality proactively reduces the tendency of the teacher to blame the students for their lack of engagement, because the teacher anticipated and planned with their students' interests at the core.

This tendency or predisposition is particularly important when reflecting on the needs of racialized and marginalized learners because, as mentioned throughout, racism and deficit thinking have provided a buffer for many educators to rationalize away their responsibility for, and commitment to, the teaching of African Nova Scotian learners. When asked how she selects the appropriate resources to support her curriculum, Margaret stated that:

> I just start with the textbooks, but then I go beyond that. When I'm picking the resources, it's things that have been brought to me by the department or fellow students who'll say, this might be interesting. I do a lot of research. I find you know; you want to have things that are engaging them in activity-based, you don't want it all lecture-based either. So, I try to incorporate all kinds of different things that I may have done in sociology as well into the class. That it's not just teacher-focused as well, that it's student-focused and that they're part of that whole learning experience, you know, they're a part of it. They're not just taking in the information from the teacher in the front of the classroom. So, there has to be a mix.

Margaret, like Nancy, understands the importance of anticipating the complex cultural needs of the students in her classroom because while she will review and utilize sections of the textbook offerings for a particular course she does not stop there. Margaret demonstrates her commitment to teaching and learning with her willingness to go beyond what is easily accessible, by doing her own research as well as incorporating the voices, input, and perspectives of both her colleagues and students. This approach sustains its commitment to the curriculum outcomes while at the same time has relevance to the lived experiences of her students. Margaret's inclusion of different approaches and activities provides multiple points of entry for

students to be engaged with their learning. Both Nancy and Margaret are demonstrating their efforts to be thoughtful and critically reflective about the needs of their students.

Critically Consciousness Lesson Plan Reflection

Critically self-assess success and effectiveness of lessons: identify areas for improvement and seek support to improve impact lessons. in posing the question to Nicole, "Tell me about what you do when a student or group of students are not connecting with the way you are delivering a lesson or a topic**,** she maintains accountability to her students.

> It starts with me. I have to reflect on what I do, because students will respond to the environment which you create. So, it starts with me. I have to reflect on, okay, so, did I know the content like I thought I knew it? Because maybe I didn't. I taught a whole math lesson one time and had a resource teacher in the back, and they were shaking their head, no. And I'm like, why didn't you stop me before? This is like an hour in. I didn't know the content that well, so I had to say, "My bad guys. Let me look at this again, and we'll try it again tomorrow." So, it starts with me. It has to be a reflective approach. What do I need to do to make sure that they're engaged, they're understanding, that I'm giving them enough opportunity, enough support, enough ways for them to grasp it? So, by any means necessary, really, and being responsive to them.

Nicole's example shows how she prioritized her students' learning needs over her own ego. Nicole, by acknowledging a major gap in her understanding and delivery of the mathematics curriculum content, had to re-engage with her understanding of the material in the interest of being better able to teach and support students in meeting the outcomes.

Corey, in his response to my asking about what he would do when a student or group of students are not connecting with the way they were delivering a lesson or topic, captures the importance of not jumping to conclusions.

> I mean, all the stock things—try something else. Try to get to the bottom of why that might be, if the student will talk to you. And try to discern what the problem is, I think is important, without making too many assumptions about why that is—which is not always easy. I will talk to other teachers if they have a problem with that student in the same way, recognizing that students may have a bad day, and maybe it's just something else going on in their life entirely. And trying to get to the bottom of it, and trying to present different ways that a student can sort of meet that outcome, is something that is interesting to me. And I always try and take a step back and I try to think about those questions of like, what is it that I'm trying to do here?

Corey's mindfulness about resisting the temptation of assuming that he knows why a student is not engaged with the lesson or classroom reflects a teacher who is conscientious about the lived experiences and the impact that these experiences have on his student's opportunity/ability to learn. Corey suggests that trying to find the underlying cause of what is going on with the student or what is contributing to the lack of engagement is foundational to identifying the issues and finding an appropriate response. The willingness of Corey to do his research in meaningfully exploring the potential barriers experienced by the student by consulting colleagues, or simply taking a step back is important to countering assumptions that can perpetuate harm.

Both Corey and Nicole recognize their responsibility to critically reflect on their practices and explore potential contributing factors to student engagement beyond areas of their immediate control of lesson delivery. Teacher accountability and conscientiousness about the lived

experiences of students are important points of consideration when resisting the temptation of assuming that students are disinterested in learning, and committing to the processes of teaching and learning.

Summary of Theme 4: Commitment to Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning

The participants' interest in critically reflecting on the successful application of the lesson planning designed for African Nova Scotian learners, is evidence of a commitment to culturally relevant and responsive teaching and learning. Nicole, Becky, Nancy, Margaret and Corey have internalized their responsibility to ensure that the social, emotional and academic needs of their students are addressed. They are being mindful of the impact of systemic racism on opportunities for students to learn, anticipating the diversity of needs of their students in the interest of being responsive to them, and critically assessing the impact of their lesson. Magill (2021) characterizes the awareness of the ways in which power imbalances can perpetuate inequities experienced by racialized learners, and resiliency from teachers in resisting deficit thinking, as critically reflexive praxis.

> Critically reflexive praxis is a teacher's awareness of, and response to, the multifaceted power relations governing relational and pedagogical acting. Consciousness to power, or critical reflexivity, is important for teacher praxis because it can expand on what they believe to be possible. Teachers who are reflexive should not be confused with teachers who are reflective. Reflective teaching deals with a teacher remembering, analyzing, and planning for instruction, and reflexivity helps a teacher understand how the social relations of power situate teaching, learning, and the social world (Magill, 2021, p. 1).

By defining reflection as a practice/process of planning for instruction and reflexivity as an internalized understanding the ways that social relations situate teaching and learning, Magill

(2021) highlights a significant difference between reflection and reflexivity. The distinction between remembering to apply a process for instruction (reflective teaching) versus an internalized understanding/commitment to the impact of the lesson on the inequities experienced by African Nova Scotian students (reflexivity) have seemingly different motivational foundations.

Reflection seems to be motivated by being accountable for demonstrating a process of application to calls for inclusivity from educational institutions, where reflexivity is seemingly committed to being responsive to the impact of systemic inequities on African Nova Scotian students through the development of culturally relevant and responsive approaches. Having an internalized understanding of the impact of power on the opportunities and ability of marginalized learners to not only succeed at school but survive in the world, is a transformative understanding. It is transformative because it shifts notions of success from the technical application of a process to an ongoing commitment to the teaching and learning of students toward more equitable opportunities academically but also in the social world.

This definition is particularly important in identifying/differentiating between potential performative or inadequate expressions of equity efforts of teaching and learning versus a persistent exploration/commitment and practical application of these internalized understandings in being responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. According to Magill (2021):

> One's reflexive response to power is contextually dependent on several factors and is linked to particulars of the context—including but not limited to, student concerns, curricular requirements, socio-cultural influences, administrative support, and other social relations. A critical reflexive teacher might consider how they act beyond the confines of the classroom. For example, such a teacher who gains awareness that a

> student may be hassled by police walking home from school might walk home with the students, engage with the police, and teach about these interactions as a way to learn about and fight for civil rights. Classroom work, then, becomes something that informs and is informed by the complex social relations in which students and teachers exist. (p. 2)

The evidence of participants that are committed to teaching and learning is captured in the examples of those teachers who are willing to extend beyond their commitment to their contract and explore solutions to barriers that are expressed to them by their students in the interest of student success, safety and well-being. The success of these participant efforts is contingent upon systemic recognition, acknowledgement and support of these participants to redress these inequities, however, those who have internalized this understanding resist and persist.

Nicole, Becky, Nancy, Margaret and Corey express a commitment to teaching and learning by critically reflecting on the validity of current content and curriculum offerings to their most vulnerable students. They are willing to extend the outcomes and content offerings of their lessons to best align with the interests, needs and lived experiences of their students.

Summary

Chapter 4 revealed the emergence of the central characteristics and themes from my participant interviews in response to the research questions: How are teachers of students of African descent culturally responsive? What are the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia? The four dominant themes and characteristics were an expression of empathy of participants towards their students that was often connected to a lived

experience with or exposure to marginalization. Central understanding that emerged from empathy was participant recognition that they were accountable as educators to address the systemic barriers experienced by learners made vulnerable by non-dominant social identities. A relational engagement with and connection to their students and their local community supports an ongoing opportunity to engage with, develop an understanding of and be more responsive to their students' needs. A sincere interest in the well-being of their racialized learners contributed to a commitment to teaching and learning that initiated a critical self-reflection among these participants of the curriculum, content delivery and areas of focus that balanced the historical and ongoing lived experiences, challenges, and contributions of people of African Ancestry.

Chapter 6: Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

Chapter 6 draws on the theoretical framework to analyze the findings from Chapter 5, which identified the emergence of four themes related to empathy, relationships, well-being, and a commitment to culturally responsive teaching and learning. The theme embodied the characteristics of teacher participants, and identified as being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners.

The ways that the four theories of decolonization, Africentricity, critical race theory, and anti-racist theory helped to explicate the themes aptly addressed the research questions: How are teachers of students of African ancestry culturally responsive? What are the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy, in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia?

The decolonizing, Africentric, critical race and anti-racist theoretical framework used to analyze the data aligned, intertwined, and overlapped. Decolonization emphasizes a collective necessity to critically reflect on, confront, and respond to the impact and implications of colonialism on those who are marginalized because of their non-dominant social identities. Africentricity extends this analysis to the specific and intersectional realities of people of African descent, but in this context specifically African Nova Scotian learners. Because Africentricity unapologetically places the lived realities, cultural values, beliefs, and ways of being at the centre of African Nova Scotians lived experiences as subjects, not objects, it offers a foundational cultural starting point to resist racist colonial dominant narratives by constructing narratives that contextualize Black resistance and resiliency to oppression. Finally, critical race theory offers a critical review/analysis of the manifestations and applications of race in colonial

institutions/society through processes of racialization and racism. Critical race theory supports an ability to not only frame core understandings regarding the mechanisms that oppress victims of racism but also an opportunity to explore and apply anti-racist action-oriented responses to this racism.

As noted in the methodology chapter, I also used and applied foundational understandings from these theoretical frameworks to develop my research methodology and data collection methods, with the intention of decolonizing the process and making the research experience more Africentric. For example, I conducted parent focus groups across the province to provide African Nova Scotian community members first voice opportunities to identify research participants who they believed met the criteria outlined as being culturally relevant and responsive to the learners from their communities. These sessions were often facilitated in the Black community by people that community members knew, respected, and trusted. These sessions were conducted informally, for example, while sharing a meal in helping to provide a sense of safety, comfort, and community. I discuss each of the four theories, beginning with decolonization and Africentricity, then elaborate on the reciprocal relationship between critical race theory and anti-racism.

Decolonization

Decolonization is characterized as a critical response to the impact and implications of imperialism and colonialism, which requires an interrogation of the underlying assumptions, values and motivations. Smith (1999) in responding to the challenges associated with effectively confronting the racism and deficit thinking experienced by Indigenous people says:

> The problem is that the constant efforts by governments, states, societies and institutions to deny the historical formations of such conditions have simultaneously denied our

> claims to humanity, to having a history, and to all sense of hope. To acquiesce is to lose ourselves entirely and implicitly agree with all that has been said about us. To resist is to retrench in the margins, retrieve what we were and remake ourselves. The past, our stories local and global, the present, our communities, cultures, languages and social practices- all may be spaces of marginalization, but they have also become spaces of resistance and hope. (p. 4)

Decolonization requires more than a change to formal political power or positioning of individuals. It further requires an ongoing and sustained effort to change institutional structures in society towards a re-centering of Indigenous or, in these circumstances, African Nova Scotian ways of being. Dei (2012) in response to his concern about the configuration of school and education to meet the needs of "Euromodernity" says,

> For African learners we need to develop theoretical prisms or perspectives that are able to account for our lived experiences and our relationality with other learners. Such prisms will be rooted in our cultures, histories and heritage and be presented as frames of reference for the intellectual and political projects of designing positive (i.e., solution-oriented) educational goals for learners. (p. 103)

Decolonization starts with a recognition of the political impact and implications of the ways that colonial, imperialistic, and Eurocentric attitudes, beliefs, values, and ways of being have excluded and harmed those with non-dominant social identities across numerous institutions. It requires a recognition that the actions, policies, practices and procedures of Eurocentric institutions and their representatives were and are not incidental or accidental. The conditions created and sustained in these institutions were/are intentionally designed to reinforce a hierarchy supporting those with cultural values and beliefs most aligned with the institution's

collective interests. Colonial institutions have calibrated membership in the “dominant” group by expanding or decreasing it to sustain a critical mass of power and control to manage discontent among those with non-dominant social identities. The ability to calibrate the inclusion or exclusion criteria regarding dominant and non-dominant identities is evidence that these identities are socially constructed.

The core motivation is maintaining control. While the mechanisms of colonialism negotiate their continued dominance over those marginalized, it constructs narratives about those marginalized through their political, educational, media, and justice systems that characterize their oppression as either biologically and/or culturally deficient, which justifies their low positionality in society. The actual impact of this oppression is to create the inequities that are pointed to as evidence of the marginalized group's inferiority/deficit, and over time, the oppression itself becomes invisible because it is both an expected and represented outcome of the dominant narratives.

An acknowledgement of this reality speaks to the necessity of a confrontation with the ways that colonial processes of control and dominance have created inequities through decolonization. Shahjahan et al., (2022) share their definition of decolonization:

> The undoing of colonialism. As our brief history of the term illuminated, disentangling from colonial domination requires multilayered processes that involve not only political but also economic, spiritual, educational, cultural, and psychological displacement of the colonial logic. Decolonization, or undoing colonial processes and logic, takes on particular meanings and understandings for curriculum and pedagogy in higher education across disciplinary, institutional, and global contexts. (p. 82–83)

The realization of several of the participants of their location on the hierarchy concerning their non-dominant social identities interrupted dominant narratives of equality of all people because their non-dominant social identities required them to reflect on the opportunity gaps in society given that their interests were not front and centre when looking to access public services and supports. This critical reflection and questioning of the misalignment between colonial narratives and the inequities experienced by these participants seem like a catalyst that provides a point of entry/opportunity to extend this understanding beyond their own experiences.

For example, as referenced in my findings chapter, Margaret's experiences as a young female soccer player not being provided with an opportunity to continue to play competitively with other girls contributed to her awareness of the disconnect between dominant narratives that suggest that everything is equal even though the boys' and girls' soccer programs were not funded equally. While this is only a surface-level exemplar of the number of ways that Margaret more than likely was communicated to by society that she, and girls collectively, were not a priority, it required of her a deeper dive into the social and emotional impact on her sense of self, and of her safety and sense of belonging at school.

In addition, Corey and Neil also describe their non-dominant ethnic ancestry as points of vulnerability in a Eurocentric society. Both acknowledge that the saliency of race provides them with the initial safety of choosing whether to disclose their backgrounds as "white-passing." To Corey and Neil, their ethnicities were reflection points that helped them understand the inherent inequities in our society. Margaret, Corey, and Neil all provided their stories in response to the question, "What about you specifically makes you able to be culturally responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners?" In analyzing their responses from a decolonizing lens, it is clear that the sharing of their stories was to demonstrate an awareness and understanding across non-

dominant social identities that colonial systems/institutions do not work equitably. Teacher's experiences with being marginalized can contribute to their understanding of the impact and implications of other forms of marginalization on others, but this is not always the case. These teachers' critical questioning of the narratives perpetuated through colonial mechanisms contributed to an openness amongst these participants that provided the necessary empathy and interest in developing better understandings of African Nova Scotian learners through relationships. In addition, these teacher's understandings enabled them to support student well-being through a commitment to being responsive to their social, emotional, and academic needs.

An additional fact that is relevant is that all three of these participants taught African Canadian Studies. The preparation to effectively teach this course required them to engage with anti-colonial and Africentric curriculum and African Nova Scotian students and community members. These non-dominant social identities that provided lived experiences with ethnocentrism and sexism as well as the teaching of Africentric curriculum contributed to their interest in "recognizing the constraints of colonization, disrupting these constraints, and seeking alternatives," which are the "specific ingredients required to recognized and disrupt the constraints is directly related to the ways and mechanisms that have created these constraints and the applied alternatives need to be relevant to the specific needs of the oppressed social identities" (Shahjahan et al., 2022, p. 85–86).

The process of colonization focused on European cultural values, beliefs and approaches while marginalizing those of African Nova Scotian learners and communities. Because many participants have a point of entry through their own lived experiences with a vulnerable social identity, these understandings create an awareness of the impact of systemic inequities and resistance to deficit thinking about African Nova Scotian learners. Upon accepting this

understanding, an educator can move to a commitment to explore and be responsive to the gaps in opportunities experienced by marginalized learners. The participants' reflections on their own vulnerable, marginalized social identities were catalysts to empathetically support their students.

To elaborate on this point, I refer to Becky's experiences as a youth in the school system. In reflecting on her experiences with racism in her predominantly white and rural high school, Becky describes a scenario where her teacher was preparing to discuss the topic of slavery and asked if Becky wanted to leave the classroom to avoid any discomfort regarding the classroom lesson and discussion. Analyzing this interaction through a decolonizing lens which calls for a change in the power imbalances between dominant Eurocentric perspectives and an ongoing re-centering of the circumstances and lived experiences of African Nova Scotians (Dei, 2012; Smith, 1999) is significant to contextualizing, exploring and fully understanding the impact and implications of the teacher's efforts to "protect" Becky.

In this exchange, the teacher acknowledges racism as a reality given the vulnerability of racialized individuals in the classroom and the seeming desire to minimize any harm experienced by Becky. However, the teacher projects her responsibility to negotiate the creation of a safe environment in the classroom on Becky as opposed to creating a safer place to take up the topic. The teacher's lack of awareness of the perpetuation of harm to Becky in prioritizing and protecting the safety, interests and centeredness of white people, illustrates the teacher's fear and unpreparedness, which served to hyper-visualize Becky. By asking Becky to leave the room, the teacher reinforces the luxury of privilege afforded to those learners with social identities most aligned with the Eurocentric curriculum. This reflects the failure of teacher education programs and the education system itself to prepare teachers to be responsive to the needs of all their students.

Unfortunately, in these types of situations racialized students like Becky may be more reluctant to express the harm they experienced by well-intentioned teachers because the education system often fails to validate, affirm, and respond to their experiences with racism generally but especially in more nuanced and less explicit expressions of racism as described above.

Africentricity

Africentricity also offers a theoretical context and framework for decolonization. Culturally relevant and responsive approaches provide a framework for organizing, defining, and assessing efforts to respond to these challenges. In many instances, there are clear overlaps between these theories and approaches. The theoretical framework supports a comprehensive analysis to answer my research question.

The inability of many teachers to meaningfully intervene and commit to being responsive to the social, emotional, cultural and academic needs of their students of African descent is the starting point to developing an understanding of these four themes. Hamilton-Hinch et al., (2021) explain:

> Learners of African descent indicate that they do not feel integrated in a meaningful way in the public education system. Students often report that they feel their teachers neither sufficiently understand the African Nova Scotian culture nor have relevant training in Black history, race relations, and cross-cultural understanding. As a result, most teachers cannot appreciate the difficulties and enormous challenges Black students face in the school system.

Hamilton-Hinch et al., (2021) have articulated the lack of preparedness of educational representatives to adequately respond to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. The sense

of isolation that this incompetency contributes to the disconnectedness for students in their own schools. The default perspective of our society is that any deficits of racialized learners are the result of their racial and cultural inferiority, rather than deficits in the educator or of the education system itself (Delpit, 2012). This means that for many educators, there is a systemic rationale that minimizes the likelihood of critically reflecting on their own shortfalls or inadequacies of the curriculum, inequities in the education system, or society at large.

The emergent causal properties of the development of a dominant narrative that validated, affirmed, and normalized the cultural and racial superiority of white, Anglophone, heterosexual, Christian, able-bodied, middle to upper-class men, came from European imperialism and colonialism. These are the same dominant narratives that are dismissive of, indifferent to, or that marginalize and "other," those with racialized or other non-dominant social identities.

Imperialism is the idea of cultural superiority of one group of people over others. Colonization is the enacting of this sense of cultural superiority, which involves the exploitation of the vulnerable and securing and enhancing the power imbalances between colonizers and the colonized to seize control over Indigenous land and take away their political and personal autonomy.

These processes of domination involve utilizing violence, theft, and deceit to take political and economic control of a territory and its people. Narratives that define and defend the cultural superiority of European values and beliefs as a process of civilizing the so-called "deficient," 'primitive,' and 'uncivilized' Indigenous Peoples became central to justifying their oppression. These dominant colonial discourses became embedded in the development of foundational policies, practices, and procedures of our current judicial, political, economic and

educational institutions. The proliferation and normalization of these colonial understandings through these institutions is described as Eurocentrism. As Hunn (2004) explains:

> Eurocentrism places the history, culture, and philosophical perspectives of people of European descent in a privileged, more valuable position than any other world culture. Eurocentrism, especially in the U.S. context, disguises itself as a universal perspective from which every culture must evaluate its experiences. It denies the value of other cultural and historical perspectives as ways of seeing and understanding the world. (p. 66)

These Eurocentric institutions, including the political, economic, education, and justice systems, have worked to continue to serve, reinforce, and replicate the power and/or privilege of those with dominant social identities (African Nova Scotian Affairs, 2019). The representatives of these institutions continue to define, manipulate and calibrate those social identities that they chose to privilege, accept, or continue to exclude within these systems to continue to sustain their power and dominance. These institutions are effective in their ability to socially construct messages/policies that "other" those with marginalized social identities. This process of "othering" manifests in the normalization of oppressive mechanisms that utilize racism, sexism, ethnocentrism and classism to establish and sustain the current inequities. Asante (as cited in Bernard & Brigham, 2012) provides that:

> Two physical attacks on Africa, in the form of enslavement and colonization, led to the internalization of African marginalization even by Africans themselves. So thoroughly was the acceptance of African peripheralization that Europe was successful in convincing the rest of the world that Africa, the mother continent of humanity and civilizations, was a mere child in human civilization terms. The question is, "Who were we African people

> without and before the encounter with Europe five hundred years ago" Indeed put more expressly, "What were the mechanisms that threw Africa off its own terms." (p. 8)

The impact of African marginalization since European contact has created a collective void in knowledge and understanding of and about the challenges and contributions of people of African ancestry. The absence of a counter-narrative allows for an increased effectiveness of dominant Eurocentric narratives to pathologize the circumstances of Black oppression, resulting in cultural deficits as opposed to institutional racism. What further complicates these issues is that information is often denied in the formal context of education, and African Nova Scotian learners struggle to make sense of deferential treatment amid the hostility they encounter.

As Asante (2012) suggests, learners of African descent, which includes African Nova Scotian learners, are vulnerable to internalizing racism because they themselves have not been provided access to counter-narratives that would assist them in reconciling their lived experiences with anti-Black racism. In addition, European educators and learners often minimize the claims of racism by African Nova Scotian learners because of the default dominant perception that racism does not exist in Canada. This further marginalizes African Nova Scotians when diminishing the fact that they would have reasons to feel offended. Mensah (2002) suggests that:

> Many Canadians are reluctant to admit that racial oppression and inferiorization persist in this country. As Canadians, we have the tendency not only to ignore our racist past, but also to dismiss any contemporary racial incidence as nothing but aberration in an essentially peaceful, tolerant, charitable, and egalitarian nation. (p. 1)

If racism is not recognized as a problem, there cannot be a systemic response to it. However, the inability of our education system to recognize and be more responsive to the anti-

Black racism experienced by African Nova Scotians, is exponentially more problematic because the education system is touted as the great equalizer. The education system is understood and promoted as the place where this work needs to be taken up. The promise of education is an opportunity to develop an awareness and understanding of the impact of systemic racism to develop a critical mass of people collectively committing to respond to these inequities. Yet if this work is not meaningfully and authentically occurring in our education system, we can expect these inequities to continue indefinitely. In addition, the absence of the validation and affirmation of the lived experiences of African Nova Scotian learners in course offerings and in the curriculum perpetuates the negative disproportional representation of Black students in suspension and student performance data.

The ability of teachers to empathize with the experiences, needs, and interests of their students can be transformative in their commitment to exploring alternative educational approaches. While proposing and implementing alternative educational approaches requires additional work beyond the current Eurocentric approaches/offerings/support systems and may be met with resistance, some participants were willing to take this risk and do the work. As a result of centering the self-worth, needs, and interests of African Nova Scotian learners by validating and affirming their lived experiences, Black learners can become more resistant to internalizing racism as some character or cultural deficit in themselves or community but rather a deficit in the systems interest/ability to meet their social, emotional and academic needs.

Because many of these participants have been able to empathize with the African Nova Scotian learners in their classrooms, the exploration and application of Africentric approaches beyond references in policy are being considered and applied. Asante (1991), in defining the key functions of Africentric educational environments notes that:

> Teachers do not marginalize African American children by causing them to question their own self-worth because their peoples' story is seldom told. By seeing themselves as the subjects rather than the objects of education … African American students can be made to see themselves as centered in the reality of any discipline. It must be emphasized that Afrocentricity is not a Black version of Eurocentricity. Eurocentricity is based on White supremacist notions whose purposes are to protect White privilege and advantage in education, economics, politics, and so forth. Unlike Eurocentricity, Afrocentricity does not condone ethnocentric valorization at the expense of degrading other groups' perspectives. (pp. 171–172)

An Africentric classroom places African Nova Scotian students at the center of the teaching and learning process alongside their peers, while actively protecting their self-worth by including them as subjects, rather than objects, in their learning.

To elaborate on this point, I refer to Erica's experience when she was a child. In describing an incident where she was accused by a teacher of plagiarizing her work, Erica expresses her frustration with the default perspective, that because her work was so well written it could not possibly be her work. Erica explains:

> So, I would hand in my paper, and I just remember this one particular teacher wrote on my paper that I had plagiarized it. So anyway, I had to go back and talk to this teacher about that because that was my genuine—that was the way I wrote. And then afterwards, she did apologize for accusing me of plagiarizing, because then she realized—because we had another assignment where we had to just write there on the spot—and so, she was like, "Yeah, I realized after I saw your other paper that you didn't plagiarize. You just

> have the vocabulary." And it's like, it's just interesting that for whatever reason she didn't think that I could be capable …

When I asked Erica about why the teacher might not have thought she was capable, she responded with:

> Well, you know what? At the time, I had no sweet clue. I didn't even make any connections there to race or anything like that. Now looking back, I think that [my race] very well could have been the reason why. But, yeah, at the time I just didn't really think about it.

The impact of racism and the type of deficit thinking is captured in this exchange between Erica and her teacher. The social, emotional, and cultural safety of racialized learners aligns with school climate data, indicating that Black learners do not feel a sense of safety and belonging in their schools. In addition, teacher expectations have a lot to do with student success. Teachers like Erica's, who see their students as deficient and have low expectations from them, fail to commit to being responsive to their needs because the students are already meeting their expectations.

Erica seemed to struggle with even naming this differential treatment years later, either because of the strength of Eurocentric mechanisms that blocked her ability to recognize this as a potentially racist act, or because of an inability to prove that it was, in fact, due to racism. Nancy's experience provides an additional example to support this point. Nancy expressed the sense of isolation she encountered, being one of a very small number of Black female students in the French immersion stream, and describes her confusion and frustration about her "struggles" in mathematics.

> I had a teacher in high school, and I can't remember his name, but to this day I remember him as being like the worst math teacher ever—that I ever, ever had. And every day, I would go into that class I would feel like, I can't do this, I can't do math. Never, ever would I do that to students, because I felt like that all through my career and up to that point, and I failed his class.

Nancy's confusion in having to negotiate between her perception of the competencies of the teacher and the authority of the teacher to characterize the failure as exclusively Nancy's demonstrates the power imbalances in favour of the teacher's perspective and positionality. Nancy's resistance/resiliency to internalizing the deficit thinking about her abilities on both the intersecting criteria of race and gender through the process of her "failing" the course is not a small task. Once again, we see demonstrated the ease of deniability of the teacher and education system to dismiss claims of racism or sexism, because evidencing the existence of a claim of racism would require an explicit incident, even when Black women's lived experiences tell them that these are more than likely significant factors. So, the requirement for those living with multiple non-dominant social identities to speak comprehensively to the impact and implications of the layers of their vulnerability to a system that is disinterested requires a reset.

Critical Race Theory

Africentricity provides an ability to unapologetically prioritize and place the lived experiences of African Nova Scotians at the centre as subjects of their reality as opposed to objects in a colonial and Eurocentric narrative. The other theories in my framework, critical race theory and anti-Black racism, support an ability to zoom in on and extend an analysis of specific elements including the impact and implications of race, racialization and racism.

Critical race theory recognizes the existence and functioning of racism in a multitude of forms. It rejects the dominant notion that racism is an aberration and can only be proven generally if there is an explicit derogatory term attached to an incident (Delgado & Stefancic, 2010). As a result of the systemic failure to "see" racism as manifested in a multitude of forms, racialized students are often required to negotiate the social and emotional trauma of racism by themselves.

As a result of her lived experiences with racism, as a teacher Becky is able to access empathic concern for the experiences of her racialized students and take their perspective as racialized learners in a predominantly white classroom that provides her insights to minimize and avoid incidences as described above. Becky herself encapsulates her commitment to being culturally relevant and responsive to the social, emotional and academic needs of her students by stating explicitly that she "never wants to make her kids feel that way". This means that she does not want her students to have to internalize the responsibility to process, navigate, and respond to the ignorance of unprepared and culturally unresponsive teachers in front of the entire class whether it be intentional or not.

The critical race theory tenet that "race is ordinary and not an aberration" supports the exploration of the impact of racism on deficit thinking" (Stefancic, 2010, p. 8) particularly when it relates to challenges confronted by racialized learners. In addition, there is a necessity to explore the impact of the ways that overlapping non-dominant social identities would validate the critical race theory tenet of intersectionality that claims that no one person possesses a singular identity in any one social identity construct, and that the complexities of people's individualized and distinct identities need to be included to fully comprehend their experiences (Crenshaw, 1989). An awareness of and application of anti-essentialism or intersectionality

would minimize this disproportional responsibility of marginalized learners to speak against their oppression. However, because Nancy had to retake the mathematics course again with a Black teacher the following year and her demonstrated success in the course and programme at large, she validates and affirms her position that her lack of "success" was more likely due to teacher incompetence. In addition, the "Blackness" of her teacher in this context is relevant because it requires us to consider the ways awareness of and responsiveness to lived experiences with racism and "deficit thinking" informed the teacher's belief in Nancy's competencies. Ultimately, this lack of safety and support experienced by racialized learners can contribute to what is often defined as "drop out" but is more accurately identified as a student "push out" (Dei et al., 1995).

An application of a critical race theory and anti-racism theoretical lens on these incidents supports interpreting and understanding the ways that Eurocentricity positions narratives and policies that limit the ability of African Nova Scotian learners to negotiate and navigate their authentic selves at school. The theories characterize race as a social construct that is developed through processes of racialization that work to 'other' those with non-dominant social identities.

However, because of the embeddedness of colonial and Eurocentric cultural values, beliefs, ideas, and understandings in institutions, many teachers are seemingly unaware, indifferent to or dismissive of their role in perpetuating the major inequities in the current education system. In addition, there is a lack of a sense of urgency to transform the education system on behalf of Black learners from educational representatives across the system. Many representatives are not in a hurry to take up the responsibility to validate and affirm the perspective of their students, especially if and/or when it requires them to account for their actions or inactions. In instances of accusations of racism and calls for accountability from students and the community, systems representatives often prioritize their "hurt" feelings about

the allegation of being racist or part of a racist environment over the needs of students or a meaningful response. DiAngelo (2011) explains that:

> White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. (p. 54)

As a result of teachers' white fragility, some teachers are more interested in dismissing claims of racism than in being responsive to them because of their personal discomfort having to confront behaviours and approaches that are complicated or that may implicate them as a contributing factor. The frequency of a school's denial and dismissiveness of addressing racism led an African Nova Scotian colleague of mine to say, "They seem more afraid of being called racist than actually being racist" (personal communication with Tracey Mulder, February 3, 2020).

Being empathetic contributed to participants' openness to seeing the ways that certain students have been denied equitable treatment in the school system. For example, Corey and Neil provide support for this point from an ethnocentric perspective. While both acknowledged that the saliency of race provides them with the privilege of choosing to disclose their social identities or not, they understand the implications that their non-dominant social identities may have on their own access and opportunities to equal and equitable treatment. Margaret's personal experiences with sexism through the public education system supported her ability to "see" the systemic failures to provide equal and equitable opportunities for girls to participate in

competitive soccer as compared with boys. Megan and Daniel “see” the inequities of the system in relation to their vulnerabilities from a class perspective. I believe it is important for all teachers to explore their social identities to identify the ways they intersect to either inhibit or enhance empathic concern and perspective-taking. This type of critical self-reflection supports a deeper understanding and capacity to become more culturally relevant and responsive to their students.

The damage/trauma created because of cultural misalignments and power imbalances between many students with non-dominant social identities and their teachers may be able to be best addressed through the development of meaningful and authentic relationships across these differences. If teachers can construct a sense of trust, safety, belonging and community with their students, students are more likely to express potential inconsistencies between teachers' assumptions about a particular behaviour or reaction to an incident and provide first-voice counter-narratives that better contextualize the student's location in and reaction to the situation.

For example, if Becky, Erica and Nancy had this type of relationship with their teacher, it would have increased the probability that they could have brought their respective concerns forward to create a level of awareness and understanding amongst their teachers to elicit a more culturally relevant response to their concerns. This learning by the teacher may have been able to have been applied with the necessary preparation to facilitate critical conversations, expand curriculum content, and challenge implicit racist/deficit thinking. The dialogue that is created because of this sense of trust, safety, and belonging could have informed the teachers’ insights and approaches, given the depth of their empathy for and relationships with their students.

Anti-racism

An anti-racist theory, as described by Dei (1996), extends the critical race theoretical framework identified and outlined.

> Anti-racism education may be defined as an action-oriented strategy for institutional, systemic change to address racism and the interlocking systems of social oppression. Anti-racism is a critical discourse of race and racism in society and of the continuing racializing of social groups for differential and unequal treatment. Anti-racism explicitly names the issue of race and social difference as issues of power and equity rather than as a matter of cultural and ethnic variety. (Dei, 1996, p. 25)

Anti-racist education extends the framework of critical race theory because it requires actions that are responsive to the barriers revealed that reflect the interest in decolonization, and the development of more Africentric spaces for Black learners. For example, the foundational recognition and acknowledgement that race is socially constructed through processes of racialization that dehumanize those othered, and that racism is an embedded reality in colonial societies provides the impetus for immediate action.

The systemic discomfort with racism expressed by the challenges of speaking about racism (Nelson, 2015) or the outright denial of differences (Dei, 1999) in the context of an anti-racist approach can no longer be employed to minimize the systemic responsibility to take up issues of racism. For example, Becky demonstrated her responsibility to be an anti-racist educator by making the request to her school to take the racialized and marginalized students into her classroom. This action-oriented response to her recognition of the existence and damage of racism on racialized students was the tipping point for taking up systemic racism despite the risk should she be unsuccessful in supporting the learning needs of her students. The resulting

benefit of Becky's Africentric classroom, beyond the academic success, is that it provided students with a sense of safety and belonging for a student to express their belief in the existence of racism and have it validated and affirmed by their teacher. The specific story that her student shares about his grandmother's recognition of the sacrifices made by Becky's grandmother is accessed to demand expectations from him of not "acting a fool" and evidences the existence of empathy, an authentic and meaningful relationship, a focus on student well-being and a commitment to teaching and learning as core characteristics of Becky.

In addition, Corey also demonstrates an anti-racist approach to the selection of material that he decides to include in his classroom. In the previous chapter, Corey uses the movie "Roots" (Margulies, 1977) as an example to describe his understanding that different students experience material differently, and this understanding needs to be applied to create a safer learning environment for racialized learners given their vulnerable location in conversations about race/racism.

Corey critically reflects on the preparation to set up an ability to facilitate conversations, selecting what images to share, calibrating the correct amount of emphasis on a topic as well as the delivery of the curriculum in the interest of the safety and well-being of his students. Kishimoto (2018) expresses the necessity of extending and adapting our understanding of anti-racist pedagogy, to go beyond current conceptions of what constitutes anti-racism efforts.

> Anti-racist pedagogy is not about simply incorporating racial content into courses, curriculum, and discipline. It is also about how one teaches, even in courses where race is not the subject matter. It begins with the faculty's awareness and self-reflection of their social position and leads to the application of this analysis not just in their teaching, but also in their discipline, research, and departmental, university, and community work. In

> other words, anti-racist pedagogy is an organizing effort for institutional and social change that is much broader than teaching in the classroom. (p. 540)

From an anti-racist perspective, this type of commitment to teaching and learning is required because it is necessary to go beyond what supports are required systemically because the needs of African Nova Scotian learners were not included at the centre.

Discussion

In addressing the research questions about how teachers of students of African ancestry are culturally responsive, and the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy, given the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia, it became evident that they have developed the necessary empathy that motivates them to commit to the needs of those students. Empathy, which emerged out of participants sharing their lived experiences with or exposure to marginalization, enabled many participants to be empathetic, concerned for, and respected for their perspective of being othered by the education system. This vulnerability supported participants' recognition and acknowledgement of the ways that colonial institutions enact hierarchies of support for some, and fail to meet the needs of those with more marginalized identities.

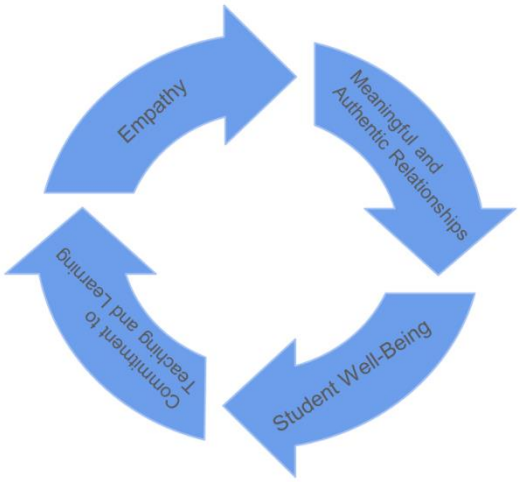
This awareness and understanding created a commitment by these teachers to unearth the core of these inequities, and become more aware of and responsive to these inequities as they emerge on a day-to-day basis for African Nova Scotian learners. Many participants sought to extend their awareness regarding the needs of their students, through developing meaningful and authentic relationships. These relationships support the development of a sense of safety, trust, belonging, and community between the teachers, students, and their families. In many instances, these teachers placed the needs and lived experiences of African Nova Scotian learners at the

center of their efforts to become more culturally relevant and responsive to the opportunity gaps experienced at school by Black students.

As a result of experiences with historical and ongoing institutional racism and intergenerational trauma, these culturally responsive teachers recognize a responsibility to focus on the well-being of African Nova Scotian students. The well-being of learners, who bring their own unique experiences of living in Nova Scotia to the classroom, who are naturally striving to be socially mobile and self-actualizing, are finding their way within the education system to be fraught with an added level of complexity. It requires of educators, an ability to frame, define, outline, and respond to the ways that racism is currently lived out and perpetuated with Black students.

Many research participants have internalized a commitment to teaching and learning, based on personal interests in being better able to address the existing opportunity gaps for African Nova Scotian learners. These culturally responsive teachers demonstrate their ongoing commitment by accessing professional development opportunities, and seeking support. For example, Nicole and Nancy enrolled in post-secondary graduate programs that focus on Africentric culturally relevant and responsive teaching, in order to expand their core knowledge. They also resist projecting any responsibility for the framing of education curriculum directed at African Nova Scotian learners.

Figure 2

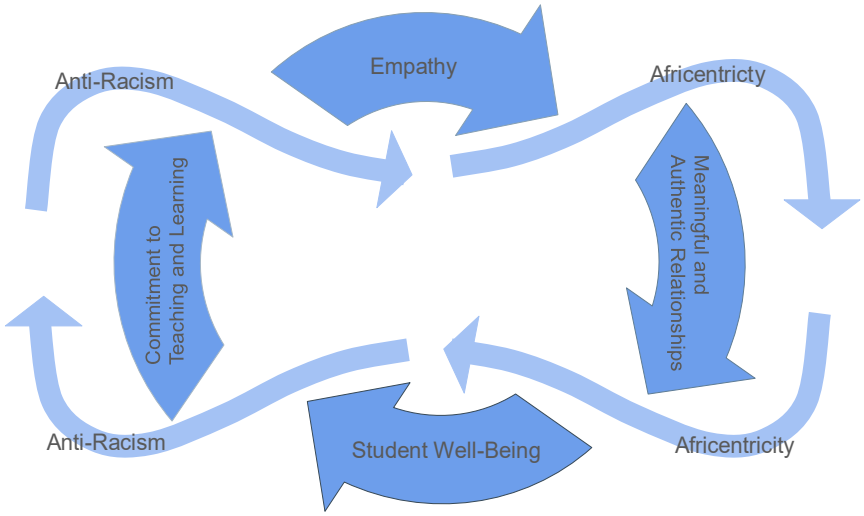


The application of each theory, like a camera, provides an opportunity to zoom in on the layers required to see, interpret, analyze, and respond to the complexity of each participant's insights, interpretations, and understandings as they relate to the themes that have emerged.

Africentricity demands the prioritization of the lived experiences and the cultural values, beliefs and ways of being from a holistic perspective that focuses on the social, emotional, and well-being of people of African ancestry against the impact and implications of colonialism. Africentricity, by prioritizing the lived experiences, cultural values, beliefs and ways of being of African Nova Scotians, requires ongoing interactions with students to support an ability to be more responsive to their needs. These understandings learned through authentic and meaningful relationships with students enable teachers to apply better judgment as it relates to responding to the impact of systemic racism. The quality of the relationship has an extended impact on the successful navigation between having high expectations for racialized students while accommodating the needs that are not being met because of systemic inequities and opportunity gaps.

Finally, anti-racism is an action-oriented approach to respond to the contextualization of the impact and implications of racism on the social and emotional well-being and academic success of African Nova Scotian learners described, organized and outlined by critical race theory. Because anti-racism is an action-oriented approach to responding to the impact of racism it most closely aligns with the theme of participant commitment to teaching and learning because of their interest in and commitment to becoming culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners.

Figure 3



I conclude with a reflection on the origins of my motivation and desire to conduct this research, and then provide a short summary of the study, identifying the main points that answer the research questions. Based on the findings, I provide recommendations for change. I also highlight the limitations of my research, and identify future research areas that could extend this inquiry.

Researcher Reflections on Sankofa: Origins and Motivation

At the beginning of this dissertation, I provided a personal narrative to contextualize the lived experiences of African Nova Scotians from my community in relation to the intentional "othering", systemic exclusion, and the historical and ongoing racism experienced by Black communities across this province. This was not only important but necessary to confront and challenge the dominant perceptions of African Nova Scotians as being deficient or inferior to white Nova Scotians. It is necessary to confront these narratives because of the success of racialization and racism, the attempt by the dominant group to erase our history from the education system while promoting Canada as an egalitarian and multicultural society, which

contradicts African Nova Scotians lived experiences. These realities have left Black people in this province vulnerable to the stereotypical summaries constructed and perpetuated by the very institutions that are required to serve us. The success of these dominant narratives has provided white representatives of our political, economic, judicial, and education systems a justification to the general population to diminish, explain away, ignore, and outright dismiss our claims and the calls to redress inequities that keep us at a disadvantage. In addition, it was also important to capture the irony and tensions between the Black community's reliance on the education system to provide us with opportunities for social mobility and self-actualization despite the system's failure to support African Nova Scotians learning, which has contributed to our marginalization and current vulnerabilities.

I expressed the psychological torment and moral dilemma confronting Black parents as it relates to the desires and hopes of wanting more and better for our children, while at the same time recognizing that the likelihood of being able to access this "success" in a Eurocentric system requires a rejection of the Black community's cultural values, beliefs and ways of being that perpetuate this harm and vulnerability. The systemic requirement for African Nova Scotians (including students and teachers) to assimilate away from their community compounds this psychological trauma of never being able to fully fit into the Eurocentric/colonial community and can eliminate or fracture the sense of safety, belonging, and trust from one's home community. I evidence this conflictual relationship of African Nova Scotian community members with the education system by referencing the literature, including numerous reports, recommendations, reviews and policy reforms that collectively capture and characterize the historical and ongoing systemic racism experienced by Black learners in this province. This foundational understanding is necessary for a meaningful and authentic critical reflection on

what is required to ensure that any educational reform centres the social, emotional, cultural and academic needs of African Nova Scotian learners. This reality is what motivated me to conduct this study.

In recognizing my location in this conversation as a "credentialed" benefactor of Eurocentric and colonial education systems, I committed to prioritizing the voices of African Nova Scotian community members in selecting teacher participants for my study. I accomplished this goal by developing and applying a research methodology and methods that empowered the community to speak their truth regarding who they believed met or were meeting the social, emotional, cultural, and academic needs of African Nova Scotian learners, while at the same time accessing my lived and professional experiences to critically analyze, reflect on, and explore my research questions: How are teachers of students of African ancestry culturally responsive? What are the fundamental characteristics and approaches to culturally responsive pedagogy in the context of the history and experiences of people of African ancestry in Nova Scotia?

Summary

Chapter 6 demonstrates the ways in which an application of the theoretical framework that includes Africentricity, anti-racism, and CCRP onto an understanding of the themes and characteristics, can be utilized to both analyze and/or enhance the understanding of responsiveness to African Nova Scotian learners. The lenses of the four theories connect with, overlap, and intertwine with each theme, and provide a fluidity to respond to the research questions. The interconnectedness between the themes of empathy, meaningful and authentic relationships, well-being, and a commitment to teaching and learning, supports and aligns with a required foundational social, emotional and academic commitment to African Nova Scotian

learners as captured in, for example, student performance and school climate data. Teacher recognition of the core need to validate, affirm, and become responsive to the lived experiences, opportunity gaps, and cultural needs of African Nova Scotian learners, given the current inequities being perpetuated by the education system, is a necessary and foundational understanding to resist the impact and implications of deficit thinking on marginalized learners.

This final chapter provides a comprehensive review of the study, summarizing the significance of the of the findings that support teachers in being more culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. I include recommendations in the interest of improving teacher recruitment, training, and professional development opportunities for pre-service and in-service educators, with the intention of interrupting policies, practices and procedures that perpetuate inequities, by exploring alternative, more equitable approaches.

The research participants in the study were identified by the African Nova Scotian community as being culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners because they demonstrated (a) an ability to develop students academically, (b) a willingness to nurture and support cultural competence, and (c) a development of sociopolitical or critical consciousness within their students (Ladson-Billings, 1995). They also worked to validate and affirm their students by using the cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate, which is more responsive to the opportunity gaps and school climate concerns (Gay, 2010). In other words, these participants prioritized: (1) the value of growth and learning to academic success, (2) the necessity of creating safer learning environments, so that students can bring their full selves into the space, while teaching learners to effectively and respectfully communicate across their differences, and (3) the importance of teaching students to critically reflect on whether or not

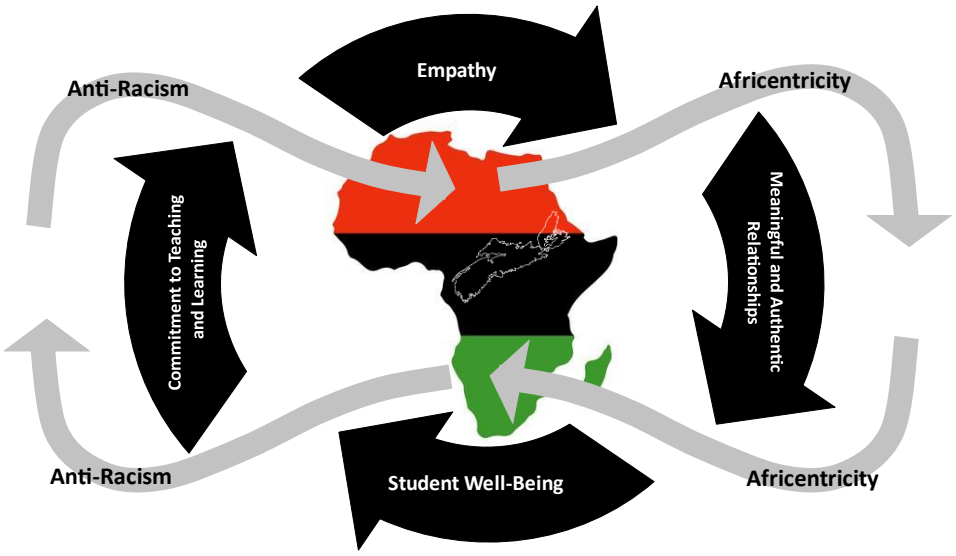
systems and individuals preserve the human rights and dignity of every individual, and to take action to address these inequities.

The fundamental characteristics and themes that enabled these teachers to be more culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners were a demonstration of empathy regarding their own struggles that inspired an internalized responsibility to commit to the social, emotional, and cultural health and academic needs of their students. This responsibility to their students was expressed through an interest in developing meaningful and authentic relationships with their students/community, a focus on student well-being in response to the needs that were identified through these relationships, and a commitment to teaching and learning that focused on what they could do to be more responsive, from content and curriculum to pedagogical, and social and emotional ways in addressing the opportunity gaps experienced by their students. In addition to the emergence of the themes and analysis as described in Chapters 5, and 6 demonstrated a cyclical, interwoven and reciprocal interaction between the themes and theoretical framework.

Figure 3 demonstrates the potential transformative opportunity that exists in the meaningful and authentic focus on, and applications of these themes, characteristics, and theoretical frameworks to envelop the whole African Nova Scotian learners as represented by the continent of Africa and the province of Nova Scotia at the centre. The inclusion of the black (representing the people), red (representing the struggle) and green (representing the land) in this diagram symbolizes our origins as people of African ancestry, from the continent to our current location in Nova Scotia. It also demonstrates the required transformation from Eurocentric ways of being to inclusive Africentric environments, that enable African Nova Scotians to speak our truth, be heard, and be responded to with dignity and respect. An ongoing critical reflection and

analysis of the efforts of a culturally relevant and responsive teacher is necessary to continue to seek out, understand, and respond to the ever-evolving needs of African Nova Scotian learners. This commitment is a journey, not a destination, since this work is not easy. It is necessary to ensure a more fair and equitable learning opportunity for African Nova Scotian learners.

Figure 3



The findings from this study inform an ability to make recommendations, that can promote more effective responsiveness to the current gaps in facilitating opportunities to redress these inequities. In many instances, it means critically reflecting on the ongoing harm and inequities that are being perpetuated, while being aware of the ways that current policies, practices, and procedures are operating simultaneously in insidious ways.

Key Recommendations (Kujichagulia Self-Determination)

Based on the findings of this research, I offer the following recommendations:

Recommendation #1

I recommend teacher recruitment from historically underserved marginalized communities, with a specific focus on African Nova Scotians, to increase the probability of teachers recognizing inequities in the system, and having a commitment to support students who are underserved.

The focus on African Nova Scotian teacher recruitment will increase the probability that Black educators will demonstrate the necessary empathy and understanding regarding the circumstances of African Nova Scotian learners. These teachers will have had firsthand lived experiences as students in the education system, as well as the localized/regional cultural awareness to support the social, emotional, and cultural needs of Black students. These recruitment efforts would require a deliberate and focused effort to interrupt the exclusionary momentum of Eurocentric and colonial institutions. These institutions have failed to appropriately support and position African Nova Scotian learners, to not only graduate from public schools, but have denied them opportunities or representation to participate within those organizations.

It is important to encourage critical reflection on admissions criteria that continues to exclude potential Bachelor of Education students from entering teaching. The intention is to transform these criteria to be more equitable and inclusive of the needs of African Nova Scotian community members interested in teaching, especially those currently working in the education system.

Recommendation #2

I recommend including the historic and contemporary challenges, contributions, and lived experiences of African Nova Scotians in the formal curriculum, from grades primary through to grade 12. Including this content in the curriculum, and making it accessible in all public schools would counter dominant narratives that promote "deficit thinking" and the racism experienced by African Nova Scotians. These learning/understandings could reduce the current gaps in knowledge and uphill battles to build a collective understanding regarding the systemic failure of the Nova Scotian education system to educate Black students towards the development of a critical mass of citizens who can see, understand, and speak to the need for the education systems to be more culturally relevant and responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners.

This content and curriculum development process ought to include a "truth and reconciliation" (Canadian Teachers' Federation, 2016) aspect that would enable those African Nova Scotian community members still living with and processing the trauma they experienced at the hands of a systemically racist education system. I describe these community members as the "walking wounded" because throughout the focus group process, many traumatic experiences were expressed regarding incidences of exclusion, humiliation, and violence, that in some cases contributed to a sense of shame or internalized racism that had people claiming that they were never very good at school, despite the clear violations of their human rights. An ability to organize and provide these first voice narratives to educators and students regarding the Black school experience would support educators in contextualizing the necessity to take up and take on these issues.

Marginalized and vulnerable communities require educational options to pursue the curriculum that is of most value to who they are and what knowledge they value the most as it

relates to their self-actualization and social mobility. Pursuing self-actualization and social mobility will require the autonomy of African Nova Scotian communities to develop their own outcomes and curriculum towards their communal interests and investment in achieving these goals, much like the Acadian School Board.

Recommendation #3

Post-secondary systems, Bachelor of Education, and graduate education programs must include critical theoretical frameworks that empower teachers to critically reflect, analyze, organize, and challenge the ways that the education systems fail to meet the needs of marginalized learners. This criticality is necessary to build the capacity to immediately intervene on behalf of African Nova Scotian learners. This will require a specific focus on decolonization, Africentricity, critical race theory, and anti-racism as it relates to African Nova Scotian learners. Nesting these theoretical frameworks in a culturally relevant and responsive framework that demands equal success of student growth/learning (academic success), an ability to effectively/respectfully communicate across our differences (cultural competence) and the development of a socio-political consciousness that provides students with an ability to critically reflect on the ways that systems work against learners' abilities to self-actualize and act against their marginalization.

Post-secondary offerings must also require mandatory curricula and content that contextualizes the lived experiences of people of African ancestry, that resist “deficit thinking” and racism, and that will empower their graduates with an ability to be more responsive to the needs of African Nova Scotian learners. In addition, the expectations that teachers will be culturally relevant and responsive to all their students’ needs are embedded in the inclusive

education policy (DEECD, 2019, p. 1) and in the Nova Scotia teaching standards (DEECD, 2018, p. 2).

This is why I propose the development of Africentric cohorts for students from pre-school to high school and throughout post-secondary educational experiences to avoid assimilationist messaging, and approaches in the dominant Eurocentric institutions. Eurocentric institutions normalize these inequities through racism and deficit thinking which contribute to the internalized racism, self-doubt, policing, punishment and sense of inferiority of Black learners, which can be countered by an Africentric cohort because there is strength in numbers and unity.

The ability to explore, and construct a cultural centre or true north for learners of African Nova Scotian/African Ancestry through the development of an Africentric experience/cohort is essential to navigating and negotiating the framework of culturally relevant pedagogy as laid out by Ladson-Billings and the academic target will have been developed for us and by us, the cultural competence will be uninhibited by being delivered by someone outside of the culture. The exploration of other cultural groups will be more critical and illuminating as there is a clearer lens that they are being interpreted through because you have started by centering your own culture by including the inequities in power as a central factor. The final intentionality is of movement towards a social and political consciousness that centres on validation and affirmation of our collective humanity or Ubuntu.

Recommendation #4

I recommend the development of multiple public-school options for capturing the expressed unique needs of African Nova Scotian learners that include opportunities to access Africentric cohorts and programming in schools currently, as well as the development of regional Africentric schools that provide an ability to more effectively centre and be responsive to the

needs of African Nova Scotian learners. This responsiveness in a fully Africentric school can be addressed through the representation of African Nova Scotian Educators, curriculum and content offerings, pedagogical approaches, as well as more culturally responsive incident management regarding current disproportional suspension rates and a focus on developing high expectations, with adequate supports, intervention and oversight to ensure student performance expectations/success.

Recommendation #5

I recommend the development of Black affinity groups for both Black students and Black professionals in education that create safe(r) spaces and places to negotiate conversations that address issues of trauma experienced by being Black in predominantly white spaces. These Black affinity spaces should seek to afford creative opportunities for participants to become responsive to current support mechanisms that are required for authentic and meaningful systemic inclusion of the contributions of both Black students and staff. As well, educational opportunities should be developed to explore theoretical frameworks that can help organize solutions to the negative impact of Eurocentricity.

Recommendation #6

I recommend the development of an Equity, Diversity, Inclusion and Anti-Racism (EDIAR) Justice League committee that accesses representation of the unique and nuanced needs of different equity-seeking communities and unifies communities in developing a more comprehensive, systemic and intersectional response to these inequities. Such a committee should be established at all levels of the educational infrastructure, including the university, department, centre of education, and school levels. The focus of the EDIAR justice league committees will be to minimize/eliminate the institutional hierarchal silos that dimmish or

redirect systemic responsibilities and commitments to change and create much-needed allyship and solidarity to ensure meaningful responsiveness.

Recommendation #7

I recommend the immediate development and application of Professional Development (PD) for educators to interrupt the current harmful and exclusionary elements of the education system; these PD sessions need to include:

A. An exploration of their positionality as educators across the system from classroom teachers to principals, to central office and departmental staff.

B. An ongoing critical self-reflection regarding the ways that they can express/explore the central characteristics and themes identified in this study which includes their ability/effectiveness at/in: being empathetic towards the needs of their racialized/marginalized learners; developing authentic and meaningful relationships across their differences with their students; centering their student's safety and well-being; and demonstrating their ongoing commitment to teaching learning in the interest of their students' social, emotional, cultural and academic growth and development.

C. The development of an awareness/understanding of the theoretical frameworks that support their ongoing critical reflection and analysis of their roles and responsibilities to African Nova Scotian learners, including decolonization, Africentricity, Critical Race, and anti-racist theoretical frameworks.

Future Research

I am interested in further exploring, more specifically, the application of the strategies characterized by participants as potential exemplars for curriculum, content and pedagogical

approaches in support of more culturally relevant and responsive professional development supports. I suggest extending this study to in-class observations of teachers.

In addition, I experienced the resistance applied by some in leadership who prioritized their own fear and vulnerability over the impact of the current systemic racism and inequities experienced by racialized students within their region. Therefore, I am interested in exploring the way that representatives of the education system in leadership capacities understand their responsibility to respond to systemic racism exemplified by disproportional representation in suspensions rooted in school climate concerns and student performance issues identified through streaming in non-academic programs and provincial assessments.

Another future research area would be to explore the impact and implications of the current power imbalances between the African Nova Scotian infrastructure's organizational reliance on government funding to fulfill the commitments to their mandates. A research question might be, in what ways do the African Nova Scotian communities' lack of autonomy and resources impact the ability to address areas of disproportional representation of African Nova Scotian learners as it relates to school climate concerns and student performance opportunity gaps? What actions and or initiatives address identified areas of concern?

Finally, the recent announcement of an Africentric Bachelor of Education cohort, with a specific focus on recruitment of African Nova Scotian student support workers at Acadia University, in partnership with the Delmore Buddy Daye Learning Institute, initiated a potential research question that I am interested in exploring. My recent work in the BEd programs at Mount Saint Vincent and Acadia universities, has been focused on building cultural competencies in predominantly white pre-service teachers. I am keenly interested in exploring issues experienced by predominantly white pre-service teachers in comparison with African

Nova Scotian pre-service teachers' lived experience and understanding of culturally relevant and responsive teaching and learning approaches.

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