(EN)COUNTERING WHITE NOISE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF HOW STUDENTS OF COLOR EXPERIENCE AND NAVIGATE RURAL, PREDOMINANTLY WHITE HIGH SCHOOLS

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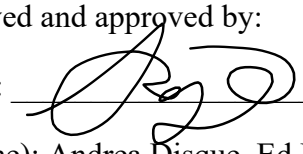
Dissertation Chair Signature: 

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ABSTRACT

The omission of students' of Color experiences from education research reconstitutes political and social narratives that determine who belongs in literal and symbolic spatial contexts in the United States. Meanwhile, racial opportunity gaps emerge in the schoolhouse and endure over the course of the lifespan because educational attainment is a catalyst for economic mobility and other positive life outcomes. The problem addressed in this study was the dearth of research exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools. Using narrative inquiry, the aim of this study was to disrupt normative White perspectives (individual and institutional) by building counternarratives that center experiences of students of Color to inform school structures (processes, policies, procedures, curriculum, climate, culture) that impact the overall wellbeing and outcomes resulting from students' of Color sense of belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools. Underwritten by theories of visibility and belonging, this study explored the experiences of six students of Color who attended rural, predominantly White high schools across the state of Maine. Analysis of semi-structured interviews with participants revealed four findings: (1) the complexity of and synergism between hypervisibility, invisibility, and singularity, (2) reflections on and understandings of White peer (pathways toward and intentions of) engagement with race, (3) navigational strategies designed toward belonging, and (4) expressions of advocacy for systems level change. These findings suggest policy and practical implications for school districts and educational leaders to consider as they work to cultivate inclusive educational environments where all students feel a sense of belonging.

Keywords: *Rural schools, predominantly White high schools, students of Color, colorblind, divisive concepts, visibility, belonging*

DEDICATION

To those who came before, I am because you were.

To all who nurtured me within the bosom of education, but especially Jon Appleby, Gisele Birmingham, Monica Chiu, Martha Couture, Rick Dennison, Josh Gould, Courtney Marshall, Jacqueline McCurry, Petar Ramadanovic, Michael Rombeiro, Carrie Ruggiano, Tracy Whitten and most especially to Reginald Wilburn, for telling this first-generation college student to privilege what she brings to the table.

To G, for working through early iterations of the interview design, for sharing yourself so freely. To T, for demanding a meeting on your first day at a new school to ask where all the students of Color were, for being vulnerable and brave.

To the study participants, for sharing your stories with me. May the work we did together contribute to creating educational spaces where every student feels they belong and where they are empowered to live in the fullest expressions of themselves.

To those who have not yet arrived, may you carry the work forward.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Race is the primary mechanism for boundary making processes that determine who belongs in literal and symbolic spatial contexts in the United States (Mills, 2007). Everyday social interactions and practices are embedded within hegemonic and hierarchical racial structures and narratives (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Glass & Berry, 2022) that are fundamental to the architecture of America (Alexander, 2011; Glass & Berry, 2022). Primary among them is colorblind ideology; though "colorblindness has been extolled as a way forward, leaving behind the racist history of the US" (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2019, p. 9), studies show that racial inequities in education, healthcare, housing, and more have remained largely the same since the 1960s (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Glass & Berry, 2022). Colorblindness is *not* the physical act of not seeing color but rather the refusal, denial and evasion of seeing color (Jupp et al., 2019). As Arrivé (2020) contends, *not* seeing is a way of seeing.

But, with George Floyd's body lying in the street in May of 2020, America was forced to bear witness (Latrice Martin, 2022). Video of Floyd's death captured by onlookers, who were paralyzed by a power differential and confined to a position of surveillance, documented the final nine minutes and 46 seconds of his life (Latrice Martin, 2022), which culminated in a guttural cry for his mama (CNN, 2020). What followed was a racial reckoning (Hamilton, 2021; Latrice Martin, 2022) that was countered with an orchestrated and intentional political and social backlash, consistent with the historical pattern of racial progress (Cohn-Vargas, 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Latrice Martin, 2022). Synchronically with social unrest was the convergence of a global pandemic, a destabilized economy, and a polarizing presidential election (Martin, 2022). These social and political constellations, in a relationship of reciprocity, had implications on and were implicated within public education (Groundwater et al., 2022).

In one of many current iterations, resistance to racial justice took the form of divisive concepts legislation that aimed to restrict race-related conversations within governmental institutions and educational systems (Hamilton, 2021). Divisive concepts legislation, birthed in a quixotically colorblind society, were enacted and exacted to stymie racial progress (Brownstein, 2022; Cohn-Vargas, 2021; Latrice Martin, 2022; Mitchell, 2021; Ray & Gibbons, 2021). Undergirded by colorblind ideology and personal hostility, divisive concepts legislation adversely and disproportionately impacts students of Color within the American public education system (Hamilton, 2021; Lee 2022) —a system already characterized by heavily documented and irrefutable disparate opportunities, experiences, and outcomes for students of Color (Glass & Berry, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021; Williams et al., 2020). Meanwhile, racial opportunity gaps emerge in the schoolhouse and endure over the course of the lifespan because "educational attainment is a runway for economic mobility" (Cohen, 2022, p. 179).

The dichotomy of colorblindness and racism creates a double bind for students of Color and more distinctly for students of Color who attend predominantly White institutions (Rogers et al., 2021). Onlying experiences (Ruggiano, 2022), microaggressions (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021), racial trauma (Grimes & Roosma, 2022), and cultural and racial hierarchies (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021) contour school environments which may therefore hinder or foreclose belonging to students of Color (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). Grimes and Roosma (2022) postulate, "These experiences *may* be even more pronounced for Students of Color in rural communities, particularly predominantly White rural communities where Students of Color may be smaller in number" [emphasis added] (and therefore hypervisible *and* invisible) (p. 46).

However, the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White schools have not been studied (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022).

Rural spaces are largely mischaracterized as White spaces in the American imagination (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). Yet the racial and ethnic composition of rural America is progressively shifting (Johnson & Lichter, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Changing demographics beget "a demographic imperative" (Jupp et al., 2019, p. 2) that demands the conceptual expansion of rural spaces (Johnson & Lichter, 2022). As the public-school student population grows increasingly racially diverse, schools remain segregated at levels comparable to pre-Brown v. Board of Education (Tatum, 2017). According to the United States Government Accountability Office that collected data reflective of the 2020-2021 school year, over 33% of students attend majority single-race schools, where approximately 75% or more students are reportedly of a single race or ethnicity; similarly, 14% of students attend majority single-race schools where 90% or more students are reportedly of a single race or ethnicity (Nowicki et al., 2022). The highest rates of school segregation occur in the Northeast (Nowicki et al., 2022; Tatum, 2017); the state of Maine, where the present study was conducted, educates the most racially homogeneous students in the country (Showalter et al., 2019).

Despite an increasingly diverse American student body, the teaching and administrative staff in public schools has steadily remained predominantly White. In fact, 79.3% of America's public-school teachers are White (NCES, 2020), while 45% of America's students are White (NCES, 2023). Said another way, an American public-school teaching staff that is 79% White is teaching an American public-school student body that is 55% Black, Asian, Pacific Islander, Latinx, Native American, Alaskan Native, or two or more races (NCES, 2023).

White school systems cogitate the experiences of students of Color within their institutions (Mitchell, 2021; Stoll, 2019) in the absence of educational research exploring the phenomena (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). Bonilla-Silva (2022) notes that because Whites experience the highest levels of social and spatial isolation (further intensified in rural communities) they develop a "White *habitus*, a racialized, uninterrupted socialization process that *conditions* and *creates* Whites' racial taste, perceptions, feeling, and emotions and their view on racial matters" (p. 172). The result is "a sense of group belonging (a White culture of solidarity)" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022, p. 172) which is expressed in educational research and which has implications on the system of public education, shepherded by predominantly White staff.

The body of educational research pertaining to rural schools is scant, and the experiences of students of *Color* within rural, predominantly White contexts are under researched (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). Of particular note is the paucity of research examining rural school climate, which is especially crucial given the essential role rural schools play in the lives of students while also "presenting unique contextual challenges that require additional consideration" (Nguyen et al., 2021, p. 464). Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) note the urgency on attending to the needs of rural school districts as legislators and educators seek to "better understand how America can equitably serve and educate all its children" (p. 81).

Definition of Key Terms

Colorblind Ideology. Colorblind ideology is the predominant racial narrative in America; those who ascribe to colorblind ideology either deny seeing skin color at all or deny its relevance (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Kendi, 2019; Stoll, 2019; Tatum, 2017). Bonilla-Silva (2022) proposes four frames of colorblind racism that are operationalized to explain the disparate social,

economic, and political opportunities and outcomes for people of Color: "Abstract liberalism (explaining racial matters in an abstract, decontextualized manner), naturalization (naturalizing racialized outcomes such as neighborhood segregation), cultural racism, (attributing racial differences to cultural practices), and minimization of racism" (p. 216).

Critical Race Theory. Critical Race Theory was reared in Legal Studies and is a way of looking at the world through the lens of race (Chapman et al., 2013). Critical Race Theory contends that race is a social construct and that racism is structurally embedded within systems and institutions. Relative to the present study, race "remains one of the most important characteristics in relation to how people experience education and the kinds of outcomes that they are likely to achieve" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1019).

Divisive Concepts Legislation. Divisive concepts legislation, specific to the context of the present study, is any education legislation following and modeled after Executive Order 13950 (an order enacted on September 22, 2020 which banned the inclusion of divisive concepts—explicitly named as race and sex—from federal trainings), such as Anti Critical Race Theory (CRT) legislation and transparency laws, that defines and bans the teaching of "divisive concepts" such as race (National Coalition for History, 2023).

Predominantly White. Predominantly White is a characteristic of a population, place, or other context wherein greater than 50% of people are racially identified as White (Bourke, 2016).

Rural. Rural, for the purpose of the present study, is constitutive generally of space that is not urban or metropolitan (United States Census Bureau, 2023).

Students of Color. Students of Color are defined as Black students, Latinx students, Asian American students, Pacific Islander students, Native American students, or students who belong to two or more racial groups (NCES, 2023).

Statement of the Problem

The American classroom has become a "contested space" (Farrington, 2020, p. 163) where racial discourse has been banned or restricted (Dee, 2022; Hamilton, 2021; Mitchell, 2021). The predominantly White public school staff (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Slaton et al., 2023) encultured in hyper segregated White spaces that are not seen as racialized spaces (Bonilla-Silva, 2022), is largely unprepared or reluctant to engage in conversations on race (Jupp et al., 2019). Additionally, school staff have come to fear retaliation by district administration, by school boards, or by the community for practicing color consciousness (Nino & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Showalter et al., 2019), and White teachers in particular fear being sanctioned or regarded as racist for talking about race given the conflation of color consciousness with racism in the national narrative (Groundwater et al., 2022; Hamilton, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Wise, 2021). Racial dialogue is further repressed in White, rural contexts where economic oppression and racial oppression are often forced into a false binary where meritocracy prevails (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020). Meritocracy is perhaps more focalized in Northern rural areas, where the present study was conducted, with a proclivity toward rugged individualism (Riel, 2021).

Racial silence *may* deny students of Color, and particularly students of Color in predominantly White educational contexts, a school-based framework for understanding their lived social realities of racism (Saleem et al., 2022). Navigating the system of education, particularly in a predominantly White context, without a schema, without a language for making sense of it, *may* have an impact on students' of Color educational engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, identity, visibility, and belonging (Farrington, 2020; Rogers et al., 2021). For students of Color, experiences of racism without an arrangement of theorization "can trigger mistrust, sap

energy, and provoke feelings of anger, grief, inferiority, or shame" (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021, p. 14) with deleterious effects on belonging, which is an already difficult construct for adolescents but one that bears significantly on development and on lifetime outcomes (Allen et al., 2021).

Rural schools are often neglected in education research (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Robson et al., 2019; Ruggiano, 2022). Because rural spaces "are too often misconceived as White spaces" (Grimes & Roosma, 2022, p. 44), the experiences of students of [C]olor within rural, predominantly White contexts are most notably under researched (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). The omission of students' of Color experiences from educational research (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Farrington, 2020; Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Joseph et al., 2016; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020; Mayfield, 2021; Riel, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Ruggiano, 2022) reconstitutes national narratives (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Kendi, 2019; Mills, 2007; Tatum, 2017) in place designed to other, to determine who is and is not seen (Brighenti, 2010; Edenborg, 2017), to determine who does and does not belong (Edenborg, 2017; Yuval-Davis, 2006)—particularly in light of the demography of school staff and boards (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2020; Stoll, 2019). The present study heeded Yull's (2014) call for educational stakeholders to analyze the spatial and racial nuances in rural communities, "to look at racial phenomena through a lens of space" (p. 11), to better understand student experiences.

While schools and their governing bodies make decisions about school operations– to include policies, procedures, practices, climate, and culture– representation and research do not include the experiences of students of Color (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Farrington, 2020; Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Joseph et al., 2016; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020; NCES, 2020; Mayfield, 2021; Riel, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Ruggiano, 2022; Stoll, 2019). The paradox of

hypervisibility and invisibility (states of visibility with degrees to which one is able to see or be seen) for students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools is exacerbated by White power structures (e.g. school boards, administrative teams, leadership committees, diversity committees) (Stoll, 2019) evaluating and determining the efficacy of initiatives aimed at equity in education, as determined by these same bodies and their governing authorities (Stoll, 2019). In this assessment model, "whites cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority […that] whites out [the] testimony, […] perspective, and […] conceptual and theoretical insights" [...] of people of Color (Mills, 2007, p. 34)**.** The result is an echo chamber of White noise (Bonilla-Silva, 2022), defined as "a constant background noise, especially one that drowns out other sounds" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.).

Education proper is a predominantly White institution (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Stoll, 2019) that engenders well-documented disparate educational experiences, opportunities, and outcomes for students of Color (Glass & Berry, 2022; Rogers et al., 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021; Williams et al., 2020); however, strong sense of school belonging for students of Color can mitigate disparate opportunities and outcomes that reach beyond the schoolhouse and last beyond the school years (Margolius et al., 2020; Wise, 2022). Bolstering students' of Color sense of school belonging has been shown to close the opportunity gap by 50% to 60% (Allen, 2021; Cohen, 2022). Yet, almost nothing is known about "the inferences people make about their belonging and their understanding of why they do or do not belong" or about "how people wade through […] incoming social signals to draw conclusions about the degree to which they are accepted and belong" (qtd. in Allen et al., 2022, p. 1149). The present study was influenced by Foucault's (1977/1995) consideration of space as inextricable from visibility and power and was particularly concerned with the theory of visibility as an "incoming

social signal" in relation to processes of belonging and othering in rural, predominantly White spaces. Though hypervisibility of people of Color through surveillance has been heavily researched and documented (Alexander, 2011; Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Kendi, 2019), visibility of people of Color as a device toward recognition and belonging is absent from the research.

Researchers highlight the need for future belonging research centered around youth voice (Margolius et al., 2020; Schall et al., 2016), especially because the lived reality of school for students is not captured by the perspective of school-based adults (Schall et al., 2016). Relative to the present study, little is known about how students of Color experience and navigate ("steer a course through [the] medium [of]" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.)) rural, predominantly White high schools. The problem addressed in this study was the dearth of research investigating the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Students of Color were defined as students who identify as Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, or two or more races (NCES, 2023). Rural, predominantly White high schools were defined as schools that are situated within geographic spaces that are not urban or metropolitan and whose student populations in grades 9 through 12 are racially identified as majority (greater than 50%) White.

Research Questions and Design

Research questions evolve throughout the research process (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019) and are central to every facet of the research design (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The research questions anchoring the present study were written with the intent of eliciting participants' lived

experiences involving the phenomena of the present study (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The research questions that guided this qualitative narrative inquiry were:

Research Question 1: How do students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 2: How do students of Color experience and navigate visibility in rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 3: How do students of Color experience and navigate belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools?

The present study adopted an approach of narrative inquiry and applied a theoretical framework, which served as both the frame for and lens of the study, rooted in visibility (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) and belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) theories. Participants were identified through homogeneous purposive sampling, marked by "membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 208); relative to the present study, participants were unified in the shared experience of attending a rural, predominantly White public high school in the state of Maine as a student of Color. The primary method for data collection was semi-structured interviews. Qualitative data was collected from the "experiential knowledge of [students] of [C]olor [engaged in] nam[ing] [their] own reality" (Chapman et al., 2013, p. 1021). Interview transcripts were reviewed by the researcher for accuracy. Data was then coded primarily through In Vivo coding ("use of the participants' own words") (Volpe White, 2019, 7:55), and bucketed into narrative threads in response to the primary research questions of the study. Restoried narratives were sent to participants for member checking. When the member checking process was complete, themes were developed from individual

restoried narratives. Chapter 4 chronicles a collective narrative, informed by the themes identified within and across individual participant narratives.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

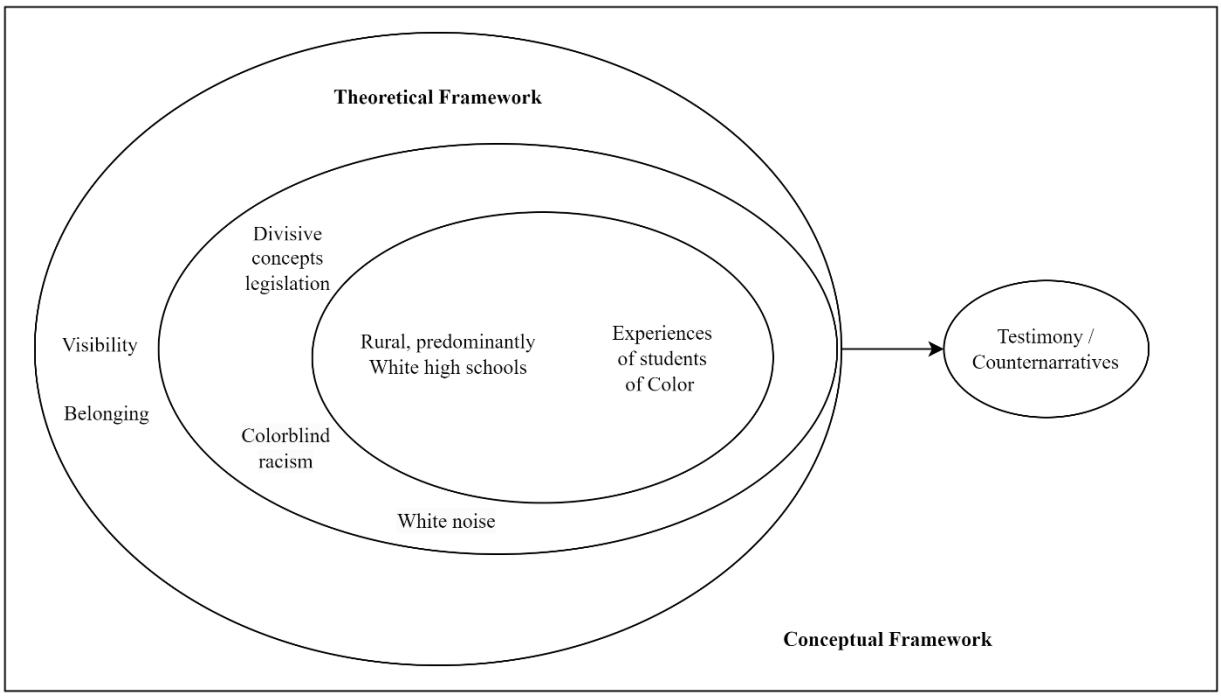
Conceptual frameworks are cobbled with materials "borrowed from elsewhere" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016, p. 7). Those materials, the foundational elements of the study, ~~(concepts)~~ are identified, specified, and defined by the researcher (Grant & Osanloo, 2014) who further delineates relationships between them (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016 The conceptual framework is, therefore, specific to the researcher and is both a product of and tool for the researcher's investigation (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). As an artifact of the researcher's personal interest and topical research, the conceptual framework contextualizes the situatedness of the researcher (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016) and encapsulates the researcher's positionality (identity, background, experience, interests and goals) (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The conceptual framework presents the researcher's "epistemological and ontological worldview and approach" to the research which clearly contours the study (Grant & Osanloo, 2014, p. 17).

The conceptual framework demarcates the confines of the study– what is included, why, and how (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) present the conceptual framework as the connective tissue that fuses the constructs of the research problem with the practice of examining the problem. To that end, the conceptual framework asserts the importance of the research, substantively and methodologically (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016); that is, the conceptual framework argues why a study is worth doing, why it matters and how it should be done (Grant & Osanloo, 2014; Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

The conceptual framework supporting the present study was designed around students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools (see Figure 1). Students of Color, who now constitute the majority of people under the age of 18 (Frey, 2022), are largely invisible in rural education research, already defined by its barrenness (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Nguyen et al., 2021; Robson et al., 2019; Ruggiano, 2022). Extant literature explores microaggressions (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021), onlying experiences (Ruggiano, 2022), colorblind ideology in contrast with experienced racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Jones et al., 2021; Riel, 2021; Stoll, 2019), and cultural and racial hierarchies (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021). The present study contributes to rural education research and to education research more generally pertaining to the experiences of students of Color, specifically in predominantly White contexts *from the perspectives and through the voices of students of Color*. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual and theoretical framework of the present study.

Figure 1

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework of the Present Study



Note. Adapted from "Where Do I Belong?: Gender and/or Sexual Minority Students and Leaders in International Schools" by D. Beam, 2022, *Doctor of Education Program Dissertations*. (https://dune.une.edu/edu_diss/4).

Theoretical Framework

> I found a place of sanctuary in 'theorizing,' in making sense out of what was happening. I found a place where I could imagine possible futures, a place where life could be lived differently.
>
> -bell hooks, *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom* (1994)

The theoretical framework is encased within the conceptual framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016) and offers both a grounding and a raising. The theoretical framework grounds a

study by providing an established foundation of knowledge within which to root (Anfara & Mertz, 2005; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Grant & Osanloo, 2014); it further raises a study by proffering a particular, structured way of seeing and understanding the world (Brighenti, 2017; hooks, 1994). Grant and Osanloo (2014) analogize the theoretical framework with blueprints that guide the study while also mapping how the researcher will "philosophically, epistemologically, methodologically, and analytically approach" the study (p. 13). To that end, the theoretical framework informs the problem and purpose statements, research questions, and research design (Anfara & Mertz, 2015; Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Grant & Osanloo, 2014).

Belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) form the theoretical framework for and so undergird the present study. The central tenet of belonging theory is that humans have an innate, even primordial need for belonging that originates from the interdependence needed to survive– as an individual and as the collective human family (Allen, 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Samuel, 2022). Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest, "Belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food" (p. 498). Understood in this way, the need to belong "is a deeply rooted human motivation that, underpinned by our ancestral origins, permeates our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1134). Cohen (2022) and Samuel (2022) refer to belonging within a collective where one is not only cared for, valued, and respected but where one is also conferred with the power to participate in purposefully and meaningfully contributory ways. Consequently, the dimension of belonging within a community, to include within a school community, is tied to purpose, agency, power, participation, value, care, and respect (Cohen, 2022; Samuel, 2022).

Aligned with the connection between belonging theory and human behavior, school belonging is a necessary precursor to adolescent function as a student and to overall wellbeing (Korpershoek et al., 2020). Belonging is correlated with physical, mental, social, behavioral, and economic outcomes (Allen et al., 2021; Wise, 2022). Academic outcomes and sense of belonging are more than just corollaries, they are "mutually reinforcing" (Louie et al., 2022, p. 4). Research shows that positive outcomes in adolescence translate to positive outcomes in adulthood, and so feelings of school belonging can have implications across the lifespan (Wise, 2022). In a longitudinal study involving 14,800 adolescents, Allen (2021) found the power of a sense or lack of school belonging endured beyond the schoolhouse and beyond the school years. Moreover, Allen (2021) exposes a gap between the theory of belonging and the practice of belonging resulting from "the societal-level effects of a lack of belonging" (p. 86). Blending the theory of belonging and the practice of belonging is critical to understanding and feeling belonging (Bacon, 2022).

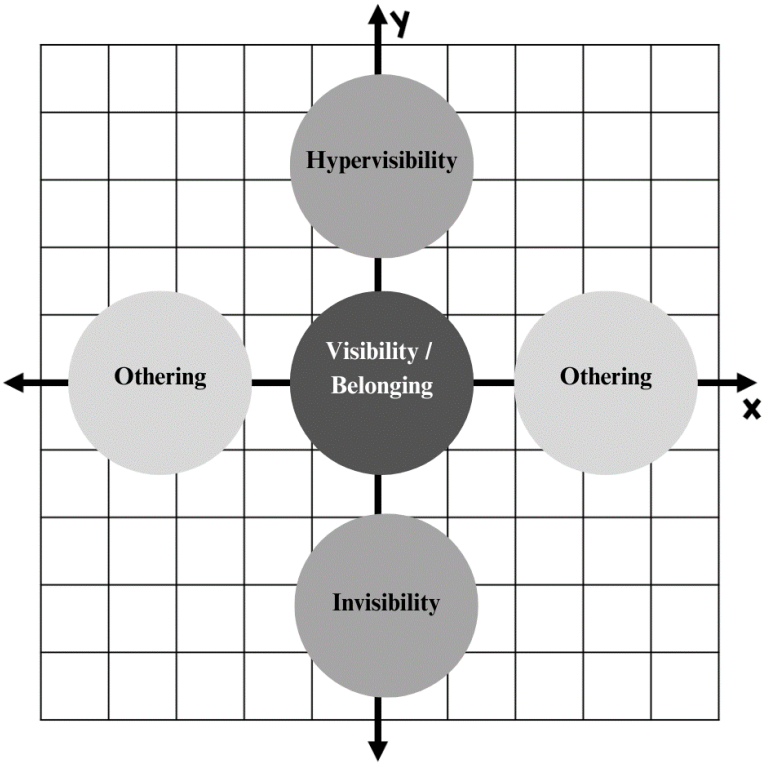
Scholars and organizers highlight the importance of examining belonging through social, racial, and cultural contexts that determine how we live and integrate with others (Allen, 2021). Relative to the present study, schools function within social and political contexts that involve national narratives on race and political and social projects of belonging and othering. Yuval-Davis (2006) contends that the politics of belonging involves "meeting other people and deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the [community] of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them'" (p. 204). Vision is employed as a classificatory tool for belonging (Edenborg, 2017).

The nexus of visibility and belonging theories offers a way of seeing and exploring the omission of people of Color from educational research, the omission of young people's voices

from educational research, and the omission of rural spaces and the people who inhabit them from educational research. Further, through the theoretical framework of belonging and visibility, the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools can be cogitated as toward belonging or othering, toward visibility or invisibility. Figure 2 represents the axial juncture in the relationship of visibility and belonging theories, where the present study exists.

Figure 2

Relationship of Visibility and Belonging Theories



Assumptions, Limitations, and Scope

Assumptions, limitations, and scope in qualitative research are essential truths, restraints, and boundaries, respectively (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). These considerations help to further confine and define the study. The present study sought to explore the lived experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools. Inclusion criteria

necessitated that participating students of Color were at least 18 years old and were members of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine.

Assumptions

Assumptions are tenets that are accepted as true and from which a study follows (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A primary assumption of the present study was that students of Color experience rural, predominantly White high schools differently than do their White peers *and* that students of Color (though limitlessly diverse) share unifying elements among their experiences. These assumptions were deduced from the contrast between experiences of being a person of Color in America and experiences of being a White person in America.

The present study assumed the authenticity of participant experiences, that participants remembered and portrayed their experiences genuinely. Delimiting participant eligibility by including only students who were at least 18 years old and who were members of the graduating class of 2024 engaged participants in retrospection and reflection. The present study was designed to explore the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools while honoring and protecting younger students of Color who may be particularly vulnerable as minors and as members of marginalized groups.

The final assumption of the present study was that the member checking process assuaged gaps between researcher data collection, coding, thematic analysis, restorying, and participants' raw narratives. The researcher identifies as a White, middle-class woman, a mother, and an educational leader and so has not shared in participants' lived experiences. Dissimilitude between race and age (and in one case, gender) of the researcher and of the participants was assumed to be bridged through the member checking process.

Limitations

Limitations are factors, beyond the purview of the researcher, that may weaken or constrain the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The present study was limited by its embeddedness within political, social, and cultural contexts. Because narrative inquiry is derived from and centered around the experiences of the individual in relation to others and to a social constellation, it is perceived as an inadequate method to represent the purest sense of reality as understood by formalists (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The present study, however, interrogated "the limits of the limits themselves" (Edenborg, 2017, p. 22) by "making things visible which were previously invisible, or opening up new ways to see and hear that which was already visible" (Edenborg, 2017, p. 22) by exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools *from the perspective of students of Color.*

The present study was further limited by the situatedness of the researcher, of the participant and by their interaction. "We know what we know because of how we are positioned" in the metaphorical parade of life (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 17). The position of the researcher and of the participant in the parade informs what they see, what they experience, and how they experience it; but as the parade moves, so too does the position of the researcher and participant, thus evoking new sights, experiences, perspectives, and ways of knowing (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The position of the researcher and consequent biases, perspectives and learnings, if uninterrogated and unbracketed, could uniquely impact data collection, analysis, and findings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

An additional limitation of the present study was the differential interaction between the researcher and participant. The researcher designed the interview protocol, to include interview questions, and decided the conversation in which she participated which sets the tone for and

direction of the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a result of researcher governance, interviews create inherently unequal positionalities which can impact the data collected (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Data analysis of collected experiences was informed by the experiences of the researcher who brought her own stories to lay alongside field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), which is an additional limitation of the present study. Patterns, threads, tensions, codes, and themes were all identified by the researcher and informed by the researcher's experiences, position, and learnings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). To remediate the blending of researcher experience with participant experience, member checks were conducted, thus deeply engaging participants in meaning-making processes. Bracketing (researcher reflexivity) was utilized to alleviate bias and ensure validity.

Finally, the present study was limited by the factor of time and by its small sample size dictated by research design. While prioritizing the experiences and narratives of participants in the present study, consideration must also be given to the voices not heard (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Chapter Three discusses limitations in more detail.

Scope

The present study aimed to explore the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools. The researcher was sensitive to the acute vulnerability of minors as participants in research studies and therefore delimited the study to identified students who were at least 18 years old and who were members of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine. High school seniors or recent graduates were best positioned to reflect on the entirety of their high school experiences, both

retrospectively and introspectively, and so provided rich data through a more nuanced look at their high school experiences.

The theoretical framework of the study, built upon theories of visibility and belonging, provided a lens for data collection and analysis. Though looking at race only and specifically may seem reductionist, it was beyond the scope of the present study to analyze layers of gender, gender expression, sexuality, physical and mental ability, religious affiliation, and other ways in which people identify. A critical analysis of the present study may caution the dangerous collapse of people of Color into a monolith and therefore the perpetuation of the White / other binary; however, "to study the lived experience of a particular group of people, certain delimiters had to be operationalized and a strategic essentialism employed" (Beam, 2023). The experiences of students of Color in the American public educational system, and in America more generally, are distinctly different from the experiences of White students in America, and deserve collective and consequential attention.

Rationale and Significance

The present study sought to fill the gap in rural education research related to the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools. Because race is so strongly correlated with how people experience education and with likely educational outcomes (Chapman et al., 2013), educators are beholden to understand the experiences of students of Color in the school setting. A student's sense of school belonging correlates to the nature and quality of opportunities and outcomes (s)he will experience, both of which have profound impacts within and beyond the schoolhouse and within and beyond the school years (Allen et al., 2021). Yet, the *2022 State of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Public Schools Report* revealed a racial gap associated with school belonging in which student experiences at

school (such as safety, sense of belonging, relationships, opportunities, and more) were largely dictated by their demographic identities, such as race (Groundwater et al., 2022). The racial gap in school belonging is problematic because sense of school belonging positively correlates to academic engagement (Margolius et al., 2020) and motivation (Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022), behavior (Schall et al., 2016), psychological and emotional functioning (Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Moffa et al., 2018), and perception and representation of self (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Pardede et al., 2021). Ongoing "data collection is critical to identifying systemic patterns that highlight successes and areas for improvement" pertaining to school belonging (Groundwater et al., 2022, p. 18). Groundwater et al. (2022), therefore, urge educational leaders and researchers to take a critical look at policies, programs, and practices that deny a sense of school belonging equitably to all students.

Research conducted with teachers and support staff indicates the desperate need for professional development and professional support aimed at fostering a sense of belonging in racially diverse student populations (Groundwater et al., 2022; Stoll, 2019). Groundwater et al. (2022) assert that in order expose opportunity gaps to include the opportunity to belong, educational leaders must ask the right questions and implement the right tools (Groundwater et al., 2022, p. 3). The present study expands this assertion further by arguing for the importance of asking the right *people*.

The particular significance of the present study lies in its qualitative methodological approach, which engaged students of Color, an underrepresented stakeholder in education research. Excavating and analyzing subjective experiences of school belonging can inform the understanding of differences in students' of Color sense of belonging (compared with one another and compared with their White peers) and therefore identify that which enhances

belonging and that which hinders or precludes belonging (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). Offidani-Bertrand et al. (2022) state, “Belonging uncertainty can contribute to racial disparities in achievement, yet there has been relatively little research examining the factors that contribute to its development or why some members of a stigmatized group experience it more strongly than others” (p. 213). Leary (2022) identifies the need for further research to inform the design of interventions to increase belonging; however, Leary concedes that we know “almost nothing about [...] the inferences people make about their belonging and their understanding of why they do or do not belong” or about “how people wade through […] incoming social signals to draw conclusions about the degree to which they are accepted and belong” (qtd. in Allen et al., 2022, p. 1149). The primary social signal essential to the present study is visibility.

Within the dearth of research analyzing a sense of belonging for students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools, is the opportunity to gain a deeper, “more textured understanding of how school belonging can be conceptualized, studied, and applied [to] have the greatest positive impact in schools” (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1153). Research findings based on interviews may offer a more complete understanding of the rationale behind perceptions of experiences (Groundwater et al., 2022) which can inform “institutional or instructional opportunities to belong at school” (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1152) as well as interventions or strategies that might be effective to increase or strengthen sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2022). The research findings associated with this study may inform how educators at rural, predominantly White high schools can create conditions where students of Color feel seen, heard, and valued, where students of Color feel like they belong. At a macrosystemic level, this study stands to contribute to the conversations happening to and within education in rural America by centering the experiences of students of Color in rural,

predominantly White schools that often serve as snapshots of the communities within which they are situated.

Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor contends that equality in America will only come with equality in education, she states "That's why we're unequal in this society, and it's what we need to change if we want all people equal– not just under law– but in participation in society" (Golden-Vazquez, 2017, para. 3). The equality to which Justice Sotomayor refers will be achieved only when all students "feel safe, supported, and like they belong at school" (Groundwater et al., 2022, p. 4). If the system of public education in America is ever to achieve equity, it is imperative that educational research explore the experiences of students of Color *from the perspective of students of Color* to better understand how to create conditions where all students may belong and thrive. The findings of the present study and others like it can enhance educational stakeholders' ability to foster school environments and conditions that support visibility and belongingness, which are critical to school success and therefore to closing the well-documented racialized gaps in educational opportunities and outcomes. The present study does not aim to change the fabric of society but simply to open space in the conversation in order to take collective steps forward, toward belonging.

Summary

Despite the burgeoning racial and social progress marked by worldwide protests in the summer of 2020, a concerted and strategic political effort to stunt racial progress was quickly operationalized. The classroom became a contested space as public education legislation at the national, state, and local levels sought to silence matters related to race while others sought to amplify issues of equity through DEI efforts. The tension between these initiatives were arguably most harmful to students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White public

schools – a latent population and place in education research– where colorblind ideology uniquely impacts students of Color who are without a school-based framework for understanding their experiences and without same race peers with whom to co-construct identity.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Students of Color were defined as students who identify as Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, or two or more races (NCES, 2023). Rural, predominantly White high schools were defined as schools that are situated within geographic spaces that are not urban or metropolitan and whose student populations in grades 9 through 12 are racially identified as majority (greater than 50%) White.

Visibility and belonging theories undergirded the present study. The blending of visibility and belonging theories was complex but necessary to understand the reality of students' of Color lived experiences attending rural, predominantly White high schools in the context of the political, social, and spatial constructs within which they are situated. The present study existed within and sought to excavate the nexus of visibility and belonging through counternarratives extracted from participant interviews. The axial juncture of the acts and theories of visibility and belonging invoked in questions through qualitative interviews opened the space for counternarratives to define not only how things are but also how things could be (hooks, 1994). Narrative methodology was employed in the study, with the understanding that the world is created through the word. With a different discourse, things can be otherwise. In order to create equitable learning environments, it is important to understand the experiences of all students, not just by performance and other quantitative measures but by qualitative understandings.

Though the "time [has always been] ripe to do what is right" (King, 1968), that the under-18 population is predominantly people of Color for the first time in American history places a "demographic imperative" (Jupp et al., 2019, p. 2) on educators to strive toward equity in education. Meaningful and sustainable change aimed at fostering a sense of belonging in education for all students, can be fostered in part by working to deconstruct and reconstruct the D/discourse (national narratives) and in part by working to deconstruct and reconstruct the d/discourse (daily, lived narratives) (Cypres, 2013). Working toward systems (legislation, funding, school structures, policies) level transformation while also focusing on daily minutiae (lived experiences of students of Color) can create school environments where all students can feel a strong sense of belonging.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Rural contexts are contoured by racial and spatial isolation (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Ruggiano, 2022). While definitions and measures of rural areas are ample and amply contested, one unifying factor is the conflation of rural with Whiteness (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). However, the myth of rural America as a White America (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021) is reductionist, revisionist, and dangerous. The increasing racial diversity of rural spaces places a demographic imperative on educators and educational researchers (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Ruggiano, 2022) to narrow the chasm created by the dearth of literature exploring students' of Color experiences in rural (Jupp et al., 2019), predominantly White contexts (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2022). The experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White contexts challenge the idyllic notions of White Americana lived in rural contexts; however, experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White educational spaces– especially from the perspective of students of Color– is under researched and absent from the literature (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019).

To explore the breadth and depth of current research related to the present study, the literature review focused on the secondary school experiences of students of Color in various educational contexts. The literature review is presented thematically and opens with the conceptual and theoretical framework, which includes a presentation of belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) theories. Themes identified through the literature review are American rurality, the colorblind schoolhouse, and belonging in adolescence.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

Conceptual and theoretical frameworks offer the researcher and the reader an understanding of the specificity and situatedness of the study (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016). The conceptual and theoretical framework of the present study provides a superstructure for the work and argues both why "it is worth doing and how it should be done" (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016, p. 8). Personal interest, topical research, and theory—all shaped by the researcher's positionality (interest, goals, and identity)—are essential components of the conceptual and theoretical framework (Ravitch & Riggan, 2016).

Personal Interest

Mamie Till Mobley harrowingly pronounced, "Let the world see." She was referring to the face of her son, in death, after he had been tortured, brutalized, and murdered (Condon et al., 2022; Metress, 2002). Ms. Mobley implored humanity to bear witness to what happened when her son Emmett was surveilled by a White woman whose husband and brother-in-law, in defense of the purity and fragility of White womanhood, murdered Emmett. Emmett's face, in life, was socially designed to be invisible, to avoid eye contact, to avoid the gaze. Even for a fourteen-year-old boy "to look directly [was] an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility" (hooks, 2009, p. 93). Emmett was murdered for being visible in a place where White people deemed he did not belong.

hooks (2009) provides historical background for the downcast gaze, citing its origin in slavery. Black people were "compelled to assume the mantle of invisibility, to erase all traces of their subjectivity" (hooks, 2009, p. 93) in response to the dehumanizing terror reigned by White people. hooks (2009) offers a reminder of the brutality exacted upon enslaved Black people "for looking, for appearing to observe the whites they were serving, as only a subject can observe, or

see. To be fully an object then was to lack the capacity to see or recognize reality" (p. 93). After emancipation, these visibility arrangements were reinforced in order to reify the subjugation of black people by rendering them invisible (hooks, 2009). Yet in death, Emmett's face became hypervisible, for all the world to see. I did not learn about Emmett until graduate school.

I am a first-generation high school graduate from a predominantly White, working class community. I was born into poverty, a child of factory workers, but I was by all measures considered middle class by the time I was five years old. I understand the transformative power of education because I have lived it. At school, I was influenced by people who I needed and who I aspired to be like. I was built by people dedicated to their own growth and, selflessly, to my growth. At school, I experienced the world in a way that I did not know it to be. I felt seen. I felt heard. But I did not understand the privilege that it was to inhabit Whiteness. I lived in a blue-collar pocket with a bootstrap mentality, and I imbibed that notion through adolescence.

When I took a philosophy class in high school, it was the first time in my life that I remembered being asked to think about thinking, to interrogate what constitutes knowledge, to challenge assumptions and how we know what we know, to think about ostensibly universal concepts like goodness. The experience of thinking in a new way, in a way that I could quite tangibly feel synapses firing, inspired me to minor in philosophy during my undergraduate studies. Through the study of philosophy, I saw the applicability and universality of philosophical thought across contextual confines such as time, place, and space. I was immersed in conversations about thinking that seemed to transcend identity and attempted to inform what it means to be human, what it means to live a meaningful life.

As I studied philosophy I also studied English Literature. I read African American literature, Native American literature, Asian American literature, each confined within the boundaries of their respective courses. And through exposure to the diversification of life experiences, I realized that in my philosophy courses I had read only one perspective. I realized that the philosophers with whom I had engaged did not build *the* foundation of thought but rather one, singular foundation of thought. But I did not yet have a schema for understanding the disjunction of my studies in literature and my studies in philosophy.

Then graduate studies birthed theory into my life. By the time I was in graduate school, learning about Mamie and Emmett, I was also a mother to two sons, then an infant and a toddler. It was during those same years that Trayvon Martin was surveilled and murdered with Skittles and a can of iced tea in his hoodie because a man deemed that he did not belong in the neighborhood through which he was walking. The convergence of these life events, of history speaking to the present, of the fractured nature of reality and existence, of the multiplicity of ways of being, of cosmopolitanism (Appiah, 2007)– the idea that we all eat and drink and love but that it manifests in countless iterations, the idea that our birth is but chance and if we were born in another time or in another place or to another mother– demanded the responsibility that comes with privilege.

Toni Morrison urged her students, once they assumed positions in the world: "Remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else" (Houston, 2003, p. 4). Just as teachers had selflessly laid bricks in the foundation of who I was to become, until I was strong enough to carry my own, now I may lay bricks in the foundation of another through education. I believe so deeply in the power of education as both a practice and an institution. I have the professional

privilege and responsibility of serving as an educational leader at a rural, regional high school in the state of Maine.

Topical Research

Throughout the last several years, systems of othering intensified division in the United States, especially as the White population declined and populations that have long been considered racial minorities grew (Johnson & Lichter, 2022; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). For the first time in history, the under-18 population in America is *not* majority White, yet the voting majority *is* White (Frey, 2022). What has resulted is a political landscape created and supported by a generation who does not see America's children as "their" children (Frey, 2022). Shifting racial demography urges the reconceptualization of space in America (Johnson & Lichter, 2022), most notably rural space that has historically been depicted in the social and political imagination as preserving White nostalgia (Gosa & Sanchez, 2016).

The political and social division that transpired concurrently with COVID-19 shed light on a secondary public health crisis, loneliness, which the Surgeon General of the United States Vivek Murthy (2023) argues can be remediated by belonging. In both an ironic and poetic way, the rapidity of COVID-19 transmission revealed the degrees of separation between any given member of the global community, which necessitated processes of physical distancing and social isolation (Allen, 2021). As Bacon (2020) states, "Our fates are linked, and we are all just as vulnerable as the most vulnerable among us" (p. ix). And so, I started thinking about themes of visibility, invisibility, othering, and belonging particularly in school spaces that serve as microcosms of the nation.

Foucault (1977/1995) theorized a framework for examining the physical and social constructions of space and contended that space cannot be dissociated from visibility and power, that these three elements must be analyzed in conjunction. Themes of space, visibility, and power entered national discourse in the years before the murder of Trayvon Martin and in the years since. The surveillance of people of Color has been well researched and heavily documented; it was perhaps most poignantly depicted in video footage captured by onlookers, paralyzed and powerless, as they bore witness to the murder of George Floyd in the summer of 2020 (CNN, 2020). Though unprecedented global protests followed (CNN, 2020; Hamilton, 2021), consistent with the historical pattern of racial progress, an orchestrated and intentional political and social backlash was quickly waged (Cohn-Vargas, 2021; Hamilton, 2021; Latrice Martin, 2022). In the aftermath of the racial justice movement catalyzed in the summer of 2020, the majority White voting base (Frey, 2022) swiftly passed divisive concepts legislation patterned after Executive Order 13950 that prohibited divisive concepts training within or by federal entities (Exec. Order No. 13950, 2020). Divisive concepts legislation operationalized colorblind racial ideology and codified it into law, thus invisibilizing people of Color (Pernell v. Florida Board of Governors, 2022).

The juxtaposition of the colorblind phenomena (that which renders people of Color invisible) and the hypervisibility of people of Color– that resulted from the surveillance of Chinese Americans during COVID-19 (Tang, 2021) the surveillance of black Americans in various iterations since slavery (Alexander, 2011; Kendi, 2019; Tatum, 2017), the surveillance of Americans from the Middle East after 9/11 (Lalami, 2020; Minhaj, 2021), the surveillance of Japanese Americans during WWII (Okubo, 1983), the surveillance of Native Americans through forced migration (Rozema, 2003)– is striking. The hypervisibility of people of Color functioning

in tandem with the invisibilizing of people of Color is ironic and irreconcilable (Stoll, 2019). Hypervisibility and invisibility maintain opposing positions on the spectrum of visibility.

Yet, another range of visibility exists (Honneth, 2001). Honneth (2001) argues for visibility as a necessary component to recognition derived from the gaze. Eye contact, the most fundamental human interaction (Brighenti, 2010), is one expression of the gaze (Foucault, 1963/2003), which is the essential element of visibility. The gaze is governed by a multitude of external forces (Brighenti, 2010; Edenborg, 2017; Foucault, 1977/1995). What we see and how we see is conditioned; there are *ways* of seeing and not seeing (Brighenti, 2010; Edenborg, 2017; Foucault, 1977/1995). Visibility, embedded within social and political contexts, is employed in boundary making processes that determine who belongs and who does not belong (Yuval-Davis, 2006).

Baumeister and Leary (1995) claim that belonging is "biologically prepared" (p. 518) and argue for its importance as a basic human need, nearly equivalent to sustenance. However, the construct of belonging is complicated in adolescence, a time defined by the transition between the egocentrism and innocence of childhood and the self-assuredness and autonomy of adulthood (Allen et al., 2022). Still, school belonging is critical as it correlates to positive academic, behavioral, emotional, psychological, and other outcomes within and beyond both the schoolhouse and the school years (Allen et al., 2021).

The complexity of belonging in adolescence is exacerbated for students of Color, already left to reconcile the American racial narrative of colorblind ideology with their lived experiences of racism, who attend predominantly White schools (Rogers et al., 2021; Saleem et al., 2022). Colorblind ideology in the schoolhouse divests students of Color of a school-based framework for understanding racialized experiences (Frey, 2022; McMurtrie, 2021; Stoll, 2019). Further

complicated is belonging for students of Color who attend predominantly White *rural* schools contoured by racial and spatial isolation (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022; Yull 2014). Exploring the lived realities of students of Color challenges colorblind education through color consciousness, through visibility, and decenters Whiteness as normative, which has the potential to create the space necessary for students of Color to bring their full selves to school and therefore experience belonging.

Theoretical Framework

> Human activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Human activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action. It cannot [...] be reduced to either verbalism or activism.
>
> - Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968)

Specific to the present study, theories of visibility (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) and belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) provide schemata for exploring how students of Color experience and negotiate visibility and belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools— which function under the political and social construct of colorblindness. Engaging students of Color about their lived experiences within rural, predominantly White high schools can inform practices within the American public education system while also contributing to the greater theoretical framework within which this study is situated: theories of belonging and visibility. Belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) theories offer constructs for understanding and exploring the omission of students' of Color experiences from educational research, and more

particularly from *rural* educational research – an area of the field that is understudied. Belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) theories further offer constructs for understanding the experiences of students of Color within predominantly White contexts as designed toward visibility or invisibility, toward belonging or othering.

Belonging Theory

Belonging theory germinated in the works of Freud (1922), Maslow (1943), Adler (1931), and Dreikurs (1981); the pioneering work of Baumeister (1995), Leary (1995), and Allen (2013) further cultivated the foundational theoretical framework. Perspectives on belonging are fractured and inconsistent due to research isolated within specific disciplines, resulting in siloes that produce gaps between research and practice (Allen et al., 2021). Further complicating definitions of belonging is researchers' interchangeability of terms such as acceptance, connectedness, inclusion, and attachment (Hailey, 2021). Though divergent terms and perspectives emerge around the construct of belonging, how belonging is measured, and how it is cultivated or restricted, belonging theorists are unified in the claim that belonging is a "biologically prepared" (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p. 519) fundamental human need (Allen et al., 2021; Bacon, 2020; Samuel, 2022). Recent work in belonging theory has pushed beyond the understanding of belonging as a need to belonging as a human right (Allen et al., 2022; Samuel, 2022).

The central tenet of belonging theory is that humans have an innate, even primordial need for belonging that originates from the interdependence needed to survive– as an individual and as the collective human family (Allen, 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Samuel, 2022). While Maslow (1943) placed belonging as tertiary to physiological and secondary to safety needs on his

hierarchy, belonging theorists and researchers have since located the need for belonging closer to the base of the pyramid (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cohen, 2022). Cohen (2022) asserts that the misplacement of belonging is due to Maslow's lack of research into the need to belong. Baumeister and Leary (1995) suggest, "Belongingness can be almost as compelling a need as food" (p. 498). Understood in this way, the need to belong "is a deeply rooted human motivation that, underpinned by our ancestral origins, permeates our thoughts, feelings, and behaviors" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1134). The search for belonging, therefore, drives decisions and behaviors (Allen, 2022; Keyes, 2019).

Early belonging theorists conceptualized the need for belonging as derivative of Bowlby's attachment theory (1958). Bowlby, one of the first to research belonging, was interested in early childhood experiences, initially through the lens of the impact on children who were separated from their parents during World War II (Cohen, 2022). Bowlby's research was concerned with early childhood, more specifically with the child's tie to the mother (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Cohen (2022) notes that Bowlby's work established the footprint for belonging in how people are parented thus instilling "a strong sense of belonging to carry throughout life– or fail[ing] to do so" (p. 25).

However, Baumeister and Leary (1995) proposed in their seminal work on belonging theory the decentralization of the mother / child relationship by removing the specificity of particular others, claiming that the need to belong can be directed toward and filled by an other human being. Belonging is then characterized not by the actors or their relation but by reciprocity (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Samuel, 2022). Pardede et al. (2013) highlight the repetition of reciprocity across theorizations of belonging. The internal need to belong is present in the self and in the other; as such, one's internal need can be met by the other. Pardede et al.

(2013) draw on Kohut's Theory of Self Psychology (1980) and identifies the need for the other "in order to mirror oneself and to feel connectedness and alikeness in being part with the other" (p. 8). At the root of this reciprocity is the importance of feeling part of others and having one's self fill the same need in others (Pardede et al., 2013). Though relationships are integral to belonging (Samuel, 2022) sense of belonging cannot be understood through individual (1:1) relationships alone (Pardede et al., 2013). Belonging is related to place (Allen et al., 2021; Samuel, 2022), to purpose (Block, 2008; Samuel, 2022), to land, to memory, to scent, to sound, to objects, to textures, to sensations (Allen, 2021), to social groups, and to experiences (Allen et al., 2021); sense of belonging manifests from "complex and dynamic agglomerations that are unique and special to each person" (Allen, 2021, p. 3).

Margolius et al. (2020) define belonging as the "sense that a person has a rightful place within a community, that their identity and life experiences are included and valued within that community, and that who they are in a particular setting […]" is an authentic expression of self (p. 2). Similarly, Cohen (2022) and Samuel (2022) refer to belonging within a collective where one is not only cared for, valued, and respected but also where one is conferred with the power to participate in purposefully and meaningfully contributory ways. The dimension of belonging within community is tied to purpose, agency, power, participation, value, care, and respect (Cohen, 2022; Samuel, 2022).

The complexity of the belonging construct lies in stark contrast to the simplicity of the belonging feeling– of being at home, both in multilayered contexts and in oneself (Block, 2008; Samuel, 2022). Belonging is a sense people know how to feel (Samuel, 2022; Wise, 2022) "but may not always know how to describe" (Samuel, 2022, p. xv); "it simply is" (Helliwell qtd. in Samuel, 2022, p. 10). Belonging is difficult to measure due to its subjective nature (Cohen,

2022; Samuel, 2022). No singular measurement tool exists to determine belonging, and current measurement tools have varying degrees of validity due to respondent perceptions and expressions of belonging (Allen et al., 2022). Allen (2021) and Cohen (2022) argue that belonging is situational and therefore frequently changing, "continually being re-created anew in every situation" (Cohen, 2022, p. 26). Allen (2021) posits that the need for continual reassessment is due to "our persistent inner drive to belong [that] demands we regularly reassess and reevaluate whether we belong in a given context" (p. 5). However, other theorists argue that the stability of particular situations or institutions informs the stability of one's perception of belonging or not belonging (Allen et al., 2021). Despite the extensive work done within belonging theory, how people assess their level of belonging and how researchers assess that assessment remains definitively unanswered (Allen et al., 2022).

Allen et al. (2021) and Allen et al. (2022) reviewed conceptual issues related to belonging, primarily varied definitions and understandings. In addition to the innumerable definitions of school belonging, terms employed to analyze school belonging are many, to include connectedness, attachment, engagement, and inclusion (Hailey, 2022). Scholars dissonantly expand and condense theorizations of belonging, contending that the expansive nomenclature result from the same ideological framework (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Goodenow, 1992a). Allen et al. (2022) concede that belonging is a "complex construct due to its multifaceted components, predictors, and outcomes" (p. 1134). They offer simply, that "belonging is good" and conversely, that the absence of belonging "is bad" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1134).

Yuval-Davis (2006) situates belonging within and differentiates it from the structures that organize it—the politics of belonging. Yuval-Davis (2006) explains, "The boundaries that the

politics of belonging is concerned with are the boundaries that separate the world population into 'us' and 'them'" (p. 204). Boundaries demarcate who belongs and who does not, decided by the individual(s) situated within multi-layered contexts (Yuval-Davis, 2006). In everydayness, the politics of belonging are invisible but palpable– "naturalized, unspoken, and unrecognized" (Halse, 2018, p. 7). Decision-making processes employed in boundary making are informed by invisible forces such as "governments, businesses, institutions, cultures, and other people" (Cohen, 2022, p. 15). Beyond the determination of who is on either side of the invisible boundary of belonging, the politics of belonging determines "what is involved in belonging, in being a member of a community" determined by metanarratives of identity and place (Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 204).

The inverse of belonging is "to feel isolated and always (all ways) on the margin, an outsider" (Block, 2008, p. xii). john a. powell (2023) suggests that othering, the process of determining who is on either side of the boundary of belonging, is *the* problem of the 21st century. While evolutionary dictums necessitated natural groupings, recent research shows that humans "instinctively see those we perceive to be outside our group as threatening" (Cohen, 2022, p. 53). Othering is boundary making and "can be described as the exercise of determining how one group is different from another, coupled with an intent to isolate and dominate the other group with constructs of inferiority" (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021, p. 1). The effects are devastating (Bacon, 2020; Cohen, 2022). Cohen (2022) chronicles the impacts on othered bodies. Chronic threat to belonging "ratchets up heart rate, blood pressure, and the release of stress hormones [... and] stimulates bodily inflammation [...] a biological response to adversity that [...] is like 'fertilizer for early death'" (Cohen, 2022, p. 32). The sense of exclusion is similarly experienced psychologically (Cohen, 2022). Psychologists have found "people are as motivated to alleviate"

the “social pain” of exclusion as they are to meet basic needs for food and shelter (Cohen, 2022, p. ix). Being othered has negative implications on self-perception, performance, behavior, interpersonal relationships (Cohen, 2022), resilience, wellbeing, and risk for disease and death (Bacon, 2020). Conversely, sense of belonging has positive implications on the same measures, and, Cohen argues, makes us “more humane” (2022, p. x).

The group(s) with which people identify are some “of the most powerful situational influences” (Cohen, 2022, p. 58). Tajfel (1978), the architect of social identity theory, found that the power of group affiliation is so strong that one comes to see the group as an extension of self (Cohen, 2022). In an experiment involving randomized groupings determined by researchers, Tajfel found that “people chose to receive less benefit as long as their group received more benefit than the other group” (Cohen, 2022, p. 55). When applied to the social and political construct of race, Tajfel’s findings are revelatory.

Allen (2021) identifies racial minority groups as the largest outgroups in the United States. Because Whiteness is perceived as the default racial setting, it serves as the standard by which all others are measured and from which all others deviate (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Hamilton, 2021). The deviation from White normativity of subordinated groups of Color magnetizes the dominant group, reinforces White identification with Whiteness through a sense of unity and bondedness defined and redefined by its position to the “other” (Crenshaw, 1995), is “imbued with essentialized notions of personhood [...] effectively erasing the experiences and perspectives of people of Color” (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020, p. 2). Stereotype is often employed to “cluster people into groups with expected traits” (Bacon, 2020; p. 177) which results in societies and cultures of an “‘Us’ who belongs and a ‘Them’ who does not” (Cohen, 2022, p. 139).

Samuel (2022) argues, “Denied belonging is liable to metastasize over time” (p. 41). Those who feel they don’t belong will continue to seek belonging “and sometimes that can manifest in really terrible ways” (Cohen, 2022, p. 5). People will seek belonging through “bad belonging” such as racism and hate groups (Cohen, 2022) or through identification with gangs or radical groups (Allen, 2021; Cohen, 2022). Those who believe their sense of belonging has been threatened or lost are more likely to join an extremist hate group, the number of which “has more than doubled since 2000” (Cohen, 2022, p. xi). Research shows that “school shootings, radicalization, mental illness, chronic loneliness, social isolation, and suicide” are all correlative with a sense of not belonging (Allen, 2021, p. xiii). The urgency of these social issues demands a greater understanding of belonging and its nurturance (Allen, 2021); scholars and organizers highlight the importance of examining “belonging in the context of a social history marked by race, culture, and changes to the way we live, work, and integrate with others” (Allen, 2021, p. xiii). Bacon (2022) places importance on theorizing as a way to “make sense of what’s happening and imagine [the] way forward to alternative futures and outcomes” (p. 227). For stakeholders in education, particularly those (students, educators, parents, researchers, and policymakers) involved in rural, predominantly White high schools, theorizing belonging can lead to “collective liberation” (hooks, 1994, p. 61).

Visibility Theory

The theory of visibility, a “relational theory” (Brighenti, 2017, p. 2), is deeply rooted within the tradition of Western philosophy, beginning with Plato (380 BCE/2013) and drawing from the thought of Descartes (1649/2009), Hegel (1807/1998), and Sartre (1953). Contemporary thought on visibility theory is largely attributed to Brighenti (2017), Deleuze (1988), Derrida (2002), Foucault (1963/2003), and Lacan (1978). Hegel (1807/1998) contends,

"Self-consciousness exists in itself and for itself, in that, and by the fact that it exists for another self-consciousness; that is to say, it *is* only by being acknowledged or 'recognized'" (p. 859). Brighenti (2010) describes social visibility through the gaze as the process by which a "*significant other* bears witness to our existence and proves it by observing us" (p. 46). Visibility through the gaze is the determinant of seeing and of being seen, and as such, catalyzes a social interchange through processes of analysis, qualification, and boundary-making (Brighenti, 2010). Lemov et al. (2023) argue that the eyes are "perhaps, the most critical tool for establishing belonging" and point out that humans are the "only primate with white sclera" (the part of the eye surrounding the pupil (p. 8). White sclera highlights the gaze and allows for immediate and precise interpretation by others. Lemov et al. (2023) contend, "Glances between and among fellow group members tell us whether we are respected and safe or resented, marginalized, or scorned. Affirming eye contact is one of the most profound signals of belonging a human can send" (p. 8).

Qualitative and quantitative measures of visibility are best understood as degrees instead of binaries. Visibility is not inherently good or inherently bad; rather, "there is a minimum and a maximum of what we may call 'correct visibility'" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 46). For example, hypervisibility can impose a state of surveillance stimulated by supervision and control, while invisibility can impose a state of social exclusion (Brighenti, 2010). Visibility is continuously regulated and contested within thresholds of visibility (Brighenti, 2010). *Between* the poles of hypervisibility and invisibility is a continuum of visibility: states of recognition and denial, liberation and oppression, empowerment and disempowerment (Brighenti, 2010). Figure 3 visually represents the continuum of visibility.

Figure 3

Visibility Continuum

Though visibility does not denote recognition, visibility and vision are fundamental components of recognition (Brighenti, 2010). Honneth (2001) identifies the first site / sight of recognition as between mother and child, a theorization that is derivative of attachment theory and, by virtue, belonging theory. The relationship between mother and child is the foundation upon which future socialization is built progressed stages of socialization as a child grows align with evolving recognitive needs (Honneth, 2001). Honneth (2001) and Brighenti (2010) each invoke Hegel's conceptualization of recognition through vision as fulfilling the need to experience "life in common" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 112).

The need for recognition is derived from the biological need to be affirmed by another human being as existing and as belonging to a collective, to the human family (Brighenti, 2010). Arrivé (2020) argues, visibility is the "vehicle and guardian of social existence" (p. 1). The inability or refusal to see precludes recognition; "being invisible means being deprived of recognition" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 46) and of a place in a "community of belonging" (Edenborg, 2017, p. 13).

Brighenti (2010) argues for the exploration of social visibility as a territory, defined by structural asymmetries of visibility. Similar to the boundary-setting that happens within the politics of belonging that categorize people who do and do not belong based on visible and invisible boundaries, regimes of visibility draw boundaries that construct territories of belonging. Visibility as an action and as a field are informed by "discourses and codes [that] predate [the] visual experience" such as lived experiences, political landscapes, social and cultural conditions, media, and more (Brighenti, 2010; Foucault, 1977/1995; Rajchman, 1988). There is "no visible without *ways* of seeing which are social and interactionally crafted" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 329). What we see informs ways of seeing, and conversely ways of seeing inform what we see (Brighenti, 2010). Mills (2007) contends: "When the individual cognizing agent is perceiving, he is doing so with his eyes and ears that have been socialized. Perception is also part of conception, the viewing of the world through a particular conceptual grid" (p. 23). Brighenti (2017) refers to the seeing eye as "neither a biological organ nor a psychological subject, but a socius, the associated function and presence of the virtual gaze that ties the social animal to relationship" (p. 3). The gaze is, therefore, highly contextualized and informs who is seen and how, who belongs and who does not (Brighenti, 2017).

Foucault (1963/2003) refers to the medical clinic as "the first attempt to order a science on the exercise and decisions of the gaze" (p. 89) by noting, analyzing and classifying bodies (and consequently determining likeness or dissimilitude between bodies) based on physical characteristics. The social discourses employed in visibility (namely, inscription and projection) induce social action, such as classification, a process through which people are socially sorted and ranked (Brighenti, 2010). These individual processes are contoured by particular regimes of visibility that "concur in the definition and management of power, representations, public

opinion, conflict and social control" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 126); regimes encode hegemonic, normative constitutions of the visible– both the "possible and the proper [...,] what *can* be seen and what *should* or *should not* be seen, between who can and who cannot see whom [,...] what is worth paying attention to, what we have a right to observe and what can be seen safely" (Brighenti, 2010, p. 45). These regimes further render "certain subjects visible, hypervisible or invisible, some voices hearable and others distorted, certain stories intelligible and others incomprehensible" (Edenborg, 2017, p. 56).

Rajchman (1988) points to a social responsibility to interrogate the systems and conditions that create singular vision and ways of seeing. Autonomy over visual subjectivity fosters acts of "epistemic disobedience" which have the potential to result in "the transference of political agency into the realm of the visible" (Arrivé, 2020, p. 5). Acts of resistance within the visible contribute to "another visual order, another visual configuration of the social world" that has the power to "redefine the social contract, to reorganize political bodies and to reshuffle the distribution of attention in the public sphere, maybe outside the perimeter of the strictly visible" (Arrivé, 2020, p. 5) and therefore into the boundaries of belonging. Though visibility does not necessarily entail belonging, refusing to see denies belonging (Honneth, 2001).

In a study on the politics of visibility and belonging in Russia, with particular consideration of "Homosexual Propaganda" laws, the Sochi Olympics, and the Ukraine War during the years of 2014-2017, Edenborg (2017) contends that these political projects of belonging sought "to produce particular *arrangements of visibility*: specific stagings or organizations of what [could] be seen, heard and felt in the public sphere" (p. 56). The present study is informed by the inverse—political projects of visibility (such as divisive concepts legislation and transparency laws that codify the national racial narrative of colorblindness) seek

to produce particular *arrangements of belonging*. These studies, then, hint at the reciprocity of visibility and belonging.

The present study was concerned with the relational and positional aspects of vision and how each is constituted by the gaze within the constructed space of the schoolhouse, the social sight / site of visibility; more specifically, the present study sought to explore themes of visibility related to belonging and inscribed on or refused to bodies of Color among predominantly White bodies in rural, public high schools in the state of Maine. Wise (2022) contends, "Space is used to construct who is in and who is out […] It offers behavioral clues and cues for how to show up and who is really wanted" (p. 87). Relative to the present study, the schoolhouse– specifically rural, predominantly White high schools– was the social site of visibility.

American Rurality

> Do you believe that space can give life, or take it away, that space has power?
>
> -bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (2009)

Definitions of rural are as expansive as the lands and people they seek to constitute. But spatial boundaries are not arbitrary demarcations; space is politically and economically distinguished by its development, population, and delimitations (Ford, 1995). These characteristics constitute a "political geography of space [which is…] the product of collective action structured by law" (Ford, 1995, p. 456). Freire (1968/2018) contends that the boundary-making involved in spatial designations goes beyond landscapes and encompasses the people who inhabit those lands; spatial borders determine who belongs, who does not belong, who is visible, and who is not visible. Boundaries and the processes involved with creating them are more distinct in rural areas where isolation is intensified (Freire, 1968/2018). The United States Census Bureau (2023) defines American rurality by what it is *not*, that is, urban.

Tieken and Montgomery (2021) found that the federal government employs more than fifteen definitions of what constitutes rurality, and those definitions are largely unified in the measurement tools that define rural by typical measures of proximity to or connectedness with urban areas (Long et al., 2021). Long et al. (2021) cross referenced eight federal definitions of rural to gain a more comprehensive understanding of rurality, specifically assessing overlaps in definition and disparities between rural and urban locations related to "socioeconomic, demographic, health access, and outcome measures" (p. S413). Their findings indicate that the binary construct of urban and rural is not infallibly and decisively indicative of categorical differences between urban and rural populations. That is, explicit distinctions between urban and rural populations are striking in some measures; however, related to education, the duality does not capture the differential contours and complexities of rural and urban populations (Long et al., 2021).

In addition to federal definitions, state and local definitions vary and further complicate a unified understanding of rurality (Long et al., 2021), creating a challenge for researchers attempting to outline precisely who and what constitutes rural communities (Long et al., 2021; Robson et al., 2019; Ruggiano, 2022; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Tieken and Montgomery (2021) argue for a pluralistic understanding of rurality, due to the disparate experiences of Black, Native, and Latinx rural populations compared to their White rural counterparts. Tieken and Montgomery (2021) define rural America as "a loose aggregate of racially separate and unequal places" (p. 8). Robson et al. (2019) also argue that research limiting itself to one definition of rural truncates the breadth of understanding.

Long et al. (2021) recommend careful and intentional consideration by researchers and policymakers when considering definitions of rural related to particular scopes of study. They

recommend that research questions, context, outcome, and region should be primary factors in determining the appropriate rural definition to apply (Long et al., 2021). Specific to the present study, Long et al., (2021) contend that broad rural definitions "are better suited for capturing differences among groups based on race" (p. S417). Because education outcomes are more nuanced and because rurality agreements are lowest among factors related to race and ethnicity, a broad understanding of rurality was applied to the present study. Further, studies conducted utilizing diverse definitions of rurality informed the present study to provide a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes rural America. Subthemes of American rurality, relative to the present study include: student population educated in rural schools; racial demographics of rural America; a dream deferred - the (re)segregation of America's public schools; and characteristics of rural communities - challenges and strengths.

Student Population Educated in Rural Schools

Because definitions of rural vary, naturally the number of people encompassed by rural definitions also varies. Federal definitions quantify between 6.9 million people to 75.5 million people as living in rural contexts (Long et al., 2021). However, recent research pertaining to rural schools offers a general consensus related to the number of students who attend them. Approximately 20% of the public-school student population is educated in rural schools (Nguyen et al., 2021; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Robson et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

Racial Demographics of Rural America

While definitions and measures of rural areas are ample and amply contested, one unifying factor is the conflation of rurality with Whiteness (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). Indeed, between 70% and 76% percent of the rural population *is* White (Grimes & Roosma, 2022;

Johnson & Lichter, 2022; Robson et al., 2019); however, the myth of rural America as a White America (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021) is reductionist, revisionist, and dangerous. Frey (2022) explains that the 2020 United States Census found that children of Color now, and for the first time in history, constitute the majority (53%) of the population under age 18.

Changing racial demographics of rural America demand a reconceptualization of rural spaces as diverse (Johnson & Lichter, 2022). People of Color now comprise 20%, roughly 10.3 million people, of the nation's rural population (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Of that population, approximately 40% are identified as African American, 35% as Hispanic, and the remaining 25% as Native American, Asian, Asian Pacific Islander, or multi-racial (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). In the deconstruction of rural spaces as White spaces, Grimes and Roosma (2021) point to the "many predominantly Black, Latinx, and First Nations rural communities" (p. 41) while Robson et al. (2019) describe the racial diversity present within rural communities more generally.

A Dream Deferred - The (Re)segregation of America's Public Schools

Despite the growing racial diversity in America, racial segregation persists (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Though nearly one-third "of all rural children come from racial or ethnic minority populations" (Johnson & Lichter, 2022, p. 2), residential segregation largely results in student segregation by race in school buildings (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Civil rights activists' indefatigable work during the 1950s and 1960s toward educational integration is a dream deferred (Hughes, 1951), with the (re)segregation of America's public schools persisting long after Brown v. Board of Education (Tatum, 2017). Robson et al. (2019) notes the discrepancy between the Black rural student population in Mississippi (33%) compared to nationwide (9%) and the Hispanic rural student population in Texas (40%) compared to nationwide (9%). In the Report of the Rural

School and Community Trust, Showalter et al. (2019) measure racial heterogeneity within schools through use of the rural diversity index. Showalter et al. (2019) describe the function of the index such that if one were to "randomly choose a school in a rural district, and then choose two students at random from within that school, the rural diversity index is the percent chance that these two students would be of a different race" (2019, p. 18). While Delaware has the highest level of rural racial diversity (56.8%), Maine, where the present study was conducted, has the lowest level of rural racial diversity (10.7%) (Showalter et al., 2019).

Ford (1995) contends that "spatially and racially defined communities perform the 'work' of segregation silently" (p. 454) thereby absolving individual actors of agency– thus promoting a systemic view of segregation in which "a racially stratified society is [simply] the inevitable result" (p. 454). Ford (1995) notes that a deracialized interpretation of racial segregation disregards the "social and political construction of racially identified political space" (p. 452). Whites experience the most pronounced "levels of racial segregation and isolation while growing up" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022, p. 171) but do not interpret segregation as racialized due to the conception of Whiteness as the default position (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Therefore, rural White communities are theorized as normal or "just the way things are" (Bonilla-Silva, 2022, p. 159) because Whiteness is not recognized in American consciousness as a racial category, whereas communities of Color are theorized as racially segregated (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Kendi (2019) contends the Whiteness of White segregated spaces is hidden behind colorblind ideology; Whiteness outfitted with colorblindness is plausible deniability of racism and of the relevance of race generally (Yull, 2014).

The resegregation of American public schools is dissonant with the "demographic imperative" of an increasingly diverse student population (Jupp et al., 2019, p. 32). Stoll (2019)

contends that social isolation is "central to our understanding of race and racism" (p. xi); therefore, the compounding of racial, social, and cultural isolation in spatially isolated areas, particularly in rural, predominantly White areas, further reifies Whiteness as normative (Ruggiano, 2022). "Spatial arrangements" contour racial identity construction (Yull, 2014, p. 9); further, "students' perceptions of racism in school are deeply impacted by the composition of the student body where they attend school" (Joseph et al., 2016, p. 19). The phenomena of social, racial, and spatial isolation is particularly prevalent and is intensifying in the Northeast (Robson, 2019; Showalter, 2019; Tatum, 2017).

Characteristics of Rural Communities - Challenges and Strengths

While rural communities are distinguishable, there *are* shared characteristics of rural communities (challenges and strengths) (Showalter et al., 2019). The challenges facing rural communities are varied; however, some distinct patterns emerge in rural contexts, including higher rates of poverty (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Johnson & Lichter, 2022; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021; Robson et al., 2019; Ruggiano, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019); aging populations (Johnson & Lichter, 2022; Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021); lower median household incomes (Robson et al., 2019); contracting economies (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021); lack of access to public transportation (Robson et al., 2019); lack of employment opportunities (Nguyen et al., 2021); inadequate health care (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Nguyen et al., 2021; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021); food scarcity (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021); substandard housing or homelessness (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021); residential segregation (Johnson & Lichter, 2022; Robson et al., 2019; Ruggiano, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019); environmental destruction and toxicity (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021); higher drug overdose rates and deaths (Robson et al., 2019); and lower rates of educational attainment compared to urban areas (Robson et al., 2019). The commonality of these challenges

offers a singular, stereotypic and deficit perspective of rural space (Showalter et al., 2019), synonymizing rural with "uneducated, poor, inferior" (Hagi, 2020, para. 24) which not only ignores the diversity existing within rural communities but also ignores the strengths and assets of rural communities (Robson et al., 2019).

The primary strengths of rural communities can be found in inhabitants' resilience in the face of adversity and in their connection to place and to one another (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). Though rural communities may often be asset poor, they are often resource rich in social capital (Grimes & Roosma, 2022), which Tieken and Montgomery (2021) define as "the resources that come from relationships" (p. 8) and which positively correlates with community health measures (Block, 2008). *People* are rural communities' greatest asset (Robson et al., 2019). Many rural inhabitants feel a deep connection to where they grew up (Robson et al., 2019) and "articulate strong attachments to the social, cultural, and physical context of their home communities" (Sharp et al., 2020, p. 536). Family support systems, social ties, a sense of community, and pride are often inherent to rural communities (Robson et al., 2019). Robson et al. (2019) ranked social capital scores on a variety of measures and found that of the 12 states with the highest social capital, three were in the Northeast, where the present study was conducted.

Block (2008) links social capital to relationships but also takes a more global approach in a focus on the interdependence and sense of belonging within communities. Block (2008) delineates what it means to belong to a community and therefore "act as an investor, owner, and creator of 'the space'" (p. 3). When people in communities are othered their "gifts remain on the margin" which becomes not only an individual problem but a community problem where latent energy and community solutions exist only as untapped opportunities (Block, 2008, p. 2). Shared characteristics of rural communities include the centrality of school in rural communities;

racial silences and (in)visibilities in rural communities; and students of Color in rural, predominantly White schools.

The centrality of school in rural communities

Schools serve as "anchor institutions" (Robson et al., 2019, p. 43) to the communities in which they are situated. Rural schools are often an integral contributor to the health of the local economy (Mette et al., 2016; Nguyen et al., 2021; Riel, 2021) and are instrumental to community development (Mette et al., 2016). Perhaps most importantly, rural schools are the primary facilitator of social interaction for community members (Riel, 2021); schools are where people come together (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). In rural communities, schools often act as the "'centers of community' and 'impart a strong sense of local identity and shared purpose'" (Ruggiano, 2022, p. 55). Tieken and Montgomery (2021) contend that "rural schools can knit the social fabric of rural communities" (p. 8). In addition to being strong community assets, schools offer a beacon of hope and a promise for the future (Tieken & Montgomery, 2021).

Sharp et al. (2020) contend that the rural school simply *is* the community, suggesting the centrality of school in rural communities. School is particularly central to the lives of rural youth (Sharp et al., 2020) and serves as a primary site of identity development mediated by social interaction (Ruggiano, 2022; Tatum, 2017). Nguyen et al. (2021) discovered notable differences between suburban and rural student outcomes related to school climate. Rural school climate tended to be a stronger predictor of outcomes, suggesting that stakeholders in rural education should prioritize efforts that enhance and enrich school climate (Nguyen et al., 2021).

Racial Silences and (In)visibilities in Rural Communities

While rurality is characterized by intimate and meaningful personal connections, practices of social exclusion based on race in rural communities result in racial silences and

(in)visibilities (Mette et al., 2016). Space is imbued with signposts for belonging or othering, especially for people of Color in predominantly White spaces (Wise, 2022). Cultural and racial exclusion within rural communities is fostered by geographic isolation and racial homogeneity that delineates the boundaries of inclusion / exclusion– of who belongs and who does not belong, who is visible and who is not visible (Ruggiano, 2022). White people in these segregated contexts do not have to engage with race which has significant implications in various facets of their social and political lives (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; hooks, 2021). Racialized social exclusion is catalyzed by existing ideological structures related to race *and* existing ideological structures related to race are shaped by the practice of racialized social exclusion (Mette et al., 2016).

The unique and often deep connections between rural, predominantly White schools and their communities, combined with racial homogeneity within these communities, can be prohibitive to conversations about race; thus, rural areas provide fertile ground to cultivate colorblind ideology (Riel, 2021). Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) claim racial silences span the breadth and depth of rural communities where, due to residential segregation, racial diversity is minimal. Because people of Color are the minority in rural, predominantly White communities, it is implied that race is not a problem because race is not present and is not a concern of White people (Yull, 2014). Bonilla-Silva (2022) postulates:

> Living in White communities sustains the racialization of the housing market– your homes are valued higher than ours– which, among other things, helps preserve the racial wealth gap. Schools are also connected to neighborhoods, so the more you segregate yourselves from us, the higher the level of school segregation. And your [White] self-segregation in neighborhoods, schools, friends' networks, and in churches shapes profoundly how you view race affairs. Your all-White bread diet influences your views

> and emotions regarding people of [C]olor. You hear 24/7 the recycled White noise in the echo chamber you inhabit, which explains why you cannot understand us; why you cannot understand our deep concern with race. (p. 33)

Riel (2021) argues colorblindness and the racial silence it engenders in rural spaces is related to "a sense of community based on shared sentiments and communal norms" (p. 269). Grimes and Roosma (2022) and Ruggiano (2022) contend that schools can and should leverage the social and cultural capital within their learning communities to create space for and facilitate conversations on race. Conversations on race and the physical space of the school serve as equally important spatial sites for connection and belonging rather than disengagement and separation (Grimes & Roosma, 2022). Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) echo the call for racial discourse in rural communities.

Further restricting or complicating meaningful dialogue on race within predominantly White rural communities is the intersection of economic and racial marginalization, two points of oppression that are often falsely contrasted, which denies their intersectionality (Mette et al., 2016). Oppression based on race and oppression based on class are juxtaposed as competing entities where only one can prevail; oppression based on race is often presented or seen as an affront to oppression based on class (Mette et al., 2016). People sometimes respond to the highlighted hardship of other groups with defensive claims "that their own lives are filled with hardship too" (Cohen, 2022, p. 155). Alexander (2011) traces the economic race-based conflict back to slavery when poor Whites gained social currency through their Whiteness, climbed a ladder on the rung of social hierarchy because though they were poor, at least they were not slaves.

The false dichotomy of race-based and class-based oppression was exacerbated by colorblind rhetoric that gained in popularity after the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and beyond (Alexander, 2011). Colorblindness took prominence as the American racial dream in the late 1960s (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) and gained significant momentum after the election of President Barack Obama (Busey & Gainer, 2022). Colorblindness "denounces racial significance" (Riel, 2021, p. 264) and functions as a system of denials, failures, and evasions (Jupp et al., 2019). The theme of colorblind ideology is important to the present study because it has become the dominant racial narrative and paradoxically exists concomitantly with systemic racism (Jones et al., 2021). Colorblind racism "minimizes experiences of racial oppression faced by people of [C]olor, normalizes institutional racism, and blames the culture of people of [C]olor for their experiences of oppression" (Jones et al., 2021, p. 547). Colorblind ideology is predicated upon the false narrative that it is "sufficient to achieve racial equity" and that equality is standard issue upon birth in the United States (Jones et al., 2021, p. 547).

Students of Color in Rural, Predominantly White Schools

The majority of interracial interactions in rural communities occur in schools (Riel, 2021) but the lived experiences of White students and students of Color, despite growing up in the same rural community, are tacitly distinct from one another (Tatum, 2017). Tatum (2017) expounds on the phenomena of Black kids sitting together in school cafeterias and argues that these same-race relationships foster identity formation and provide support, especially in racist conditions. Ruggiano (2022) also points to the multitude of studies that examine the importance of same-race peer connections, especially during such a critical time as adolescence. Ruggiano (2022) notes that these studies prove same-race peer connections promote "positive racial and

academic identity and sense of belonging" for students of Color in rural, predominantly White schools (p. 56).

Ruggiano (2022) defines the two primary features of rural, predominantly White communities as racial and spatial isolation. Youth of Color who live in these contexts often do not have access to more diverse urban and suburban centers (Ruggiano, 2022). As a result, "for youth of Color and families residing in white rural contexts, onlying experiences in schools and the broader community are more likely an everyday reality" (Ruggiano, 2022, p. 57). Yull (2014) found that rurality had specific impacts on people of Color when expounding on their educational experiences within rural spaces. Participants in Yull's (2014) study largely held individual positions of colorblindness birthed from and situated within the context of the colorblind communities in which they grew; however, through dialogue, they narrated experiences of overt and covert acts of racism. Participants expressed their racialized experiences in colorblind ways but maintained their colorblind ideology, indicating that racism "had almost been normalized in the rural community" (Yull, 2014, p. 7).

Grimes and Roosma (2022) explored racial trauma in rural contexts and its negative impact on the mental health of students of Color; they conclude that racial trauma at national, state, and local levels "directly impacts students' educational outcomes" (p. 46). Grimes and Roosma (2022) contend that disturbing or harmful school experiences *may* be exacerbated for students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White schools; however, the lack of education research exploring the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White communities leaves researchers like Grimes & Roosma (2022) to make conjectures about those experiences. The lived experiences of students of Color are largely disregarded in education research, and to a greater degree in rural education research (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel,

2021; Ruggiano, 2022). Gaps on race and rurality in public education research emerged as a subtheme through review of students of Color in rural, predominantly White schools. Those gaps are further delineated below.

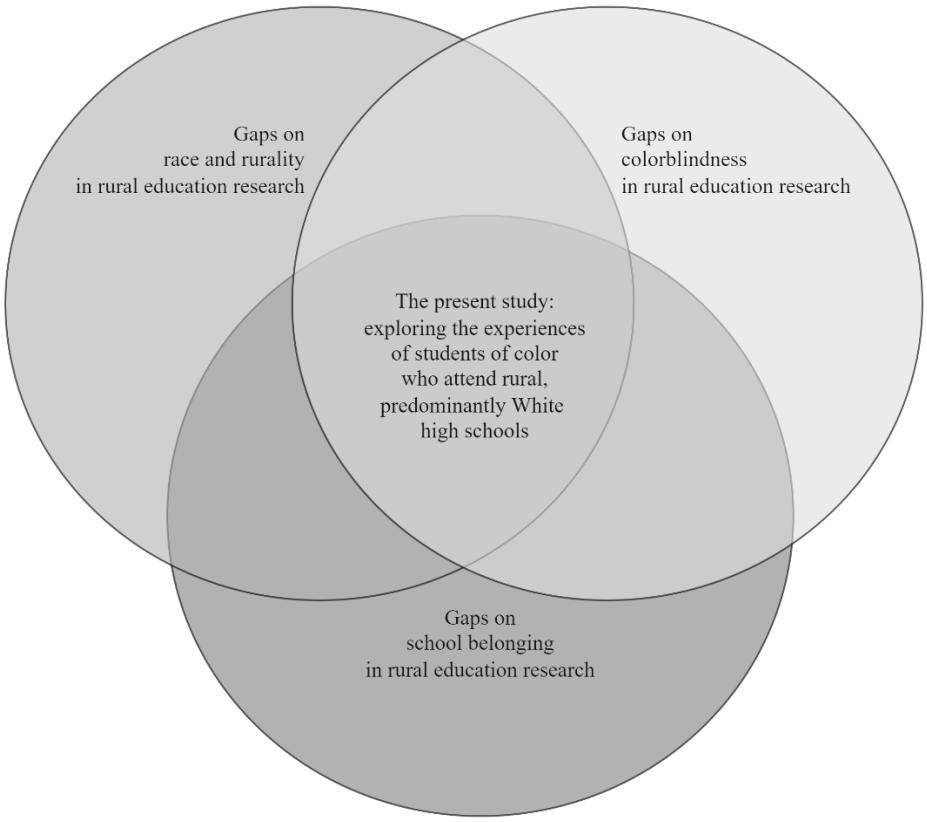
Gaps on Race and Rurality in Public Education Research. The body of educational research pertaining to rural schools is primarily focused on predominantly White contexts, which produces gaps on race and rurality in rural education research (Riel, 2021). Grimes and Roosma (2022) argue the importance of "decenter[ing] Whiteness in rural spaces" (p. 49) and contend that all students, including rural White students need and deserve to learn and talk about race, including their own. Grimes and Roosma (2022) highlight the importance that all students "learn about systemic racism, racial trauma, implicit biases, stereotype threat, and micro- and macro-aggressions" (p. 49). Frey (2022) refers to the exhortation demanded by the diversity of the majority of the American population under age 18, as evidence that "both white and nonwhite children need to become familiar with all elements–both good and bad–of the nation's racial and ethnic history" (para. 9). Stoll (2019) emphasizes the importance of the school's role and claims that "sometimes school districts will have to model the importance of this work for their community" (p. 86).

Because rural spaces "are too often misconceived as White spaces" (Grimes & Roosma, 2022, p. 44) and because Whiteness is accepted as a normative racial position, rural education research has neglected the perspectives of people of Color (Ruggiano, 2022). Mills (2007) states, "Whites will cite other whites in a closed circuit of epistemic authority that reproduces white delusions" (p. 34). Racial identities, constructs, and experiences in rural, predominantly White schools deserve consideration (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021). However, the experiences of students of Color within rural, predominantly White contexts are under

researched (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). Figure 4 illustrates the axis where the present study exists, the point at which gaps on race and rurality, gaps on colorblindness, and gaps on school belonging in rural education research converge.

Figure 4

Gaps in Rural Education Research Relative to the Present Study



The omission, the silence, the invisibility of people of Color in rural school research perpetuates the "monolith myth of rural Whiteness" (Grimes & Roosma, 2022, p. 44). Racial silences and invisibilities are exclusionary and indicative of whose voices are heard, whose voices are not heard, and whose voices comprise the "community's constitutive and defining" narrative (Lawrence, 1995, p. 348). Official narratives within rural communities prioritize the

"needs and voices of certain groups of people" and cast aside the needs and voices of other groups of people (Bacon, 2020, p. 28). Mc Nulty (2022) contends that "counternarratives and knowledge produced from the periphery are deemed illegitimate and even dangerous" (p. 6). The chasm created by invisibility, silencing, and othering of people of Color can be bridged by "honoring the diversity of rural communities, decreasing the sense of invisibility of People of Color in rural communities and creating more nuanced conversations about this topic" (Grimes & Roosma, 2022, p. 48), and by leveraging "the many assets and forms of knowledge cultivated within communities of Color" (Ruggiano, 2022, p. 56).

The Colorblind Schoolhouse

> Colorblind racism otherizes softly.
>
> –Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists* (2022)

Schools are constructed spaces within constructed spaces, microcosms of the communities and societies in which they are situated (Stoll, 2019). Like the innermost nesting doll, schools reproduce the characteristics of the enveloping figures outside of them. Meritocracy underwrites the institution of American education (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Riel (2021) differentiates meritocracy and colorblindness as theoretically distinct but acknowledges them as coordinated partners that make deracialized meaning of school constructs and practices as well as of outcomes for students. Colorblindness in schools explains away the racialization of disparate outcomes as being due to individual lack of effort or cultural deficiencies (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Students under meritocratic pressure and other elements of colorblindness may feel that their experiences are related to individual characteristics or shortcomings (Farrington, 2020; Saleem et al., 2022). Wise (2021) explains that applying a colorblind framework to examine the disparate opportunities and outcomes for people of Color inevitably "pathologizes" the victim; "if the problem is not America" (para. 6) and is not "the sedimentation of unequal opportunities

resulting from a history of White racial domination and ongoing discrimination" then it must be people of Color (para. 5).

The narrative of colorblindness informs adolescent development as youth form their identities and make meaning of their lives as well as of the world in which they are situated (Rogers et al., 2021). Cohen (2022) laments the overwhelmingly colorblind approach to "problems associated with identity in America" which leaves the issues largely ignored (p. 213). Operationalized colorblindness uniquely impacts students of Color who attend predominantly White schools, without a school-based framework for understanding their experiences and without same race peers with whom to co construct identity (Rogers et al., 2021). In the sections to come, the following subthemes of the colorblind schoolhouse are reviewed: the discord of colorblind ideology and racism, White teachers and students of Color, internalization of colorblind ideology by students of Color, restoring color to the American eye(deology), and gaps on colorblindness in public education research.

The Discord of Colorblind Ideology and Racism

As Wise (2022) indicates, "Stories are powerful design tools; they shape our environments and our thinking" (p. 118). The story of colorblindness dominates the national racial discourse; however, colorblindness does "not match what children may see, hear, and remember" (Rogers et al., 2021, p. 1826). The synchronization and discord of colorblind ideology and racism is confounding, particularly for adolescents and even more so for adolescents of Color who attend predominantly White schools, where it is presumed that there is no race and therefore no need to learn about race or racism (Glass & Berry, 2022; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020; Stoll, 2019). The prohibition of racial discourse from the schoolhouse silences the tragedy and truth of American history– a history characterized by boundary making, by

labeling self or other, by rendering invisible or hypervisible– that is necessary for students of Color to contour and contextualize their understanding of the systems and structures that inform race relations on both systemic and individual levels (Frey, 2022). Students of Color deserve meaning-making systems (Rogers et al., 2021). Colorblind ideology does not provide a schema for understanding the social reality of living in America as a young person of Color (Glass & Berry, 2022; Saleem et al., 2022); colorblind ideology denies, evades, and refuses the experiences of students of Color who are thereby divested of a framework necessary for understanding their identities and lived experiences (Frey, 2022; McMurtrie, 2021; Saleem et al., 2022; Stoll, 2019).

Being locked into the racial caste system without a schema, without a language, for making sense of it can have an impact on students' of Color educational engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, identity, visibility, and belonging (Farrington, 2020; Rogers et al., 2021); students of Color *may* "conclude that their interpretation of reality is inaccurate or that their individual characteristics are the source of [poor] treatment" (Saleem et al., 2022, p. 100). Cohn-Vargas et al. (2021) explains that for students of Color, experiences of racism without a framework for understanding those experiences can result in the internalization of inferiority, anger, or shame, which can negatively impact sense of school belonging (Allen et al., 2021). McMurtrie (2021) contends that analyzing racism at the structural level depersonalizes racial discourse for students of Color and for White students.

Colorblind messages are replicated by White curricula in which students of Color do not see themselves or others who look like them (Hamilton, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Margolius et al., 2020). American public school system curricula are centered around White Western civilizations, ways of knowing and histories that exclude people of Color (Glass & Berry, 2022;

Hamilton, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Margolius et al., 2020) and therefore replicate regimes of visibility (Brighenti, 2007) and belonging (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Vasquez (2021) asserts that colorblind pedagogical approaches founded upon universally held notions of "critical thinking" and "making good decisions" dismisses how both of these functions are informed and theorized while privileging a White normative perception (p. 519). Moreover, educational experiences are "shaped by white commonsense or the belief that the experiences, knowledge, and understandings of White people are universally understood as 'just making sense'" (Knowles & Hawkman, 2002, p. 244), which silences other ways of knowing, other ways of being The lack of racial discourse in the schoolhouse invisibilizes students of Color and contours the understanding of their lived experiences such that they may believe race is irrelevant or worse, that *they* are irrelevant. Stoll (2019) argues, "If one does not see color, then one does not really see children" (p. 62).

White Teachers and Students of Color

Colorblind ideology informs the field of education, such that "good" teaching is characterized by colorblindness (Jones et al., 2021; Joseph et al., 2016; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020). However, colorblind ideology has warped the concept of equity and pathways to achieve it (Knowles & Hawkman, 2020). Jones et al. (2021) found that educators, functioning with colorblind ideology, could not see "how race has patterned the lives of their students" (p. 552), which bears weightily on the educational experiences of students of Color given the racial gap between them and the predominantly White educational body (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020). Because Whites generally live racially segregated lives, they do not have to engage with race on personal or systemic levels, which contours how they see and engage with race (Bonilla-Silva, 2022). Bolstering the power structures that govern public education, school

boards are predominantly White, particularly in rural areas; “four in five small district boards are at least 90 percent white” (Stoll, 2019, p. 92).

The predominant Whiteness of the American public-school teaching staff fortifies barriers to teaching race due to White teachers’ limited discomfort and lack of understanding or fear, which sustains the Whiteness of education (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021; Stoll, 2019). Showalter et al. (2019), in a report on rural education in America found that pre-service teachers were resistant to “justice-oriented curricular practices” (p. 45). Educator concerns included, “fear of parent backlash, administrative disapproval, and uncertainty about how to present or discuss justice-oriented topics with their students” (Showalter et al., 2019, p. 45).

Jupp et al. (2019) demonstrated through a longitudinal, twenty-five year look at race-evasive White teacher identity study that “identifie[d] the contours of White preservice and in-service teachers’ silence, resistance to, engagement in, and pedagogical grappling with” (p. 33) that “White teachers variously deny, evade, and resist that they are racialized actors in their teaching and learning with students of [C]olor” (p. 94). Further, Jupp et al. (2019) found that White teachers neglect students’ racial identities because they do not see them as relevant or important. Staff colorblindness, indifference to race and to structural racism (Jones et al., 2021; Mayfield, 2021) invisibilizes students of Color whose lived experiences with racism are incongruent with colorblindness (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020). Further damaging, Jones et al. (2021) found that teachers emphasized motivation as the primary factor in student outcomes, thus neglecting inequalities related to race. Stoll (2019) asks, “What are the consequences of teaching students of [C]olor that race no longer matters when their lived experiences so often demonstrate otherwise” (p. 62)?

Knowles and Hawkman (2020) lament the dearth of literature exploring the relationship between students of Color and White teachers. Margolius et al. (2020) assert the importance of relationships in adolescent identity development as relationships help adolescents make sense of the world and of their particular place in it. Colorblind conditions, actors, and messages can contribute to onlyness (Ruggiano, 2022), alienation, and otherness for students of Color (Saleem et al., 2022) which can negatively impact students' sense of belonging (Byrd, 2015), engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy (Saleem et al., 2022). Slaton et al. (2023) found that students who experience low school belonging have the strongest relationships with teachers who practice cultural humility. Visibility can be leveraged as a tool toward recognition of self through other, which can enhance belonging and correlatively positive outcomes.

Internalization of Colorblind Ideology by Students of Color

Research has shown the permeating effect of internalized colorblindness. Freire (1968/2018), in his work on oppression, notes the transcendence of the oppressor through internalization by the oppressed. Riel (2021) argues that because colorblindness is the dominant racial ideology in America, students of Color can also adopt the frames of colorblindness. The American narrative proper is infused with colorblindness (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021) and so colorblind ideology structures the discourse, the minutiae of daily living as well as the Discourse, the constructs in which students of Color live (Cypres, 2013). Evidence suggests the adoption of colorblind tenets by students of Color (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Ramasubramanian et al., 2021; Riel, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). Students of Color are conditioned to see themselves through the "white racial lens" (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021, p. 30), through what Du Bois (1903/1999) referred to as "double consciousness" (p. 11) which can lead to the internalization of colorblind ideology by students of Color. For students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White

schools, the phenomena of seeing oneself through the eyes of another is particularly salient (Riel, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021). Freire (1968/2018) writes:

> They are at one and the same time themselves and the oppressor whose consciousness they have internalized. The conflict lies in the choice between being wholly themselves or being divided; between ejecting the oppressor within or not ejecting them; between human solidarity or alienation; between following prescriptions or having choices; between being spectators or actors; between acting or having the illusion of acting through the action of the oppressors; between speaking out or being silent, castrated in their power to create and re-create, in their power to transform the world. This is the tragic dilemma of the oppressed which their education must take into account. (p. 48)

The expressions of both colorblind ideology and lived experiences of racism reveals a potential site for internal conflict (Rogers et al., 2021). Grimes and Roosma (2022) noted that internalized racism may "perpetuate racial trauma and negative mental health outcomes" (p. 47). Students' of Color social realities of living race—of living invisibility and hypervisibility, belonging and othering, self and other—are contradictory to the colorblind ideology through which they have been told to make sense of their lives (Rogers et al., 2021). Studies indicate that when verbalizing their experiences in predominantly White contexts, students of Color often employ the language of colorblind ideology though it is not reflective of their actual experiences (Riel, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021).

Riel (2021), through qualitative interviews, discovered the duality of coexisting colorblind ideology and experiences of racism. Riel (2021) found that Black and mixed-race students attending school in rural contexts adhered to colorblindness through meritocratic ideals and the minimization or denial of racism while concurrently sharing racialized experiences

where they were treated poorly due to their race. Rogers et al. (2021) similarly found that adolescents were more likely than younger students to express discrepant narratives of colorblindness through specific colorblind frames applied to racist incidents. Rogers et al. (2021) and Joseph et al. (2016) found that older children were acculturated to not talk about race and when engaged in race talk, claimed that race was not important while still expressing personal experiences of racism – exposing the double bind, the contradictory experiences of colorblindness (race does not matter) and experiences where race is central.

Restoring Color to the American Eye(deology)

Because race is a social construction, it can be deconstructed (Stoll, 2019). Colorblind conditions have disoriented the movement for racial justice by heralding color consciousness as racism (Hamilton, 2021; Kendi, 2019; Rogers et al., 2021; Stoll, 2019; Tatum, 2017). To deconstruct race in America, race must first be visibilized (Stoll, 2019). The seeing human eye by its very nature does as it was designed to do—it *sees*. Ideology, no matter how deeply embedded within internal or meta narratives, does not change the function of the eye. Colorblindness, therefore, is premised upon deniability—the denial that we see color, despite the fact that we do. Alexander (2011), in an argument toward seeing color, postulates that color consciousness offers reprieve from the delusory ideal of colorblindness. The denial of colorblindness asserts our inability to see race "and to treat each other fairly or with genuine compassion" (Alexander, 2011, p. 243). Restoring color to the American eye(deology), restores faith in humanity, that we can "show care and concern for others, even as we are fully cognizant of race and possible racial differences" (Alexander, 2011, p. 243). Niño and Perez-Diaz (2021) emphasize the importance of color consciousness particularly in rural communities and calls on educators in rural communities to harness the power of education to advance an equitable

society. Denying difference and assuming the universal drive toward one American identity is assimilationist (Gosa & Sanchez, 2016). Gotanda (1995) equates the misconception of a unified (White) American identity with "cultural genocide" (p. 270). School environments should empower students to bringtheir whole selves into the schoolhouse (Farrington, 2020; Vargas, 2021), where they feel individually constitutive of the learning space and where "their learning 'makes sense' to them based on their encultured understanding of themselves and the world" (Farrington, 2020, p. 165).

Alexander (2011) contends that "visibilizing" and "discoursing" race is not the real issue; othering people is. Alexander (2011) argues toward a color conscious society where we can "see each other fully, learn from each other, and do what we can to respond to each other with love" (p. 244). Similarly, Margolius et al. (2020) highlight research on belonging that indicates the importance of adolescents being *seen*. Visibility as a necessary pathway toward belonging and positively related outcomes can bridge opportunity gaps (Allen et al., 2021). Black and Latinx students who attend predominantly White schools and who express feeling cultural respect and appreciation at school experience a greater sense of belonging and related outcomes (Byrd, 2015; Mitchell et al., 2017).

Gaps on Colorblindness in Public Education Research

Scholars engaged in exploring the impact of colorblindness in public education identify gaps in research. Though recommendations for future study vary, a recurring element is the abandonment of colorblind ideology and the need for explicit attention to race (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Joseph et al., 2016; Jupp et al., 2019; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). Vasquez (2021) calls on educational researchers to analyze preservice and in-service teachers'

understandings and applications of culturally relevant pedagogy and how that shapes how they engage with and employ colorblind ideology.

Rogers et al. (2021) note the demographic imperative exerted by increasingly racially diverse populations while Knowles and Hawkman (2020) highlight the majority White public-school staff; the relationship between these groups and the individual teachers and students within them "remain undertheorized" (Knowles & Hawkman, 2020, p. 256). Eberhardt and DiMario (2020) propose to that in order to assuage this gap in literature, educators and educational researchers should engage directly in conversations about race together with students, to "jointly interrogate the ways that systemic racism continues to guide institutional practices and shape experiences of all students in educational spaces (and beyond)" (p. 8). Jupp et al. (2019) support a visibility of racism that forces the American consciousness to understand racism not only by what is spoken and visible but also by what is unspoken and invisible.

Education researchers engaged in scholarship that explores the impact of colorblindness in education emphasize the importance of centering the voices of students of Color (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Farrington, 2020; Glass & Berry, 2022; Joseph at al., 2016; Mayfield, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). Farrington (2020) asserts the importance of understanding the educational system through the lens of those who "benefit the least from it." (p. 166). Joseph et al. (2016) highlight the unique perspectives and insights of youth and how education stands to benefit from them. Ruggiano (2022) echoes the sentiment of youth engagement and calls upon educators and educational researchers to harness the "funds of knowledge" present in youth of Color (p. 70). Rogers et al. (2021) encourage open conversation that gives space for the complexities and nuances, that captures the breadth of students' experiences, particularly in the

context of colorblindness "as a meaning-making system" (p. 1831). The narrative power of story is a critical element of self-definition and gives shape to the spaces we occupy (Wise, 2022).

Belonging in Adolescence

Research indicates that perhaps the most difficult time for belongingness is adolescence, a period of development caught between the egocentrism and innocence of childhood and the self-assuredness and autonomy of adulthood (Allen et al., 2022). In fact, adolescence is widely characterized by belonging uncertainty (Cohen, 2022) due to shifting social patterns and "complex social rules" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1144). While it may be the most difficult time for belonging, adolescence is also the most critical time (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013), ascribable to identity development processes happening (Keyes, 2019) concertedly with the attempt to make meaning of the world (Rogers et al., 2021).

Goodenow (1992a) highlights adolescents' need to define themselves in and through social circles and social categorizations. Hegel (1807/1998) explicates the boundary making and identity formation processes as co-occurring *and* contingent upon both a self *and* an other; that is, "they recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another" (p. 860). Hegel (1807/1998) posits the identification of self as dependent on the other yet also in *contrast* to the other– I is defined as not-other. Adolescents develop their self-concept and identity through relation to the other, by responses of the other, and by identification with groups (Allen et al., 2022).

Boundary-making is intrinsic to identity development (Samuel, 2022). Through identity development processes, people define (and defend) themselves "*against* that which [they] perceive as different" (p. 49). Conceptualizations of self are exclusionary of the other, of that which is outside the self, and so the other is reciprocally defined *against* the self (Samuel, 2022).

Group identity is formed and informed in much the same way, according to research that indicates humans quickly categorize other humans (Bacon, 2020) and instinctively consider those they distinguish from outside their group to be a threat (Cohen, 2022). In addition to individual and social identity development, belonging in adolescence is important for "psychosocial adjustment, coping, resiliency and ultimately, the transition into adulthood" (Allen, 2021, p. 26). Research has shown the devastating impacts of not belonging during adolescence, to include "emotional distress, drug abuse, violence, and suicidality" (Cohen, 2022, p. 232).

Cohen (2022) contends, "Inner belonging is inextricably linked to belonging with others. Our ability to see the other as ourselves is deepened as we uncover within ourselves the illusion of separateness, the fundamental unity at the core of our being" (p. 82). Margolius et al. (2020) place absolute importance on relationships in adolescent development. Relationships with adults and peers impact youth identity development and feelings of belonging while providing a safe space "for young people to express agency, power, and voice" (Margolius et al., 2020, p. 1). Goodenow (1992a) purports that a sense of belonging within a social group mitigates anxiety in enigmatic situations, which is particularly relevant for young people as they seek to make meaning of themselves, of the world, and of their place in it. The following subthemes of belonging in adolescence are reviewed in the ensuing sections: school belonging, school racial demographics and sense of school belonging, school belonging outcomes, sense of belonging and students of Color, and gaps in school belonging research.

School Belonging

Much of the research on adolescents' need to belong has been applied in schools (Schall et al., 2016). School serves as the primary site of social engagement and identity development

for adolescents (Glass & Berry, 2022; Hailey, 2022) and provides opportunity for belonging (Allen, 2021). Within the physical and ideological structures of education, learning happens among many others (Goodenow, 1992a). Further, education (higher order thinking) is itself a social process (Goodenow, 1992a). Goodenow (1992a) contends that learning takes place *between* people rather than *within* people. The processes of learning and development are enmeshed within social frameworks; examining the constructs of learning and development within social schemes can enhance our understanding of belonging (Gooedenow, 1992a).

Goodenow's (1992) seminal study on school belonging provided a widely-accepted definition of school belonging: "The extent to which [students] feel personally accepted, respected, included and supported by others in the school social environment" (p. 4). Goodenow's definition laid the groundwork for further research, and contemporary researchers concerned with school belonging adopted Goodenow's definition (Eryilmaz, 2021; Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Keyes, 2019; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Lardier et al., 2019; Moffa et al., 2018; Saleem et al., 2022; Slaton et al., 2023). Other scholars, most with a nod toward Goodenow (1992), expounded or expanded the conceptualization of school belonging (Moffa et al., 2018). Margolius et al. (2020) define school belonging as a student's sense of a rightful place within a particular school community where their true identities and experiences– and expressions of both– are included and valued. Hailey (2022) refutes a unidimensional look at school belonging and instead proposes a multifaceted understanding of belonging within domains of safety, support, and relational connection. Goodenow and Grady (1993) assert that the climate and culture of a school can have more profound impacts on student belongingness than peers or social circles. Murphy and Zirkel (2015) theorized that generalized school belonging, that is, a student's feeling that (s)he belongs in education proper, is a precursory

domain to particular school belonging. Generalized school belonging is not site-specific but rather refers to school belonging within the institution of education (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015).

Regardless of differences in nomenclature, over the last three decades, educational stakeholders have progressively acknowledged the importance of school climate and culture on student belonging and educational outcomes (Hailey, 2022; Moffa et al., 2018). Margolius et al. (2020) stress the significance of schools as social sites of belonging, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the social unrest of 2020, both of which resulted in young people reporting disconnection from others. These political and social circumstances were perhaps exacerbated by the tendency for adolescent "sense of trust in adults at school, their self-esteem, and their motivation for academic work […] to decline in their teens" (Cohen, 2022, p. 232). A third of students in a survey involving school belonging across 72 countries reported feeling that they do not belong at school (Allen, 2021). Allen (2021) and Cohen (2022) charge educational stakeholders with adopting effective strategies and methods to nurture belonging in schools. The consecutive sections review the ecology of belonging and school belonging as socially mediated, both subthemes of school belonging.

The Ecology of Belonging

Adolescents exist as, within, and between systems (Margolius et al., 2020). Researchers argue for the consideration of these systems when exploring sense of belonging (Keyes, 2019; Lardier et al., 2019; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Schall et al., 2016). Belonging cannot be understood through individual experiences alone nor by school climate and culture alone (Hailey, 2022). Students in the same school experience differential levels of belonging due to a variety of factors (e.g. race, gender, sexuality, etc.) (Hailey, 2022). Therefore, sense of belonging is best understood in an environmental context, an ecology of belonging (Pardede et

al., 2021). Space is imbued with signposts for belonging or othering (Wise, 2022). Relative to the present study, signposts include predominantly White contexts, colorblind ideology, and visibility. Experiences within a particular setting necessarily attach qualities to the setting; correlatively, conditions and qualities of the setting necessarily attach to qualities of experiences (Pardede et al., 2021). The resulting interconnection between experiences and setting defines a sense of belonging or unbelonging (Padede et al., 2021).

Though Williams et al. (2020) defend the subjectivity of environments (that environments are open to interpretation and that these interpretations matter), quantifiable and qualifiable differences emerge between contexts and variables such as urbanicity, safety, and more (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). For example, rural youth are less likely than their urban peers to report a sense of belonging (Margolius et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021). However, belonging "does not have to be left to chance" (Block, 2008, p. xii); rather, structures of belonging can be embedded within spatial constructions.

School Belonging as Socially Mediated

Relationships in adolescence are paramount to identity development (Keyes, 2019). Sense of school belonging is socially mediated through a "complex web of social and personal relationships" (Goodenow & Grady 1993, p. 60). The social schemas within a school governs student sense of belonging (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Particularly relevant are student to student relationships (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Lardier et al., 2019; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015) and student to teacher relationships (Cohn-Vargas, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020), though scholars vary in their prioritization of one over the other. Researchers also found that supportive relationships outside of school positively impacted school

sense of belonging (Margolius et al., 2020; Lardier et al., 2019). The role of peers and the role of teachers, both subthemes of school belonging as socially mediated, and are reviewed below.

The Role of Peers. Adolescents develop their sense of self through others and how they believe others perceive them, not simply in an interpersonal context but also in an overarching context of "how they are likely perceived in society at large" (Schall et al., 2016, p. 463). Adolescents produce and absorb information about who they believe themselves to be and about who they believe others to be (Schall et al., 2016). Their identities are both informed by and inform other identities (Schall et al., 2016). Schall et al. (2016) explains the social process of identity formation as involving the assignation of youth by their peers "into social categories based on perceived social characteristics" (p. 463), a boundary making process of who belongs and who does not (Yuval-Davis, 2006). Students who identify with a principally external locus of control believe they are powerless in the boundary making processes that determine social circles, that is, that peers and peer social circles control if and how they fit in at school (Schall et al., 2016). The role of peers in deploying mechanisms of school belonging may be particularly powerful for students of Color. Students of Color in a predominantly White high school may feel powerless in their ability to control or affect their own expressions and manifestations of visibility and belonging. Riel (2021) found that racial microaggressions negatively impacted school belonging for rural students of Color.

Fan and Bellmore (2023) note the importance of friendships related to sense of school belonging. In a study of friendship quality profiles, Fan and Bellmore (2023) determined that friendships categorized as realistic or ideal positively impacted students' sense of belonging whereas friendships categorized as somewhat problematic negatively impacted students' sense of belonging. Students with idealistic or realistic friendships are "more likely to receive the

necessary social and academic support from their best friends than adolescents with somewhat problematic relationships" (Fan & Bellmore, 2023, p. 16). Students' friendship profiles bear significantly on their perceptions of the school environment more generally; friendships, therefore, "can contribute to structuring environments" and therefore to improving outcomes (Fan & Bellmore, 2023, p. 16). Social engagements and relationships aggregate to form a cohesive and stable perception of belonging (Schall et al., 2016). The nature and quality of interactions and relationships "become the source material for more enduring perceptions of the school social climate, broadly, and peer acceptance, more specifically" (Schall et al., 2016, p. 462). Byrd (2015) emphasized the importance of school racial climate to belonging.

The Role of Teachers. Classrooms are a constitutive element of school belonging (Cohen, 2022; Keyes, 2019; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Beyond a physical space, a classroom is "a distinctive psychological reality for each student in it" (Cohen, 2022, p. 116). Studies show that variations in school belonging are greater within the same classroom than between classrooms (Cohen, 2022). Research supports the importance of social bonds between teachers and students (Allen, 2021; Lardier et al., 2019). Fan and Bellmore (2023) contend that the role of teachers is comparable to the role of peers in the formula for school belonging while Goodenow (1992) privileges the importance of adults in students' perception that they belong at school. Cohen (2022) and Keyes (2019) agree with Goodenow (1992) and further claim that the role of teachers overwhelm the role of peers in constructions of student sense of belonging. Teachers are uniquely positioned to facilitate relationships with and between students while fostering a classroom that enhances both, thus advancing student belonging (Schall et al., 2016).

Keyes' (2019) inquiry into factors that promote classroom belonging and engagement among high school students found that in the absence of positive peer relationships within the classroom, students still felt a sense of belonging if their teacher was effective "in fostering relationships and constructing an engaging learning environment" (p. 183); the singular most influential factor in classroom belonging is the moderating role of the teacher (Keyes, 2019). Teachers play a pivotal role in developing students' sense of classroom belonging (Keyes, 2019). Cohen (2022) identifies factors in the teacher-student relationship that most promote student belonging are respect, encouragement, and the feeling of being heard. Additionally, Cohen (2022) highlights the importance of teacher fairness and high expectations, while Allen (2021) found that teachers' "sense of belonging to their schools" is predictive of "their students' sense of belonging" (p. 32) to their schools.

Academic achievement and sense of belonging are mutually reinforcing (Keyes, 2019; Korperschoek et al., 2020; Schall et al., 2016). Students' achievement increases through classroom engagement (Margolius et al., 2020). Several key classroom features are necessary for student achievement and engagement, which informs school belonging: relationships with and between students (Keyes, 2019), value of students (Margolius et al., 2020; Schall et al., 2016), value of learning (Schall et al., 2016), classroom management practices grounded in inclusive and fair practices (Keyes, 2019), mastery-oriented teaching and learning (Gray, 2017; Keyes, 2019; Korpershoek et al., 2020), high expectations for achievement (Schall et al., 2016), student choice (Gray, 2017; Margolius et al., 2020), student voice (Margolius et al., 2020); challenge and rigor (Gray, 2017), and curriculum that is racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse (Gray, 2017; Louie et al., 2022; Slaton et al., 2023).

Louie et al. (2022) highlights the importance of "decentering whiteness as the axis around which all learning must revolve" (p. 10). Diversifying curriculum to include all expressions of humanity, all identities (individual and collective) provides a comprehensive look at the cognitions and contributions of people of Color (Louie et al., 2022). Curricular representation can enhance engagement and belonging as students of Color "see their cultural ways of knowing and being reflected in the pedagogy" (Louie et al., 2022, p. 10). The experience of seeing oneself reflected in the curriculum can be appreciably affirming for students of Color who experience acts and expressions of othering (Mitchell et al., 2017). Slaton et al. (2023) found a correlation between a teacher's cultural humility and a student's sense of classroom belonging despite reportedly low levels of school belonging. Even among students who experienced low or no school belonging, the cultural humility of the teachers had a moderating ability to invoke classroom belonging for students of Color (Slaton et al., 2023).

School Racial Demographics and Sense of School Belonging

Race is unfactored in sense of school belonging for White students (Knowles & Hawkman, 2020). However, Murphy and Zirkel (2015) postulate the positive association between school racial demographics and sense of school belonging for students of Color– that is, students of Color experience and express greater levels of belonging in schools with higher population levels of their racial or ethnic group. Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligni (2013) draw a similar conclusion– that school racial composition informs students' of Color sense of belonging– but their research did not extend beyond schools where there was no dominant racial majority.

In Hailey's (2022) study involving students' and families' school choice in New York City and their perception of anticipated school belonging based on school racial profiles, Hailey

hypothesized that students and families, irrespective of race, would anticipate a greater sense of belonging in schools with the greatest proportion of their same race peers. Same-race peers are important agents in external processes of belonging (Louie et al., 2022). Hailey (2022) affirmed the correlation by referring to conclusive research demonstrating that students of Color express higher levels of belonging in schools with higher proportions of same-race peers. Students of Color who attend predominantly White schools "indicate feeling isolated, marginalized, and heightened racial discrimination" (Hailey, 2022). In contrast, Byrd (2015) does not emphasize school racial demographics but rather school racial climate. Byrd (2015) highlights the importance of positive interracial engagement and relationships with other students and with teachers. Qualities of relationships are related to qualities of sense of belonging; degrees of positive relationships are related to degrees of positive sense of belonging (Byrd, 2015).

Sense of belonging is mediated by internal processes and perspectives such as worth, agency, self-efficacy, and power as well as by external processes and perspectives informed by relationships of care and reciprocity (Louie et al., 2022). Hailey (2022) notes that schools where students have limited opportunity for engagement with students of a different race than their own act as an epicenter where biases toward racial outgroups are cultivated in the form of "racist rhetoric, hostility, and violence" toward racial outgroups (p. 903). For students of Color in predominantly White educational contexts, the resulting harm (in many forms) can be profound (Hailey, 2022).

Schall et al. (2016) found that locus of control beliefs in the school environment affects school belonging. When students identified a heightened sense of external locus of control, they felt unable to affect their own belonging (Schall et al., 2016). Findings from Schall et al. (2016) have implications for students of Color in predominantly White contexts who may position the

locus of control as entirely external, rendering them powerless in their ability to inform their own sense of belonging (Schall et al., 2016). Sense of powerlessness may impact internal processes involved with sense of belonging such as agency, power, self-efficacy, and worth (Louie et al., 2022). These processes cannot be divorced from mechanisms of visibility and invisibility related to space and power (Foucault (1977/1995), which are reviewed in the following section on racialized boundaries of belonging in schools, a subtheme of school racial demographics and sense of school belonging.

Racialized Boundaries of Belonging in Schools

Frameworks of belonging exist not only in human psychology but also in societal structures (Wise, 2022) such as the schoolhouse. Hailey (2022) highlights the racist rhetoric and violence happening on the national stage in recent years as contouring school belonging. Williams et al. (2020) refer to the 400-year-old structures and narratives of systemic racism that directly correlate to differential senses of belonging. Murphy and Zirkel (2015) therefore contend that school belonging is understood differently for students of Color who experience racism in all of its forms, specifically social identity and stereotype threat, in the schoolhouse which elicits belonging uncertainty.

Well-documented disparate educational opportunities and outcomes (Glass & Berry, 2022; Williams et al., 2020) buttress students' of Color perceptions of unequal treatment in schools, particularly related to discriminatory and exclusionary disciplinary practices (Margolius et al., 2020; Slaton et al., 2023). These elements, compounded by curriculum focused on a White and Western experience (Margolius et al., 2020) taught by a predominantly White teaching staff (Slaton et al., 2023), can result in students of Color feeling less sense of belonging compared to their White peers in predominantly White settings (Saleem et al., 2022; Slaton et al.,

2023). Because students of Color are more likely than their White peers to experience threats to their individual identities based on their racial identities (Louie et al., 2022) and are more adversely impacted by colorblind ideology than their White peers (Saleem et al., 2022), they are less likely to experience school belonging (Louie et al., 2022; Saleem et al., 2022). A sense of not belonging can have detrimental effects on students' of Color self-perception and can impact "what [they] believe is possible" (Wise, 2022, p. 115).

Students of Color bear the psychological weight of determining whether or not they belong in educational institutions generally and in particular schools (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015) in the context of an enduring history of exclusionary educational systems and practices (Margolius et al., 2020). Students determine whether or not they, and others like them, belong in educational institutions in general by evaluating "whether people like them have a central place in the curriculum and in the organization and running of the school" (Murphy & Zirkel, 2015, p. 21). The daily minutiae involved with students' of Color lived experiences at school inform how students manifest and project their identity and how they see or do not see themselves as a student (Hanley et al., 2022).

Elements that threaten belonging "can be more intense for those who identify as belonging to racial minorities" (Allen, 2021, p. 5). Murphy and Zirkel (2015) contend that even in schools where students of Color are the racial majority, a sense of belonging may be misaligned because "education is raced in ways that favor White students" (p. 28). American public schools were "established as white spaces"—by White people, for White people (Glass & Berry, 2022, p. 24). Students of Color may feel as though they do not belong in education proper or in school, and they are likely to find environmental clues (including predominantly White contexts) that reinforce this belief (Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022). Hailey (2022) notes the

implications for Black and Latinx students in predominantly White schools could be particularly disparate. Therefore, students of Color attending predominantly White, rural high schools may experience greater levels of "belonging-related stressors" (Allen et al., 2021, p. 89).

Hailey (2022) found that though people of all races actively choosing a high school in New York City made choices that indicated a preference for predominantly same-race schools, White respondents consistently rated Black and Latinx schools as sites of less potential for belonging. Hailey (2022) identified that "the negative relationship between racial sentiment and racialized projections of school belonging was most apparent among the White respondents" (p. 896) whose negative racial sentiments were uniformly applied to Asian, Latinx and Black contexts. The collapsibility of anti-Asian, anti-Latinx, and anti-Black sentiments suggest a sentiment of pro-White / anti-other, reifying boundaries between White and other (Hailey, 2022). White respondents employed colorblind narratives such as "safety" and "fitting in" but equally employed racial stereotypes and "outgroup hostility" to evaluate potential school settings (Hailey, 2022, p. 884).

School Belonging Outcomes

Understanding belonging as a biological need offers an organizational structure for understanding human behavior and wellbeing. School belonging outcomes are positively correlated with physical, mental, social, behavioral, and economic aspects (Allen et al., 2021; Wise, 2022). Academic outcomes and sense of belonging are more than just corollaries, they are "mutually reinforcing" (Louie et al., 2022, p. 4).

Research indicates that belonging positively correlates to overall wellbeing and happiness (Cohen, 2022; Louie et al., 2022). Relative to the present study, students with a strong sense of school belonging experience favorable outcomes related to academic engagement (Eryilmaz,

2021; Gray, 2017; Margolius et al., 2020); academic achievement (Korpershoek et al., 2020); academic motivation (Byrd, 2015; Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013; Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Gray, 2017); and perception of academic competence (Gray, 2017; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Saleem et al., 2022). Sense of school belonging positively impacts student attendance (Allen et al., 2022; Cohen, 2022; Saleem et al., 2022); behavior (Cohen, 2022; Korpershoek et al., 2020); and development (Schall et al., 2016). Furthermore, sense of school belonging influences students' future aspirations and attitudes (Irvin et al., 2016; Korpershoek et al., 2020), and perception and representation of self (Allen et al., 2022; Cohen, 2022; Moffa et al., 2018; Pardede et al., 2021). Sense of school belonging also mediates social outcomes such as welcomeness (Hailey, 2022), safety (Hailey, 2022; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015), and inclusion (Allen et al., 2022; Hailey, 2022). Finally, sense of school belonging enhances psychological and emotional functioning and wellbeing (Cohen, 2022; Moffa et al., 2018; Pardede et al., 2021).

Research also shows that the positive outcomes in adolescence listed here translate to positive outcomes in adulthood, and so "feelings of belonging in school can have profound implications for a lifetime" (Wise, 2022, p. 19). In a longitudinal study involving 14,800 adolescents, Allen (2021) found that sense of school belonging "continued to have enduring power" (p. 40) that lasted "well beyond the time that the individual [left] school and venture[d] out into the wider world" (p. 30). For the purpose of the present study, the following measures and effects of school belonging are more intimately reviewed as characteristics of school belonging outcomes: academic engagement, academic motivation, academic achievement, behavior, psychological and emotional functioning and wellbeing, and perception and representation of self.

Academic Engagement

Adolescents who feel they belong in educational contexts generally and in specific educational contexts express greater levels of academic engagement in those particular settings (Margolius et al., 2020). Margolius et al. (2020) contends, "When young people feel known, safe, and supported by members of their learning communities, they are more likely to be engaged in their learning, and see that learning as meaningful to them and their lives" (p. 1). When students feel they belong in a community, they are more likely to invest in that community and reciprocally, in themselves (Margolius et al., 2020). In a Turkish study on the relationship between classroom engagement and school belonging, Eryilmaz (2021) found that students who experienced and expressed greater levels of school belonging became more engaged in their classrooms. Student curiosity and interest as well as a sense of integration and investment increased (Eryilmaz, 2021). Keyes' (2019) study of ninth grade students' experiences in their most and least favorite classes revealed linkages between students' experiences of belonging in the classroom and their engagement in that classroom. Keyes (2019) differentiates between cognitive engagement and emotional engagement. Emotional engagement encapsulates how students respond to relationships and factors in the school environment (e.g. teachers, peers, curriculum); positive emotional engagement involves school belonging, "feeling important, and identifying and valuing the successes associated with school-related outcomes" (p. 172).

Academic Motivation

When students feel like "full and valued members of the school, they are willing to put forth more effort and to commit themselves more fully to the purposes of the school" (Goodenow, 1992, p. 16). Goodenow (1992) notes a symbiotic relationship between students' feelings of acceptance and respect and their level of effort and commitment; the more a student

feels accepted and respected, the more they engage in the environment, and the more a student engages in the environment, the more the student feels accepted and respected (Goodenow, 1992; Goodenow & Grady, 1993). Goodenow (1992) and Goodenow and Grady (1993) found that sense of school belonging is a necessary precursor to academic motivation. Gray (2017) correlates levels of belongingness with levels of academic motivation. Students with a healthy sense of school belonging report persevering academically because they like school and because they feel school is "useful to their current or future lives" (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013, p. 680).

Academic Achievement

Korpershoek et al. (2020) discovered a slight but positive correlation between school belonging and academic achievement; however, educational researchers and scholars have not reached a consensus on the association between school belonging and academic achievement (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Theoretically, students with fulfilled school belonging needs (and therefore strong connections to school that result in increased engagement), would then internalize academic valuation and experience success (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Gilleeen-O'Neel and Fuligni's (2013) study evaluated within-person academic outcomes and utilized grade point average as an indicator of academic success; they collected longitudinal data comparing sense of belonging across individual students' high school careers. Though their study revealed an association between school belonging, "intrinsic value" (i.e. "the extent to which students enjoy school"), and utility value (i.e. "the extent to which students feel that school is useful to their current or future lives"), they found that there was no correlation between sense of school belonging and academic achievement (Gillen & Fuligni, 2013, p. 689); however, indicators of the correlation between sense of school belonging and academic

perseverance was present (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013). Students can feel a sense of belonging at school and still struggle academically (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligni, 2013).

Behavior

Sense of school belonging lessens behavioral issues (Schall et al., 2016). The factors that constitute school belonging, such as positive social relationships, act as protective assets for problematic behavior (Schall et al., 2016). When positive social relationships are present, the potential for inappropriate behavior diminishes (Schall et al., 2016). "Adaptive school behaviors" are associated with positive school experiences and sense of belonging; whereas, the absence or lower levels of school belonging are associated with maladaptive or inappropriate behaviors (Schall et al., 2016, p. 464). Schall et al. (2016) claim, "Disconnected youth cannot leverage or activate the supportive potential of the school environment" (Schall et al., 2016, p. 464) to regulate or understand appropriate codes of behavior. Higher sense of belonging is positively associated with less instances of high-risk behaviors such as substance use (Lardier et al., 2019). Students generally behave positively when their need to belong is met (Pardede et al., 2021).

Psychological and Emotional Functioning and Wellbeing

Sense of school belonging impacts overall psychological and emotional functioning and wellbeing (Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Moffa et al., 2018). School belonging is indicative of mental health quality (Lardier et al., 2019). High levels of school belonging are associated with happiness, inclusion, and social support that results in "improved psychological functioning" (Moffa et al., 2018, p. 10). School belonging is a protective factor against psychological and "psychosocial distress" through adolescence and into the adult lives of students (Moffa et al., 2018, p. 3). Low levels of school belonging are associated with

depressive symptoms (Lardier et al., 2019). Inversely and relatedly, "Students who reported low life satisfaction also reported the lowest sense of school belonging compared to their peers" (Moffa et al., 2018, p. 9).

Perception and Representation of Self

Sense of school belonging impacts a student's perception and representation of self. Identity formation in adolescence is a social process in which an understanding of self is negotiated between a self and another human being (Pardede et al., 2021). Social membership or exclusion further impacts this process and, as a result, one's perception of self (Pardede et al., 2021). Pardede et al. (2021) assert that school belonging influences "how people appraise themselves, how they feel about themselves" (p. 2). A strong relationship exists between school belonging and self-concept, such that experiences of support and commendation enhance student self-perception and regard (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Positive perception of self and the confidence associated with it catalyzes social connection with peers and adults (Williams et al., 2020). However, the pressure to fit within social matrices can shape representation of self, due to the drive to fulfill belonging needs (Pardede et al., 2021). Pardede et al. (2021) conclude that representation of self is very much concerned with the politics of belonging, boundary making processes, and so is manipulated and regulated by the biological need to belong. When belonging needs are met, "the way we present ourselves socially to others is an important aspect of how we balance our needs to belong and to be accepted up against the desired view of one's social-image in the eyes of others" (Pardede et al., 2021, p. 2). Pardede et al. (2021) invoke the movie *The Breakfast Club*, where a group of students initially presented themselves in a way that they thought would elicit belonging;

however, as they developed a sense of belonging, they were able to bring their whole selves to the environment.

Sense of Belonging and Students of Color

Sense of belonging is important but complex for students of Color (Lardier et al., 2019; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015; Slaton et al., 2023); in "almost all education systems worldwide, socioeconomically disadvantaged students and students from minority backgrounds report lower sense of school belonging than do more advantaged students" (Allen, 2021, p. 37). In a study by Williams et al. (2020), an intervention designed to increase belonging had disproportionately positive outcomes for students of Color: "They failed fewer classes (completely eliminating the achievement gap between minoritized and nonminoritized students) and earned higher grades (reducing the achievement gap by 86%). There is also evidence suggesting that they recorded fewer instances of disciplinary sanction" (p. 432). Students also had improved attendance, on par with similar results for their White peers (Williams et al., 2020). Because students of Color are more likely to endure adverse experiences at school, they are more vulnerable to low senses of belonging or to nonbelonging (Slaton et al., 2023). However, students' of Color constructions and senses of school belonging (and the determinants of each) within the context of their daily lives at school has been largely unexplored by educational stakeholders and researchers (Hanley et al., 2022; Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022).

Gaps in School Belonging Research

Much research on belonging has been done in questionnaire studies or lab experiments (Allen et al., 2022). Leary (2022) recommends future studies explore "questions [of belonging] in the context of people's ongoing social lives– at work or school, in their peer groups, in the community, or wherever" (qtd. in Allen et al., 2022, p. 1151). Allen et al. (2022) designate

academic contexts as critical research sites to "further examine the role of culture and social identity in belonging processes" (p. 1152). Lardier et al. (2019) also assert the criticality of examining belonging within academic environments, particularly through the lens of the "cultural and social identities of their students" in order to support belonging.

Within the dearth of research analyzing a sense of belonging for students of Color who attend predominantly White, rural high schools, is the opportunity to gain a deeper, "more textured understanding of how school belonging can be conceptualized, studied, and applied [to] have the greatest positive impact in schools" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1153). Research findings based on interviews and focus groups may explore "institutional or instructional opportunities to belong at school" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1152) as well as interventions or strategies that might be effective to increase or strengthen belonging at school (Allen et al., 2022). Exploring adolescent sense of belonging can help districts design effective prevention or intervention approaches (Korpershoek et al., 2020; Moffa et al., 2018) to enhance learning as well as academic and other outcomes (Korpershoek et al., 2020).

Schall et al. (2016) argue that investigating how students experience, express, and make meaning of belonging can help researchers understand the impact on adolescent development. They further contend that contradistinctions emerge related to derivations of belonging (Schall et al., 2016). The present study analyzed visibility as a point of origin. Keyes (2019) recommends applying the framework of adolescent development when analyzing school belonging in order to understand how "school and academic histories and identities operate for children and adolescents within a school context" to facilitate or restrict belonging (p. 197). Williams et al. (2020) offer the subjectivity of belonging as a site for further exploration.

Edenborg (2017) identifies areas for future scholarship and laments that "though notions of belonging and visibility tend to be linked and are often assumed to presuppose each other, the relation between visibility and belonging remains theoretically underdeveloped" (2017, p. 14). Edenborg (2017) suggests future study to "analytically conceptualize the role of visibility in the production and contestation of belonging" (p. 14). The present study exists within and sought to excavate the nexus of visibility and belonging through counternarrative.

Summary

The research presented in the literature review is centered around belonging (Allen et al., 2021; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) theories, which together served as the theoretical framework for the present study. The literature reviewed in this chapter supports the need to study the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools *from the perspectives of students of Color*. The current study sought to explore constructs of belonging (or othering) and visibility (hypervisibility, or invisibility) within the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools.

The literature review focused on extant literature related to American rurality, the colorblind schoolhouse, and belonging in adolescence. Belonging, and school belonging more specifically, is correlative with positive academic, behavioral, emotional, psychological, and other outcomes within and beyond the school years (Allen, 2021; Allen et al., 2021; Wise, 2022). Yet, the experiences of students of Color in predominantly White contexts is undertheorized, even more so in *rural,* predominantly White contexts (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Knowles & Hawkman, 2020; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). A thorough review of related literature reveals the gap the present study sought to fill—particularly the cross-section

created by gaps on race and rurality in public education research, gaps on colorblindness in public education research, and gaps in school belonging in public education research.

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Students of Color were defined as students who identify as Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, or two or more races (NCES, 2023). Rural, predominantly White high schools were defined as schools that are situated within geographic spaces that are not urban or metropolitan and whose student populations in grades 9 through 12 are racially identified as majority (greater than 50%) White.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The need to belong is intrinsically present within the human genome (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), but the construct and experiences of belonging are complicated for adolescents maneuvering through the intricacies and nuances of individual and social identity development processes (Allen et al., 2022). Moreover, the lived racialized experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White schools are disregarded by colorblindness and by a body of educational research that does not represent or explore those experiences (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). The problem addressed in this study was the dearth of research investigating the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools.

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Research Question 1: How do students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 2: How do students of Color experience and navigate visibility in rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 3: How do students of Color experience and navigate belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools?

Belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953), which underlie the present study as the conceptual and theoretical framework, served as the mechanism through which to think meaningfully and critically about the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools. The conceptual and theoretical framework aided in the contextualization of those experiences within the social and political constellations under which schools function. The nexus of belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) subverted political and social narratives—that other and render invisible people of Color in America—that are reified in rural education research by the omission of youth of Color, particularly in predominantly White settings. Disrupting the Whiteness of rural, predominantly White schools by centralizing the experiences of students of Color in the present study created an opening in rural education research through which to meaningfully explore the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools.

The principal tenets and processes of a qualitative methodological approach are most harmonious with the foundational elements of the present study reaffirmed above. Qualitative inquiry explores the breadth and depth of the human experience and is therefore undergirded by participant voice. The data of *language* ("data with a soul" (Brown, 2010, 1:06)) is both the sub- and superstructure of qualitative research; that is, participant words inform an overarching and comprehensive word. The present study sought to explore the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools, *from the perspective of students of Color*.

To narrow the gap in research exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools, narrative inquiry was employed. Narrative inquiry is a

way to think about the human experience, about the storied lives people live on storied landscapes and the narratives that emerge from them (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). People experience life narratively, in the stories people are told, in the stories people tell themselves and in the stories people tell one another (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative happens in particular places (applied to the present study: rural, predominantly White high schools) and at particular times (applied to the present study: adolescence, in this social and political moment) and so cannot be extracted from the contexts in which it is embedded; therefore, a function of narrative inquiry is to interrogate and illuminate the "layered narratives at work in their inquiry space" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 70). Layered narratives include the physical, personal, emotional, and social (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018), the temporal and spatial (Clandinin & Connelly) as well as the "institutional [...] cultural, familial, and linguistic" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 58) conditions in which each participant's experiences are embedded and that consequently contour every experience (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). A narrative approach applies to the present study as it aimed to contextualize the experience of students of Color within the space of school, the space of rurality, within race, within time (adolescence), as well as within broader social and political narratives.

The duplicity of narrative emerges in its specificity to the individual and transcendence beyond the individual as the result of participants sharing in an experience, existence, or identity or as the result of participants being "seen as composing lives that shape and are shaped by" metanarratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 43). Narrative inquiry facilitates a consequential understanding of what it means to "live in [the participants'] countries, speak their language, negotiate their streets on their buses and turn our keys in their locks" (Blaise qtd. in Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000, p. 54). Applying a narrative approach to the present study opened the space for understanding particular and collective lived experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools, which is particularly important given the Whiteness of educational staff (NCES, 2020) and school boards (Stoll, 2019) as well as the lack of research exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022).

Narrative methodology requires narrative thinking which constitutes the phenomenon, the method, the process, and the product of the present study. Interlaced with narrative methodology, the conceptual and theoretical framework, cemented in belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) provided a guide for how to approach data collection and analysis. Data collection was initiated by participant engagement in and with narrative through semi-structured interviews, defined by Ravitch and Carl (2021) as functioning with a specific set of interview questions while prioritizing the conversational element of interview by taking a tailored approach that is "co-constructed with each participant" (p. 134). Semi-structured interviews are a customized process wherein participants are asked predetermined questions in an order that attempts not to interrupt the narrative flow; additionally, semi-structured interviews allow space for probes to deepen the conversation and enhance meaning (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). The social components of visibility and belonging relative to the present study are simultaneously the phenomena, the theory, the process, and the product.

Interview questions were grounded in belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) as a structure for exploring the experiences of students of Color who

attend rural, predominantly White high schools. Through semi-structured interviews, participants reflected on their experiences as toward belonging or othering, toward visibility or invisibility. Further, belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953), created an opportunity to look at predominantly White educational spaces through the lens of race in the context of political and social projects of visibility and invisibility, belonging. Application of this conceptual and theoretical framework to the present study additionally enhanced visibility and belonging of students of Color within rural educational research specifically focused on predominantly White settings.

As the principal investigator of this study, I took a microlinguistic approach to data analysis by analyzing units of language (words, phrases, and more substantial elements of discourse), a process that is characteristic of dialogic analysis (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In this type of qualitative data analysis, researchers mine themes from participant narratives to procure the meaning of the story (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Due to the complexity of narrative, I additionally applied a postmodernist approach to data analysis by deconstructing participant stories, an "unmaking of them by such analytic strategies as exposing dichotomies, examining silences, and attending to disruptions and contradictions" (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 72).

During and following data analysis, participant narratives were restoried. Restorying in narrative inquiry makes meaning of raw data through analysis processes such as coding and theme development and then retells the story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The three-dimensional space approach to restorying was applied to the present study. The three-dimensional space approach focuses on interaction (personal and social experiences), continuity (temporality), and situation (context and place) (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). Narratives were restoried individually while contributing to a collective, overarching narrative. Collecting, analyzing, restorying, and sharing qualitative data in the form of individual and collective narratives contributes to the limited body of research exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools.

Site Information and Demographics

The setting of the present study was the rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine. In the state of Maine, where the present study was conducted, 61% of the population lives in rural communities, thus establishing the largest rural population share in the United States (Robson et al., 2019; United States Census Bureau, 2023). As a result, Maine has the largest distribution of rural student enrollment, with 53% of Maine's public-school students considered rural (Robson et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). Despite the fact that people of Color now constitute the majority (53%) of the under-18 population (Frey, 2022), students of Color account for only 12% of publicly funded students in Maine (University of Maine System, 2020). Participant solicitation, recruitment, and engagement was conducted through direct contact with administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers at rural, predominantly White high schools as well as through contact with the Maine Department of Education and the Maine Young Peoples' Caucus. Participants were not recruited or accepted from the researcher's site of employment as an administrator at a rural, predominantly White high school in Maine.

Participants and Sampling Method

Homogeneous purposive sampling was employed to identify study participants. In homogeneous sampling participants are selected for intensive study based on similar experiences or characteristics (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Participants in the present study, though incalculably diverse from one another, were unified in the shared experience of attending a rural,

predominantly White public high school as a student of Color. Through the experience of being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White public high school, participants shared "membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 208). Study participants identified as Black, Latinx, Native American or Alaska Native, Asian, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, or as two or more races (NCES, 2023). Study participants were at least 18 years old and were members of the graduating class of 2024. Having completed or nearly completed their high school education, study participants were positioned to thoughtfully reflect on the entirety of their experiences as students of Color who attended a rural, predominantly White public high school.

The sample size consisted of six study participants in order to balance the saturation of individual narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018) with the multiplicity of perspectives necessary to represent the complexity and diversity of the human experience (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A small sample size offered the researcher the richness of depth not possible with larger sample sizes (Subedi, 2021). A small sample size lent itself to a comprehensive understanding of the particular social and cultural contexts within which individual participants are embedded (Subedi, 2021). Further, narrative inquiry is relational, and a small sample size was necessary to afford the researcher time in the field to build relationships with participants (Subedi, 2021).

Recruitment support was sought from rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine. Rural schools were identified by their designation as "rural," "distant rural," or "fringe rural" on the U.S. News and World Report website. Contact information for administrators (principals and assistant principals), guidance counselors, and teachers at rural, distant rural, or fringe rural high schools were sourced from directory information on each school's website. Contacts were asked to post paper recruitment flyers in common, high-traffic

areas within their school building for a period of two weeks. Recruitment flyers had an embedded QR code leading prospective participants to the participant information sheet (detailing the purpose of the study, what is involved in the project, possible risks and benefits, privacy and confidentiality, compensation, and participant rights). Additionally, school contacts were asked to send a copy of the recruitment email once weekly for two weeks, with the participant information sheet as an attachment, to students of Color who meet the age requirement of the study. Finally, the state of Maine Young People's Caucus was engaged as an organization via email with a request to distribute recruitment material to their members through email or during meetings as flyers.

Recruitment material directed interested study participants to contact the researcher via the researcher's password protected University of New England email. The first six respondents were selected for participation. A seventh respondent expressed interest in participation; however, she was contacted at the conclusion of all six interviews to express gratitude for her interest and to notify her that she would not be asked to participate in this study. Upon initial contact, interested participants were asked how they learned of the study, and interviews were scheduled. Participant names and contact information were documented on a Master List. Verbal consent was sought from the participant by the researcher at the start of the interview.

Instrumentation and Data Collection

Oral interviews are a customary feature of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and were the primary data collection instrument of the present study. The social components of visibility and belonging relative to the present study were simultaneously the phenomena, the theory, and the process. While the theoretical and analytical lenses of the present study are visibility and belonging, the *processes* involved with the study– visibility and

belonging– effectively worked to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Social interaction and relationship, through interviews, engaged participants directly with their lived experiences, asking them to think critically about the meaning of their experiences, a key tenet of narrative inquiry (Billett, 2004).

The "socially recollecting 'we'" (Mills, 2007, p. 29) in education proper, reflected in rural education research, is not representative of the racial diversity of the under 18 population (Frey, 2022); it is the "socially recollecting 'we'" that comprises the White majority of elected school boards and hired school staff in rural, predominantly White communities which exercise power, circumscribe the landscape, and frame the future of communities (Ruggiano, 2022; Stoll, 2019; Tieken & Montgomery, 2021). Listening to the experiences of students of Color within the racialized structures of school *told* by students of Color is necessary for cultivating equitable school spaces (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021; Jupp et al., 2019) in which everyone is visible and belongs (Louie et al., 2022).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted in strict accordance with a pre-determined and pre-approved interview protocol, informed by Creswell and Poth (2018), to include scripted interview questions. Questions were constructed through the conceptual and theoretical framework of belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953). Semi-structured interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were recorded on Zoom, an online meeting platform. Participants were asked to have their video on for introductions only but could elect to turn their cameras off during the interview. Field notes were taken throughout the interview. Video from the interview was saved to the Cloud which required the login credentials of the researcher and which was further protected by two-factor authentication.

To protect the identity of participants and to ensure confidentiality, participant information was catalogued on the master list only, and participants were asked to choose a pseudonym. The master list was accessible solely to the researcher and securely stored separately from study data. To protect confidentiality, all identifying information concerning participants, participant locations, or the people they reference during the interview was deidentified through pseudonymization in written transcripts.

Interviews were transcribed utilizing the transcription functionality through Zoom. Text from the transcription was copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document and saved locally to a hard drive, accessible exclusively to the researcher. To ensure accuracy, the researcher reviewed the video recording of the interview while cross-referencing the transcription. Errors in the automated transcription were corrected. Transcripts were verified by the researcher. Master lists and recordings were destroyed after participants had an opportunity to review restoried narratives, a process further detailed in data analysis.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis demands "total immersion in and closeness with [the] data" so that the researcher becomes "intimately familiar with [the] details, nuances, and subtleties" of the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 241). Narrative analysis is an iterative, co-constructive process between the researcher and the participant wherein both negotiate the meaning of the stories (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Member checks, the practice of authenticating experience and story, were performed through data analysis processes. More specifically, restoried narratives were shared with participants to ensure honest representation (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) affirm:

> When narrative inquirers return to participants with text, their question is not so much, Have I got it right? Is this what you said? Is this what you do? Rather, it is something much more global and human: Is this you? Do you see yourself here? Is this the character you want to be when this is read by others? These are more questions of identity than they are questions of whether or not one has correctly reported what a participant has said or done. (p. 148)

The co-constructive process of data analysis was fundamental to the present study as it sought to explore the experiences of students of Color *from the perspective of students of Color*– even more important to the present study due to the racial identity of the White researcher. Participants had five days to verify the narrative; all participants replied.

The first meaning-making step in qualitative data analysis is coding: the process through which the essence of language-based data is captured (Saldana, 2008) and classified (Volpe White, 2019). Codes are designed to be summative and therefore represent the substance and spirit of the data collected (Saldana, 2008). Volpe White (2019) suggests researchers think about coding as placing similarly substantive data into buckets. Following the guidance of Saldana (2008), emergent codes were noted during the interview and captured as field notes which later informed the coding process.

During the coding process, the problem and purpose statements, conceptual and theoretical framework, and research questions of the present study were centralized in order to guide coding decisions (Saldana, 2008). Volpe White (2019) suggests researchers code data in a way that is "reflective of [their] worldview" and "anchored in [...] methodology, conceptual framework, and research questions" (1:40). Because the present study sought to explore the experiences of students of Color *from the perspective of students of Color*, the methodological

approach of inductive coding (derived from the data itself rather than being predetermined) aligned with the critical elements and philosophy of the study, to include its narrative origin.

InVivo coding, "use of the participants' own words to create the codes" (Volpe White, 2019, 7:55) was employed during first cycle coding and when sensible during second cycle coding to "honor and prioritize the voice of the participants" (Volpe White, 2019, 8:00). Additional attention was paid to narrative tensions, dichotomies, gaps and silences that shaped the narrative (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). After completing the first cycle of coding, applied code names were reviewed for consistency throughout and across transcripts (Kriukow, 2020). Ensuring consistency was integral to the integrity of the data and to associating like-data (Kriukow, 2020).

During second cycle coding, further alignment of terms was sought and areas for collapsibility identified (Saldana, 2008). Patterns emerged during second cycle coding which revealed "relationships, concepts, explanations, and broader categories" (Volpe White, 2019, 12:44). Throughout the iterative process of coding (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019), the data was analyzed in accordance with the conceptual and theoretical framework, the purpose and problem statements, as well as with the research questions that grounded the study (Volpe White, 2019).

While the process of coding is the first step in becoming viscerally acquainted with the data, it naturally lends itself to identifying patterns from which themes can be constructed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Themes are the purposeful aggregation of similar codes that form an overarching idea (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Volpe White (2019) and Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) caution against quantifying the qualitative by inferring significance based on the number of times a code emerges; however, Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) offer that repetition can be utilized in theme recognition due to the reasonable assumption that the recurrence of a

concept within and across transcripts likely indicates a theme. Patterns, threads, and tensions can also be leveraged to identify themes during data analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Theme recognition for the present study began during the coding process. Complete interview transcripts were input into the first column of a three-column table. Column two held first cycle codes while column three held second cycle codes. Once noted, second cycle codes were subsequently pasted into a new document in order to isolate the codes from the raw data. Themes emerged by noting repeated codes, codes that were distinctive or remarkable, codes that were most heavily substantiated, or codes that were unexpected related to the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Qualitative research experts suggest that the identification of five to seven themes is most appropriate in order to write a detailed qualitative report (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Once themes were established, they were input into a codebook worksheet with four columns consisting of theme, code names, meaning, and supporting data (direct quotations from the participant) for further analysis.

The researcher employed a microlinguistic strategy of data analysis when analyzing participant narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). In microlinguistic data analysis, the researcher interrogates units of language shared by the participant to discover the meaning of individual stories and of meta narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To address silences, dichotomies, and other narrative nuances, the researcher also took a postmodernist approach to data analysis aimed at deconstructing participant narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

A central feature of data analysis processes innate to narrative inquiry is restorying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Moving from raw data to analysis requires the researcher to make sense of shared lived experiences and

then retell the story in a meaningful way (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Ollerenshaw and Creswell (2002) defend the importance of restorying, stating that individuals often tell stories that may be missing important sequential information or that may not be "logically developed" (p. 332); "by restorying, the researcher provides a causal link among ideas" (p. 332).

Several approaches to restorying are employed in narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). The researcher harnessed codes and themes discovered through the raw data of language to exercise a three-dimensional space approach to restorying participant narratives. The three-dimensional space approach, based in Dewey's philosophy of experience, reasons that in order to understand people, three dimensions of understanding are necessary: (a) interaction, an exploration of their experiences and interactions; (b) continuity, an exploration of their interactions or experiences related to the interactions or experiences from which they came or to which they lead; and (c) situation, an exploration of the place or context in which interactions and experiences occur (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002).

Applying the three-dimensional space approach to the present study, the researcher mined the data for personal and social experiences, specifically related to how the participant experienced the world and the social interaction in which the other person "may have different intentions, purposes, and points of view" (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 239). Secondly, in applying the three-dimensional space approach, the researcher excavated experience rooted in time over the course of the participant's high school education (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002). Lastly, the researcher explored participant experiences in the physical place of the rural, predominantly White high school or the larger community within which it operates. Collecting, analyzing, and restorying qualitative data in the form of individual

and collective narratives contributes to the limited body of research exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools.

Limitations, Delimitations and Ethical Issues

Researchers are morally entrusted and ethically charged to critically analyze the potential weaknesses, boundaries, and ethical considerations of their studies (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Limitations are conditions external to the research and to the researcher that restrict or constrain the study, its scope, and its potential findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Delimitations are conditions internal to the research and set by the researcher to narrow the scope of the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Lastly, ethical considerations are a set of principles that guide research through engagement with and reflection of the three primary elements of the Belmont report on research involving human subjects: respect for persons, beneficence, and justice (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Limitations, delimitations, and ethical issues are explored in depth in the subsections to follow.

Limitations

Limitations are factors, beyond the purview of the researcher, that may weaken or constrain the study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The present study was limited by its small sample size. Small sample size is characteristic of narrative inquiry. While prioritizing the experiences and narratives of the participants in the present study, consideration must also be given to the experiences and perspectives not captured here ~~voices not heard~~ (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The present study was further limited by its embeddedness within political, social, and cultural contexts. Thompson (2019) argues that cognition is not powerful enough to overcome

institutional and systemic inequalities because the cognizing self exists within hegemonic structures that produce disparity. Social domination, control, and subordination reconstruct consciousness in ways that make awareness and critical thinking about those structures difficult (Thompson, 2019). Thompson (2019) contends that one cannot cognize about the system from within the system, that one cannot escape the shackles in the Platonic cave. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) further assert that researchers help create the world in which they find themselves; accordingly, researchers cannot be objective inquirers, "people on the high road, who study a world lesser in quality than our moral temperament would have it, people who study a world [they] did not help create" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61). Narratives are reproductions of narrative proper, a reproduction of social structures (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Because narrative inquiry is derived from and centered around the experiences of the individual in relation to others and to a social schema by researchers similarly embedded within a social schema, critics question the capacity of narrative inquiry to represent pure reality sought by formalists (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

The present study resisted resignation and aligned with Edenborg's (2017) charge to researchers to interrogate "the limits of the limits themselves" (p. 22). Edenborg contends through syllogism:

> [I]f domination is to regulate and order visibility, [then] resistance lies in the disordering, undermining, and arrangement of that regulation, by making things visible which were previously invisible, or opening up new ways to see and hear that which was already visible. (p. 22)

Narrative inquirers, then have a responsibility to resist the typical order by recognizing their contextuality, by acknowledging their embeddedness, by practicing researcher reflexivity, and

thereby exploring both the visible and the invisible in order to present research findings that could "lead to a better world" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 61). To disrupt the White habitus, the closed circuit of epistemic authority, the politics of belonging, the regimes of visibility, *the White noise*, it was essential to deconstruct the discourse of colorblindness (referring to the national racial narrative and to the body of rural educational research) through the lived experiences of students of Color within rural, predominantly White high schools.

Qualitative studies involving interviews are further limited by the interaction between the researcher and participant. The researcher designs the interview protocol, to include interview questions, and decides the conversation in which (s)he participates which sets the tone for and direction of the interview (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). As a result of researcher governance, research interviews inherently "have an inequality about them" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 110). The researcher's actions, questions, responses, verbal and nonverbal cues produce power dynamics that shape the engagement and "the ways participants respond and give accounts of their experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 110). Equally impactful are the (un)intended silences, the questions not asked by choice or by disregard (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 147). Researcher encouragement of one particular aspect jeopardizes equal consideration or exploration of other points (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Ultimately, "the field text is shaped by the selective interest or disinterest of researcher or participant (or both)" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 94), underscoring the importance of researcher reflexivity and member checking processes.

Delimitations

Delimitations identify and delineate the demarcations of the study, purposefully designed by the researcher (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Because the present study sought to explore the

experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools, it was delimited primarily by race, by space, and by place. Participants identified as students of Color who attend(ed) a rural, predominantly White public high school. The study aimed to explore the junction of race, space, and place; research sites were delimited to rural, public high schools in the state of Maine. More specifically, though the study aimed to capture the breadth and depth of lived experiences of students of Color, application of belonging and visibility as theoretical lenses delimited the scope of experiences shared in the data collection phase.

Another primary delimitation of the present study was its disregard of intersectionality. People identify in a number of ways outside of race. Though looking at race only and specifically may seem reductionist, it was beyond the scope of the present study to analyze layers of gender, gender expression, sexuality, physical and mental ability, language, religious affiliation, etc. A critical analysis of the present study may caution the dangerous collapse of people of Color into a monolith and therefore the perpetuation of the white / other binary; however, "to study the lived experience of a particular group of people, certain delimiters had to be operationalized and a strategic essentialism employed" (Beam, 2023). The experience of a student of Color in the American public educational system – and in America more generally– is distinctly different from the experiences of a White student in America, and deserves attention.

The present study was further delimited by the age requirement for participants. The researcher was sensitive to the acute vulnerability of minors as participants in research studies and therefore delimited the study to identified students, age 18 or older, who were members of the graduating class of 2024. High school seniors or recent graduates were best positioned to reflect on the entirety of their high school experiences, both retrospectively and introspectively, and so could provide rich data through a more nuanced look at their high school experiences.

Ethical Issues

Precedent atrocities waged against and exploitation of human research subjects, especially vulnerable or powerless populations, catalyzed a movement for the ethical consideration of human rights established by the 1978 National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research which instituted formalized protections for human subjects in research, as detailed in the *Belmont Report* (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019; National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979). Ethical issues must be considered in all phases of research, to include data collection, data analysis and interpretation, and dissemination of research findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). To understand the breadth and depth of these ethical considerations, and in an effort to mitigate potential challenges to ethical research practices, the researcher participated in and successfully completed Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) Program Training prior to submission of the present study to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for review.

Researchers are ethically bound to protect participant rights and to protect participants from harm (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The present study, to include its procedural safeguards for protecting participants, was reviewed by the IRB at the University of New England. Subsequently and equally important, the researcher sought informed consent from participants prior to the data collection phase of research. Participants were informed about the purpose of the study, their rights as participants (including the right to withdraw at any time), the length of the study and their requested time commitment, how data collected from their stories would be used, and any potential impact that participation in the study may have on their lives (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). To protect privacy and reduce

physical barriers, semi-structured interviews were conducted remotely through the Zoom platform; additionally, all participants were asked to select a pseudonym, to which they are referred in the final narrative.

Participant information was available only on the master list and accessible only to the researcher. The master list was securely stored separately from study data. Master lists were destroyed after restoried narratives were verified by participants. To protect participant rights and ensure anonymity, all identifying information (to include reference to self, others, or specific locations) was omitted from interview transcripts (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). The researcher is an educational leader in a rural, predominantly White public school district in the state of Maine; to avoid any potential compromise of ethical considerations, students who currently attend or who previously attended the researcher's institution were not admitted to the study. Interview recordings were stored in the Cloud on the Zoom platform and were accessible only by the researcher through two-factor authentication.

The interview process creates an inherent imbalance of power, which is another ethical consideration of the present study. The researcher determines what questions to ask and what questions not to ask. Relative to the present study, the researcher identifies as a White, middle class woman, a mother, and an educational leader. The racial identity of the researcher may have exacerbated the power imbalance intrinsic to the interview process. Perhaps more concerning, the area of inquiry may have portrayed the researcher in a position of voyeurism, thus replicating the hypervisibility / invisibility and belonging / othering constructs that the study aimed to explore. The researcher addressed these ethical considerations through cultural competence and cultural humility. Data was collected in a way that respected and honored the lived experiences of the participants. More specifically, the interview protocol, though semi-structured, prioritized

participant voice by "asking participants to tell their own stories in their own way" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 111).

In qualitative inquiry, and especially in narrative inquiry, participants are asked to give wholly of themselves, "often revealing intimate details and experience of their lives" (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019, p. 233). Creswell and Guetterman (2019) deconstruct how researchers compensate participants for their contributions to the study and for their time by questioning if incentives affect participant responses or participation. Though the assignation of a monetary value to the weight of the lived experiences shared by participants would be arbitrary, the contributions of people of Color in America have been systemically unrecognized and unrecompensed. Participants in the study were compensated for their time; a $25 Visa gift card was sent to the participant's email address contained in the Master List upon conclusion of their interview.

The matter of ownership was another ethical consideration of the present study. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) note concern for researcher potential to exploit, usurp, or reappropriate participant voice for "researcher ends" (p. 177). Relative to the present study and to the racial dynamics of the researcher and participants, processes for ensuring fidelity to and purity of participant voice, such as member checks and researcher reflexivity were conducted. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) reframe questions of ownership to questions of relational responsibility and claim that ownership of narrative is secondary to researcher responsibility to participants; participants develop trust with researchers who must then act cautiously and sensitively when making decisions about how participants are represented in the narrative. Researchers bear an ethical responsibility to protect the sanctity of participant voice while understanding the larger narratives and contexts within which it is presented.

The final ethical consideration of the present study was composition and presentation of results and findings. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) contend that participants are the first and most important audience of the researcher and as such, researchers must take great care to "compose a text that does not rupture life stories that sustain them [participants]" (p. 174). Secondarily, researchers are responsible to a body of research to which they seek to contribute (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000); this responsibility can be fulfilled through high quality research and findings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019) that speak to how participants "lived and told [...] stories within the particular field of inquiry" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 174).

Trustworthiness

The degree of the trustworthiness of a study translates to the degree of reader confidence in its findings (Stahl & King, 2020). Researchers are obliged to build trust in their studies, in their participants, and in participant narratives by finely detailing fundamental research practices and findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Stahl & King, 2020). Through strict attention to trustworthiness, researchers can instill confidence in readers that what has been reported is trustworthy and may have some level of applicability in the reader's own settings. Primary considerations for creating trustworthiness in a qualitative study are: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Stahl & King, 2020), which are evaluated in relation to the present study below.

Credibility

Validating credibility involves ensuring the coherence of participants' perceptions and "the researcher's portrayal of them" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 202). Member checks, the practice of authenticating experience and story, were performed during the present study through data analysis processes to ensure the researcher accurately represented participants and captured

their experiences. Restoried narratives were sent to participants for review and feedback. All participants within 5 days. Triangulation, the process of substantiating evidence between participant narratives, was employed to enhance credibility (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Data collected from each participant through interview was analyzed in relation to one another and in relation to data collected from other participants.

Transferability

Transferability is a measure of the applicability of a study to other contexts or settings, that is, the degree to which a study could be applied to other contexts or settings (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Bloomberg and Volpe (2019) define transferability as how well the researcher details the processes of the study so that readers may evaluate whether consistent or comparable processes would be applicable to their own research or lives. Specific to narrative inquiry, the researcher "does not prescribe general applications and uses but rather creates texts that, when well done, offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 42). Purposeful sampling and thick description are essential study attributes that enable readers to assess transferability and were employed in the present study (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019).

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) assert that when the taken-for-grantedness of a life lived is unveiled and interrogated, further applications can be discovered. The present study was designed to chisel space for the experiences and counternarratives of students of Color within rural educational research. By establishing and clearly delineating parameters of the study and by harnessing the power of students' of Color voice through thick description, the present study allows for transferability from specific rural settings to other rural settings or more generally to settings where students of Color live storied lives.

Dependability

Dependability is the extent to which another researcher could conduct the study and come to the same findings (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019; Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). The research process is "logical and traceable" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019, p. 204) throughout the present study. All processes and procedures– to include theoretical and methodological approaches, data collection, and analysis– were heavily documented and reasoned.

The researcher practiced reflexivity to appropriately check biases and perspectives thereby reducing the influence on how the study is conducted and the findings that result. Stahl and King (2020) emphasize the importance of bracketing, the process of acknowledging and separating interpretations from observations. Though "researcher bias and assumptions are always present in the research act," processes such as bracketing and member checking can mitigate researcher influence on research procedures and findings thus ensuring dependability of the study (Stahl & King, 2020).

Confirmability

Confirmability addresses matters and measures of objectivity (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Despite researcher transparency and clarity with regard to methodological, theoretical, and analytical design as well as implementation of evidence-based validation strategies, the nature of objectivity is problematized in narrative studies with researcher as instrument and participant as data (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Confirmability and, accordingly, objectivity exist in tension with narrative methodology, in the sense that the researcher and participant are embedded entities who theorize from within socially-constructed systems (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). However, the present study is beholden to standards of quality and strove for objectivity through triangulation, reflexivity, and member checks as previously detailed.

Summary

Rural schools and the students educated within them are understudied by educational researchers; further absent in the body of research exploring rural schools are the experiences of students of Color, particularly those who attend predominantly White schools, often misconceptualized as exclusively White spaces (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). The purpose of the present qualitative study was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools.

The conceptual and theoretical framework founded upon belonging theory (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Yuval-Davis, 2006) and visibility theory (Brighenti, 2017; Derrida, 2002; Foucault, 1963/2003; Sartre, 1953) was intimately linked to the selected methodological approach of narrative inquiry both in theory and in practice. The design of narrative inquiry as a methodological approach lent itself to exploring the experiences of students of Color *from the perspective of students of Color*.

A small sample size of six study participants were selected using homogeneous purposive sampling. Study participants were students of Color, age 18 or older, who were members of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine. Participants were engaged and data collection happened through semi-structured interviews, conducted and recorded through Zoom. Zoom, an online meeting platform, offers functionality that supports transcription and therefore data analysis processes. Participant information was deidentified by using participant-selected pseudonyms, and the master list that catalogued personally identifiable information was destroyed after participants had an opportunity to review restoried narratives.

Thick description of data collection and data analysis processes was practiced to ensure, to the greatest extent possible, the trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability) of the present study as well as to mitigate, also to the greatest extent possible, ethical concerns and researcher bias. Chapter 4 chronicles data analysis methods (to include coding, theme development, and restorying) and delivers the findings of the present study.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Students of Color were defined as students who identified as Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, or two or more races (NCES, 2023). Rural, predominantly White high schools were defined as schools that are situated within geographic spaces that are not urban or metropolitan and whose student populations in grades 9 through 12 are racially identified as majority (greater than 50%) White. The problem addressed in this study was the dearth of research investigating the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools. The research questions that guided this inquiry were:

Research Question 1: How do students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 2: How do students of Color experience and navigate visibility in rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 3: How do students of Color experience and navigate belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools?

Narrative research offers a method for thinking about human experiences and about *the* human experience (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative research is built upon the storied lives people live, upon the stories people are told, upon the stories people tell themselves, and upon the stories people tell one another (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The present study engaged 6 participants interested in telling their own stories. To qualify for participation, participants were required to be at least 18 years old at the time of the study and to be a student of Color at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine.

Participant recruitment was open for 32 days (April 29, 2024 to May 30, 2024). On the first day of the recruitment period, emails were sent to administrators across 55 rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine. After 7 days and insufficient or unfavorable responses, an amendment was sought from the IRB to expand recruitment pathways, to include outreach to guidance counselors and teachers and to include social media. After receiving IRB approval of the amendment, the participant recruitment flyer was posted to social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat) of the primary investigator and emails were sent to guidance counselors and teachers across 55 rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine.

Six students from three schools expressed interest in participating in the study and made initial contact with the researcher. Each of the interested and eligible students were sent the participant interview confirmation email with the participant information sheet attached, and interviews were scheduled. Verbal consent was obtained from each participant prior to the start of the interview. Data was collected from all six participants through semi-structured interviews conducted and recorded on the virtual meeting platform Zoom. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via Zoom.

Analysis Method

Written transcripts of recorded interviews were generated by Zoom. Transcripts were verified through cross-referencing the associated video alongside text of the auto generated transcript. Though outside the confines of the present study, it is worth noting that, due to the transcription feature, there was a heightened level of editing necessary for three of the transcripts associated with students whose first language was not English, though they were fluent English speakers.

As qualitative studies are concerned with human experiences and as those human experiences are communicated verbally (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019), the specific pieces of data analyzed in the present study was the word. The researcher reviewed units of language shared by the participant to discover the meaning of individual stories and of meta narratives (Creswell & Poth, 2018); in vivo coding ("use of the participants' own words") (Volpe White, 2019, 7:55), was applied as an implement of analysis. Verified transcripts were input into the first column of a three-column table. First cycle codes were input into a second column, and second cycle codes were input into a third column. Narrative threads emerged by noting repeated codes, codes that were distinctive or remarkable, codes that were most heavily substantiated, or codes that were unexpected related to the phenomenon (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). Individual participant narratives were restoried based on the threads specific to each participant in order to maintain participant autonomy and authority over voice and story.

Individual narratives were sent to participants to complete the member checking process, during which participants were asked to verify the accuracy of their narratives. Because the primary investigator is a White woman, it was critical to the integrity, trustworthiness and authenticity of the study that each participant review their individual narrative and verify for accuracy. Participants were given 5 calendar days to respond or the narrative would be considered accurate and the narrative included. All six participants confirmed veracity; one participant wanted an addendum of 64 words to her narrative. The master list and all recordings were destroyed after verification by participants was received. Though individual experiences and narratives were nuanced and diverse, several themes emerged between all six participants and were then developed by the primary investigator.

Presentation of Results and Findings

Six eligible participants were recruited for participation in the present study. The six participants in this research were students of Color, age 18, who attended three different rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine and were members of the graduating class of 2024. Five participants identified as female, and one participant identified as male. One student was from South America and moved to the United States when she was 11 years old. Another student was from Asia and moved to the United States when she was 8 years old. Two students were from Africa and moved to the United States when they were 17 years old. Finally, two students lived in the United States for their whole lives. All but two participants attended their rural, predominantly White high school for 4 years; two participants attended their rural, predominantly White high school for 1 year.

Individual Narratives

The narratives that follow aim to capture the experiences of students of Color, specifically those of the participants in this study, who attend rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine. During the interviews, each participant engaged with belonging and with visibility, both framed by interview questions that were guided by research questions. The data is first presented individually to honor the lived experiences and perspectives of each participant. Collective themes are then presented.

Garcia

Garcia was an 18-year-old who self-identified as a Latina woman. She described her mother as Black and her father as White. Garcia was raised by her mother, to whom she referred as a single mother. She was born in Brazil and lived there until she was 11 years old. She then moved to the United States: first to New Hampshire and then to Maine. Garcia's first language

was Portuguese. At the time of the interview, Garcia was 1 month away from graduating high school and planned to attend college in the fall.

"Why do you talk like that?" – The Power of Language. Garcia did not know any English when she moved to the United States. During her interview, Garcia shared a story of befriending a boy who she learned, as she picked up the English language, was "bluntly disrespecting" her to her face. The boy weaponized language to separate and other her; Garcia recognized the divisive power of language: "Unfortunately, I didn't have anyone who spoke Portuguese and I just, I was all by myself." Not having school-based peers or adults who spoke Portuguese was an isolating experience; she felt like she "didn't belong when [she] didn't know any English."

Garcia described specific lines of inquiry from her White peers that felt voyeuristic and placed her in a position of exhibition: "Um, or people being like, 'Oh, why do you talk like that? Why do you act a certain way? [...] Why do you do this? Your mom doesn't know English? [...] Your mom is a house cleaner?" These questions and other anecdotes (such as "the food you eat smells weird") served as verbal cues to Garcia that her existence deviated from White normativity, emphasizing her hypervisibility and casting her outside the boundaries of belonging. Imposed hypervisibilty expressed through the language of her White peers resulted in Garcia sharing that she felt "small" and "looked down upon."

Though she experienced the divisive power of language, Garcia experienced and exercised the unifying power of language as well. Garcia noted that she learned remotely during her freshman year due to COVID-19 but that when she returned to in-person learning as a sophomore, she quickly joined the civil rights team at her high school. Reflecting on her membership, Garcia stated: "I felt like I could be myself and talk about my emotions, talk about,

talk about my points of view without being judged or without being seen a different way." Through participation in civil rights, student government, and genders and sexualities alliances, Garcia "learned how to express [her]self." She noted the interrelatedness of her voice ("talk about my experience") and her visibility ("I just put myself out there," "bring myself out there," and "bringing myself to it"). Garcia's autonomy over and control of her voice and visibility empowered her to leverage both: "So I just put myself out there. I started talking." Garcia harnessed her voice to reappropriate hypervisibility as a device for connection.

Garcia correlated her verbal expression with the process of "accepting [her]self" and– though it's unclear which preceded the other, or if these experiences happened in tandem–to reappropriating her visibility. Wielded hypervisibility empowered Garcia to come into a fuller expression of herself that resulted in individual and cultural pride. Garcia recalled:

> And I learned that, yeah, my food does smell weird to you. And yeah, my mom is a house cleaner. But that's how she puts food on the table. [voice cracking] Uh, it's just accepting myself. [...] So definitely this year as a senior, I was able to talk to the sophomore class and really, talk about my experience as an immigrant and what it's like, you know, living in Brazil, how different the culture is and everything. So that was definitely bringing myself to it. Other than that, I guess you know, just making sure that everyone knows, you know, I'm Brazilian. I'm an immigrant. I'm proud to be a Brazilian, even though I live here. I'm proud. I'm proud of the way I grew up. And the way that my mom does, [becoming emotional] excuse me, does things. And yeah, just like making sure that people know, making sure that my culture is still a part of me, even though…

Wielded hypervisibility through voice enabled Garcia to take control of her identity and to author narratives about her, about her lived experiences; it further enabled her to take power back from peers who had "pushed her out" of the boundaries of belonging. Garcia additionally noted that her exercised hypervisibility served as a means of protection: "I feel like I kind of put myself out there. So, they don't target me as much anymore [with the n word]." Of her White peers, Garcia said, "They take me better now." In this narrative presentation, White peers were the decision makers on who was allowed to be in a space, who could hold space, and who belonged in a space. Garcia expressed her existence as outside of White space, but through her vulnerability and courage to lay herself bare, her peers were more willing to "take [her] better [into White space]."

"Hold my hand." – The Importance of Connection. Though Garcia recognized that she became more socially connected as she cultivated her voice and visibility through involvement in activities, as she "put [her]self out there" and as she "learned to express [her]self," when asked about if or how she experienced belonging at school, Garcia paused and became emotional. She said:

> Whew. [crying] That's a hard question. I wouldn't say that belonging is the right answer. But I definitely have felt like part of the community and part of the group. Um, I think that [voice breaking, then a pause]. Oh, gosh! I think that for me to belong to a place, it would have to be someone who actually has experienced my culture and has been part of it, knows what I have actually been through and can connect with me to like that, you know, more like deep level. But I have definitely been connected with my community. And ugh! [crying] Sorry I'm, like… yeah, I have definitely connected with

> my community, and I'm definitely part of it now [...] Um, but I don't know about belonging. I don't know about that.

Garcia presented a stark distinction between connection and belonging. She defined belonging as *someone*, not a sense or feeling, indicating that her sense of belongingness was intimately tied with other humans who share a deep and visceral sense of knowing. She further explained:

> - but it's just like, to me belonging is like *someone* that you can share stuff with. And [deep sigh] they're like… they know how you are. They know how you act. They are part of your culture. They understand you in like, at least the surface level and you can walk into a room and be like, "Oh, we have so much in common." You have at least one person where you're like, "Oh, yeah, like, you do this? I also do that" or like, "Oh, your parents are like that? My parents are also from this place." And that's like, what I think belonging is like. Me, personally, I have never experienced, like, anything like that. Even the Brazilian immigrants that I have been around, they have been like, from everywhere in Brazil, not specifically where I'm from. But, I believe that I felt like I didn't belong when I didn't know any English. But after then that, after that, coming to high school, specifically, I was, I felt like at least overall, I was like, pretty, you know, okay. I connected with everyone okay. [emphasis added]

Throughout her interview, Garcia emphasized the importance of connection. The platforms of civil rights, student government, and genders and sexualities alliances connected Garcia to peers with whom she aligned perspectives, goals, or ways of knowing and existing; in those spheres, she felt "seen and visible." Garcia explained, "Those are the people that I'm

friends, close friends, with because we want to make a change [...] [It's just] finding your people, I guess." She clarified:

> And most of those people might not necessarily be, you know, people of Color, you know; I have a lot of White friends. But are people who are new, people who have been through hard experiences, people who, you know, they have different cultures, they came from a different place.

Garcia identified with the experiences of being new, of enduring hardship, of being an immigrant. Her experience of being both central to and separate from White space, of having her lived experiences and her identity othered, catalyzed her toward creating connections with and for other students whom she saw or anticipated being "pushed out" of the predominantly White space of her high school. She explained that she "want[ed] to be that support for people," that she wanted to "make them feel seen." She took ownership for, and expressed agency over creating connections. Garcia continued:

> I mean with my connections, definitely, yeah. I wanna make sure that everyone at least feels a little bit of belonging or connection. So um, I definitely went out, and you know everyone who's new is, no matter what I would go up to them like, "Oh, hey! My name!" And, "You know, I'm a, I don't know sophomore, junior, senior, and let me know if you need any help. I'm always on these rooms." [...] I just like, like to bring myself out there and be like, "Hold my hand like, if you need help." That's how I like, I don't know, carry myself.

She discerned that her connections were mutually reinforcing and indicated that she felt validated when she connected students with other people and with new ideas. She said, "I just love to see them connected. That's how I feel validated." Garcia shared more about her visits to

sophomore classes this year to support their work on an immigration unit. Students were tasked to "talk about a refugee country and [...] make a debate about it." Garcia talked with them about her lived experience of immigrating to America and recalled:

> I had the opportunity to [...] show [...] what I had to go through. And all of that. And I think, and later on, I have a few sophomore friends, and they were talking about how they used me on their debates, and that was very validating, because, I don't know. I just… People go through so many hard things, [becoming emotional] and I went through a lot of hard things, and it's great to see that people can use that and relate to that. And, uh. [voice cracking] It's so great. I love it.

Garcia made herself hypervisible as a guest speaker in a predominantly White classroom and deployed her voice as a way of facilitating connections for her White peers, not only to other parts of the world and to other lived experiences outside of their White habitus, but also to each other. Garcia understood the universal human experience of enduring "hard things" and excavated suffering as an opportunity to create connections through resilience.

"You're pushed out" – Hypervisibility and Othering. Despite being considered White in Brazil due to her light complexion, Garcia noted, "I was very clear here [in the United States] that I'm not." The absence of people of Color at her high school placed Garcia in a state of hypervisibility, which had the effect of centralizing her while othering her identity and experiences, so Garcia was at once in the center, but outside, of White space. Garcia received "a lot of judgment, a lot of stares, a lot of whispers in the halls." When asked about examples of feeling seen or not feeling seen, Garcia talked about lunch: "But, not being seen. I think a lot of lunches. Lunch has definitely been hard. Um, especially in the beginning, it was very hard. People would move away from me, not want to sit with me." Garcia, in a state of imposed

hypervisibility, did not feel seen and experienced literal and symbolic separation, effectively casting her out of White space, though she was embedded within it.

She explained that student interactions were largely defined by her White peers echoing racist stereotypes:

> And it was just like the very typical people thinking that I would steal from them, people thinking that I was somehow from the ghetto, that I was lower than them, that we came here illegally (there was a lot of that) […] So, but yeah, the n word, people clutching their purses. Somehow. I don't even know what the correlation is there, but people clutching their purses, or someone loses something in the locker room, and the first person who it could have been is me [...] I personally don't play sports, but I have heard from peers [of Color] [...] that, um, sports are very hard, and people, might say certain things [...] like, "Oh, you just run faster because you're of Color" or, "Oh, you already have a genetic advantage anyways."

Garcia remarked that her White peers "might feel uncomfortable," "might feel scared" or "might feel threatened," in the space of these stereotypes. But a narrative tension emerged when Garcia expounded: "Sometimes *they just want to hurt you* because it's unknown, and they just don't know how to deal with it" [emphasis added]. The tension between the innocence and intentionality of her White peers intensified when Garcia differentiated between peer mistreatment in Brazil and peer mistreatment in the United States.

> I came here when I was 11. So, I was, like, in sixth grade. […] But even in Brazil, I feel like you would see people who were different, and yeah, there would be like little names and stuff like that. But I don't know. It was never in the deeper level. I feel like people here, they bully to hurt a lot of the times. [becoming emotional, speech pattern disrupted]

> Sorry. And they just want to, like make you feel different. They really want to, like, [pause, crying] separate you from everyone else. [crying] Um, sorry.

When ruminating on this phenomenon, Garcia reflected Bonilla-Silva's (2022) notion of the White habitus that results in "a sense of group belonging (a White culture of solidarity) (p. 172). She illuminated:

> Um… and yeah, it's just separation, I think. People see you, and they might see you as a threat. They might see… they might not be comfortable with you. So it's just…. and they're already very linked together, everyone. So it's like little groups, and you try to make friends and get in that group, and you're just pushed out. And, you feel lonely. You are alone for a very long time.

Garcia explained the impact of being embedded within but "pushed out" and "not seen" within rural, predominantly White space had on her representation and sense of self:

> I was actually talking to a friend who is of Color about this today. So, when you move from a place that it's like there are more people of Color […] and you come to a place like this, you change. And I was talking to my friend about that, because they also came here not that long ago, and it happens from the way that you talk, to the way that you behave, from the things that you eat and not eat, from the way that you dress, from your hair (as my hair is straight now), um, it's everything. I definitely had a time where I wanted to be like any other White Mainer [speech pattern disrupted, becoming emotional] and I was kind of ashamed [voice breaks]. But I don't know. Yeah.

While Garcia identified that her move to America changed her, it is unclear if the changes she discussed happened subconsciously over time, or if the changes were intentional acts of adjusting to the White habitus in order to attain appropriate degrees of visibility and belonging.

"They just didn't know." – The Nescience and Naivete of White Space. Garcia conjured the invisibility / hypervisibility binary as she characterized her experiences at her rural, predominantly White high school; she deduced the hypervisibility of students of Color as deriving from the invisibility, or the general absence, of people of Color in her high school. When asked how she experienced visibility as a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school, Garcia referred to not being seen due to the lack of exposure to people of Color by her White peers. Garcia understood her presence as a disruption of White space and classified White reactions: "For people of Color, unfortunately, people, when they see you, the first thing that they think of is to be uncomfortable most of the time." She stated that her peers "didn't know" and that, as a result, they were "uncomfortable."

Garcia depicted White space, depicted her White peers as nescient and naïve. She related anecdotes of "little things" that were hurtful in peer interactions but ascribed those "little things" to her White peers' lack of understanding or unfamiliarity with people of Color. Throughout her interview, Garcia repeated the refrain: "They just didn't know." She explained, "Many kids don't have that experience of what it's like to see someone who's different" and resulting from that inexperience, "they just didn't understand." Garcia elucidated:

> While not being seen again, it's [...] a lot of it is just kids who have never seen this before, have never seen someone like me before. And, they don't… they don't know what different cultures look like. They don't know what different families look like. They don't know what it's like to, you know, be an immigrant, move from a different place. Maybe they have lived here their whole lives.

Garcia summoned Bonilla-Silva's (2022) conceptualization of the White habitus within hyper segregated White communities, which profoundly impacts how people view race and

explains why those conditioned within it do not think about or do not understand those living outside of it. Garcia further suggested that the Whiteness of the rural space at her high school was compounded by a sense of nationalism: "I think that people forget that not everywhere is like the… the U.S. And not everywhere is like where you're living."

Garcia similarly invoked Bonilla-Silva's (2022) reference to Mills' (2007) notion of the echo chamber, in which those who inhabit predominantly White space hear "24/7 the recycled White noise" (p. 33). She talked about her peers' regurgitation of racist stereotypes. When Garcia invited students into dialogic space by saying, "Hey, I know that you didn't mean the worst, but this made me feel a certain way" she often received feedback such as, "Oh, I didn't know. I just wanted to know more about you or about your food, or about the way you talk." Garcia indicated that her peers did not know how to engage with something or with someone they perceived as outside the White normative experience. She further noted that due to their uncertainty or discomfort, her White peers did not know how to explore interactions outside of employing racist tropes. Garcia offered: "But it's just the little things that *I want to think* that they didn't understand and they were, maybe, you know, uncomfortable with it. And they just didn't know how to communicate" [emphasis added]. Garcia wanted to believe that her White peers were not acting with malice, that they did not intend for their comments or gestures to be hurtful to her or to other students of Color. She wanted to believe in the inherent goodness of the human condition and of her White peers.

Similarly, as she talked about racist peer interactions that went without intervention by teachers, Garcia stated, "Not like it's their fault […]." Garcia suggested that the predominantly White teaching body at her high school were also encultured within the White habitus and were, therefore, also uncomfortable and unprepared: "[T]eachers are not ready. Teachers are not made

for this. Teachers are not made to… I don't know… welcome change and welcome different people." The narrative thread of teachers as agents functioning within an imperfect system is further explored below. Though Garcia employed terms such as "miscommunication" and other indicators that served to remove culpability from her White peers and teachers, a tension arose in the space between innocence and intentionality, chronicled later in theme two.

"These are ways that we can fix this." – The Need for Social Activism in Public Education. Garcia recalled that when she came to the United States, she was "plopped into a classroom and told to learn English." She said, "Unfortunately, I didn't have anyone who spoke Portuguese and I just, I was all by myself." Language was a barrier to her belonging, and she referred to being "all by [her]self" as a solitary experience. She quickly recognized "that the American school system, especially around here, is not made for immigrants, and it's definitely not made for people of Color." In addition to the social challenges (being pushed out) that came with inhabiting White space, Garcia identified structural issues with the system of education both within and beyond her rural, predominantly White high school.

Garcia witnessed racist student interactions (microaggressions, stereotypes, or other racially charged comments or engagements) that often went unaddressed by teachers, despite them having seen or heard the interaction. Garcia stated, "Not like it's their fault [...] teachers are not trained." Garcia's experience is an example of Jupp et al.'s (2019) findings in their longitudinal study on the race-evasive practices of White teachers resulting from discomfort, fear, unknowing, or not seeing race as relevant due to their lived experiences and general lack of engagement with race.

Garcia relayed that as she "found [her]self, found what [she] stand[s] for and what [she] want[s] to fight toward," she realized: "If I don't talk about it and I don't push forward to make

change, no one will. So I just put myself out there." Garcia described herself as "one in a lot of people" and understood that if she did not light the torch for social change at her high school, no one else would. Garcia took action and became a torchbearer of change. She described a multi-tiered strategy of meeting and talking with administrators, teachers, and students.

Garcia met with administrators at her high school to say, "This is the problem. And these are the ways that *we* can fix this" [emphasis added]. Garcia's implication of self here (and again when she refers to what *she* should change in the school system) implies that she bore social responsibility, that she took up the charge for social activism. Beyond administration, Garcia worked with teachers in her high school to build connections that would empower them to engage with uncomfortable but important racial dialogue. Garcia also talked with her MLL teacher, whose position with the district serves students in grades Kindergarten through 12. Garcia shared:

> We had lots of conversations about how the school system here is not made for us, and how there are many things that need to be changed. [...] Teachers are not ready. Teachers are not made for this. Teachers are not made to, I don't know, welcome change and welcome different people. And that's something I saw in every class I took.

Garcia pardoned staff and related that it was a systemic issue that "teachers are not trained." Garcia described an instance of asking a teacher questions in a way that projected her own experiences as an immigrant and as a student of Color at her high school, onto her teacher, who was correspondingly thrust into a position of disorient. Her teacher replied, "I have never, ever been taught this in my career."

As previously discussed, Garcia visited sophomore classes to support their learning through an immigration unit. Garcia felt validated when students were able to "use [her] on their

debates" because she saw that students were able to connect with her through the universal experience of struggle. Garcia bravely and vulnerably shared her lived experiences in order for her peers to lean into and connect with her experiences, to see themselves in her experiences, to draw similarities between their own lived experience within the White habitus and Garcia's experiences outside and within it. Engagement with and connection to Garcia's experiences on an individual and personal level may have excavated student perspectives of who belonged in predominantly White space and therefore redefined the racially homogeneous space of her high school. Garcia explained the importance of breaking down barriers to dismantle systemic racism:

> For people of Color, unfortunately, people, when they see you, the first thing that they think of is to be uncomfortable most of the time. So, it is kind of bringing in that trust, bringing in that support and being like, "Hey, you know, I am just like you" and connecting like that.

Garcia felt validated by being an agent of social change. She reported:

> I just think every time I work with someone, a student especially, and you know they're like, "Oh, I made new friends because of you. You connected me to blah blah blah," or, "I really like the idea that you gave me," and especially if they are like a student of Color or an immigrant, I just love to see them connected. That's how I feel validated. It's just, like seeing… being able to, like… put myself out there and bringing people with me, and do the change.

Garcia's use of the term "validated" in her dialogue above refers to making connections and to creating change. Garcia felt validated when she connected others and when she connected *to* others, especially those "pushed out" of the White social habitus at her high school. She felt

validated through vulnerability and courage to "put [her]self out there." She felt validated when she galvanized others to join her and "do the change." She felt validated when White students connected to her, to her experiences. She felt validated as she blazed a path for students of Color to exist at her high school in the fullest expression of themselves and therefore redefine the historically White space and conceptualizations of it. She felt validated through social activism and through knowing that her support of other students of Color and immigrant students normalized their experiences while expanding the collective imagination of rural, predominantly White spaces to include the experiences of students of Color. She felt validated knowing that others will be better served at her high school because of her, because of the contributions and connections she made; aligned with Garcia's exculpation about the universal experience of hardship and suffering, because she endured it, she wanted to ease it for others.

When asked if there was anything else that she felt she should share about the experience of being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school, Garcia identified the lack of support for students whose profile does not reflect that of a typical White student:

> The amount of questions that people... that an immigrant especially has, or someone who… like my mom has never… my mom didn't go to college. And my mom is a single mom. And she wouldn't speak any English still. [emotional, crying] And like every day all the time I have questions, and I'm like, "Who should I ask?" Or, "I think this is a really dumb question. But what am I supposed to do?" And I don't really have that support to like, be able to go up to someone and be like, "Hey, I have questions about everything and anything." And I need like… the list goes on and on and on. [...] I'm always asking questions, especially about college, because I will be the first person to go to college in my family. But um, we don't have that support to ask the questions of,

> "Hey, why does this work this way?" or, "I don't know. I don't. I don't know what to do for this," or "I'm having trouble with a test. How do I talk to teachers? How do I send emails?" There are kids that have never had the opportunity to have technology until they come to the US [...] Um, there are kids who I have known that they have to flee from wars, and they just have past trauma and anything and everything scares them. And then them being plopped into a classroom like I was. I don't think I would be able to deal with that. It's just… there's no support. Lack of support is what needs changing.

Summary. The absence of people of Color at Garcia's high school placed her into a state of hypervisibility; she felt simultaneously centralized within and pushed out of the rural, predominantly White space. In a position of imposed hypervisibility, Garcia did not feel seen and experienced literal and symbolic separation; as a result, she felt "small" and "looked down upon." Over time, Garcia reappropriated hypervisibility in order to reclaim narratives about her, to exercise power over her identity, and to create connection.

Garcia recognized that her White peers generally did not have experience with people of Color and therefore had a difficult time engaging with race; when they did, it was through the invocation of racist stereotypes, though a narrative tension emerged between Garcia's expressions of the innocence and intentionality of her White peers. She acknowledged that the outcome, regardless of cause or purpose, was the same: separation and othering. Garcia's first experience with being othered taught her the divisive power of language; however, Garcia harnessed the unifying power of language to find or create opportunities for connection both for herself and for other students of Color. Garcia's wielded hypervisibility aligned with amplified vocalization; as she exercised her voice, she assumed a position of activism. Garcia talked with administrators and teachers, presented to sophomores about her immigration journey, and

participated in activities such as the civil rights team, student government, and genders and sexualities alliances.

Garcia emphasized the importance of connection but differentiated between connection and belonging. Garcia defined belonging as *someone* with whom one shares a deep and visceral knowing. Garcia shared that she had not ever experienced a sense of belonging in her school. Garcia engaged with her predominantly White high school as a system and asserted that predominantly White teachers, not having had lived experiences as students of Color, and not having had appropriate pre-service or in-service training, were not prepared to engage with race. Garcia felt validated in her work toward social change in her high school. She fractured the normative understanding of her rural, predominantly White high school by redefining who inhabited the space and in what ways. With courage and with vulnerability, Garcia acted as a torchbearer for change, lighting pathways for other students of Color and immigrant students to disrupt the echo chamber of White noise.

Jessica

Jessica was an 18-year-old who self-identified as an Asian American woman. She was raised by her mother and father, whom she described Asian American. Jessica was born in Vietnam and lived there until she was 8 years old when she moved to the United States; her first language was Vietnamese. At the time of the interview, Jessica was 1 month away from graduating high school and planned to attend college in the fall.

"I was the only." – Singularity Experiences. Jessica juxtaposed her lived experiences in Vietnam with her lived experiences in rural Maine. Jessica described her transition to the United States: "Um, and I guess… coming from a country where everybody I looked at, everybody I spoke to, was Vietnamese, it was really jarring." Over time, her startlement eased;

however, Jessica remained aware of her status as an "only" throughout high school. Jessica detailed that she "could only name two other Asian students" at her high school, and that there were "less than 10 minority students collectively." Jessica clarified that the other Asian American students at her high school "didn't identify as Vietnamese;" she stated, "I guess I kind of felt… alone, like I was the only… the only Vietnamese student in my school. I guess there was that singularity experience." Jessica recalled wanting to form a "Vietnamese American student organization or an Asian American student organization" at her high school, but resigned: "There weren't that many Asians to really populate the club."

Beyond the walls of her high school and into the boundaries of her greater community, Jessica explained, "I can name like five other Vietnamese people I know and can speak to within a 25-mile radius." Jessica conjured the racial and spatial isolation characteristic of rurality that exacerbated her singularity experience. Though Jessica stated that she "got used to it over time," she "kind of missed that aspect [of seeing and speaking to other Vietnamese people, of being with other Vietnamese people], too." Jessica affirmed that she felt part of her school community but that she felt like something was missing in terms of her identity due to her experiences of being the only. Jessica "tie[d] [being the 'only'] back to that identity… identity part" and stated, "I really, I guess, missed out on some experiences."

When probed to say more, she referred to "identity" and further explained: "My mom is the only other person I, like, speak Vietnamese actively to. The other two Asian students at my school, they're Asian American, so they weren't taught their native language when they were born." Jessica intimately tied her identity to her first language, such that she felt like she missed out on some experiences by not having other Vietnamese students or community members with

whom to speak Vietnamese. Jessica referred to language as "a big struggle that [she] had to overcome during [her] elementary years." Jessica elaborated:

> Yeah, I think what really made me feel belonged was when I really grasped English. I… I was really lucky to come into a community where everybody was really welcoming, especially when I was 8. Um, my classmates really welcomed me into their classes and into their discussions. But despite that there was still this barrier where I really couldn't understand what they were talking, what my teachers were saying, and so that really… I felt really isolated from my community because of that. But when I started learning English and mastered English, I think I felt like I belonged in my school more because of that.

Jessica felt like she did not belong when she could not communicate with her classmates, though they were welcoming and inclusive. Jessica shared that by the time she entered high school, she "was part of a good friend group" who accepted her, and "because of that [she] felt more belonged." Jessica initially felt isolated from her community, but her sense of belonging at school grew as she acquired and mastered the English language. A narrative dichotomy emerged between Jessica's singularity experiences and her inclusion in the school community, between her feeling of "missing out" due to not having other Vietnamese students (with whom to talk and to identify) and her feeling of being welcomed into the predominantly White spaces within her high school. As Jessica acquired the English language and connections with White peers, her isolation eased because she was no longer outside the boundaries of communication, but her feeling of singularity endured. Jessica concurrently occupied the space of singularity within the space of community, suggesting that she existed both within yet outside the boundaries of belonging.

"I feel like I'm a zoo animal on display." – Hypervisibility and Invisibility. Jessica elucidated her experience with visibility at her rural, predominantly White high school:

> It sounds weird. But sometimes I forget that I'm a minority, that I'm Asian, just because everyone I see is predominantly White, and I don't walk around with a mirror to see my Asian features. So, I think it definitely makes me feel White, even though I am not.

Jessica's Asianness was not reflected back to her, through the faces of other students or through a mirrored reminder of her own face. The experience of immersion in a predominantly White space conditioned Jessica's eyes and resulted in her sometimes forgetting that she is Vietnamese, which denoted an element of invisibility. A visual and verbal correlation presents in the parallel between the concept of invisibility and what Jessica largely described as the racial silence in her high school. When asked, "Has a school-based adult or a school-based peer ever asked you or talked with you about your experience of being a student of Color at a rural, predominantly White high school?," Jessica replied:

> I think not openly. I think, people have made, like stereotypical jokes, in reference to social media, like maybe a TikTok they've seen, or an Instagram reel they've seen. But I don't think I've ever had a talk with a teacher or a student openly about my race.

Jessica had not engaged in dialogue with her peers about race; however, her peers did engage in racial dialogue with one another. Jessica recognized that her peers' entry point to engaging with race was through racist stereotypes taken from social media, which largely informed their conversations on race. Jessica explained the resulting impact on her visibility:

> I think... I think just the stereotypes around it, um, made me feel more seen. I would say I often score high in my tests. I often get great marks on my tests in my GPA, and I guess everybody really attributes it to my race rather than my capabilities. So they would

> say, “Oh, she accomplished that because she's Asian, and Asians are smart and they can do all these stuff.” But that kind of makes me feel like my abilities weren't seen… more like my race was seen. I would say [I felt] hyper visible but for the wrong thing.

Jessica explained the experience of feeling at once hypervisible and invisible. Through her peers’ ascription of her academic ability (the result of a growth mindset and work ethic) to an innate intellectual advantage based on a racist stereotype, she felt hypervisible in her Asianess yet invisible as an individual.

Jessica invoked the theme of visibility once more when describing the evolution of her experiences involving lunch. As a young child, Jessica’s mother would pack Asian cuisine for Jessica’s lunch. However, she received “negative reactions” from it and “slowly stopped bringing lunch.” Jessica noted that it wasn’t a conscious decision at the time, but upon reflection recognized that it was likely a subconscious strategy to mitigate her state of hypervisibility during lunchtime. Jessica said, “I guess now I try to… I try to bring, like my own lunches sometimes to kind of push against that, like, wall in my mind.” Jessica verbalized her cultural connection to food and recognized that her cuisine was outside the normative White experience in her school community. In high school, Jessica tried to “push past the wall,” which could reasonably be inferred to represent negative past experiences of hypervisibility, in order to retain her identity through food.

The duality of wanting to “push past the wall” with food and of not wanting to be hypervisible was echoed in Jessica’s experience with language. Food and language were two cultural elements that Jessica identified as deeply important to her identity; parallels existed between her experiences with both at school. Though Jessica felt like she was part of her school community, when asked if she could bring her full self to school, she explained:

> I try to not speak Vietnamese that much when I'm in school. Just because whenever I speak it, everybody would ask like, "Oh, how do you pronounce this? How do you pronounce this?" And I just… I feel like I'm a zoo animal on display. Even though it's… it's just a language that I speak, and I know people are curious about that but I guess I tried not to speak it as much in school. Especially when it comes to my name, too. I think. I've Americanized my name, even though it's pretty Vietnamese. I've tried to Americanize it as much as possible, for people to be able to pronounce it.

Jessica understood her peers' curiosity about and fascination with her native Vietnamese language, and though she acknowledged that her peers were well-intentioned and meant no harm, Jessica felt as though she were on exhibition during past experiences of speaking Vietnamese at school. Jessica centralized language as a foundational element of her identity, but the Vietnamese language deviated from the normative experience of spoken English, which thereby increased Jessica's visibility and catalyzed her to leave her language at home.

However, Jessica appreciated recognition of her cultural heritage and connected a sense of validating visibility to her peers' recognition of her identity as Vietnamese: "I think, feeling seen. I think it felt validating. I think just to be recognized for having a cultural heritage that was different from others and not, um, and something being recognized. But it isn't something bad." Jessica's cultural experience was outside the normative White experience of her high school, but Jessica felt validated in an appropriate degree of visibility and in peers' recognition of her cultural identity.

"I try to embrace my culture." – The Importance of Cultural Identity. Jessica expressed visibility and belonging at school by embracing her culture through exploration in academic areas, particularly when she was given opportunities for self-directed learning. She often chose topics related to Asia in an effort to "retain [her] culture." Jessica blended academic and cultural growth by "exhibiting that part [her cultural identity] of [her]self in school." Additionally, when peers brought up conversations related to race or related to Asia, she "didn't shy away from the topic" but rather, she tried to "participate in the discussion as best as [she] could."

Jessica described feeling "seen" and "validated" when she was "recognized for having a cultural heritage that was different from others." Jessica's cultural identity deviated from that of her predominantly White peers, yet she qualified that her use of the word "different" did not denote a negative connotation. However, Jessica recounted singularity experiences blending with experiences of engaging with and expressing her cultural identity. As an example, Jessica explained the importance of celebrating Asian holidays but noted that her peers at school did not understand, "especially with food." She expounded:

> Like maybe I would try to bring in food that I got from like an Asian market down in Portland, and most people would either reject the food because it was foreign to them or had a really negative reaction after eating the food. Um, and the negative reaction was a little disrespectful in some ways, and so that kind of makes me feel like I didn't belong. [...] I think that there were some reactions where my classmates really liked the food. But others would say, "Oh, this smells like dog food. This tastes like dog food. This tastes like cat food" and like that really negative reaction, that I completely understand you

> don't have to like the food, every food that you eat, but comparing it to something that's given to a non human, it feel… it felt really jarring and hurtful in some ways.

Jessica described her White peers' reactions to Asian food as dehumanizing and jarring. Jessica felt a sense of belongingness at her rural, predominantly White high school, and the dehumanizing reactions of her White peers to Asian food fractured her experience of belonging by casting her not only outside of the White normative experience but outside of the human experience.

Jessica explained that experiences such as the one she described informed and shaped her college search. Jessica sought colleges "that are culturally diverse" and with strong student organizations– specifically, Vietnamese American student organizations or Asian American student organizations. She expressed anticipation for diversity on her college campus and exclaimed: "I'm just really excited because they have a big population of not just Asian students, but of other… of all kinds of races. And that's something that I also look forward to."

"Weaving [diversity] into education." – The System of Public Education. Though not pointedly, Jessica engaged with her high school as a system. More specifically, she identified four ways in which her high school supported validating visibility and belonging: student choice, student voice, cultural competence and humility of staff, and opportunities for diverse cultural engagement. Jessica explored how she expressed visibility as a student of Color at her high school through opportunities for choice-based, self-directed study in classrooms and extracurriculars (such as academic decathlon). Student-driven learning provided Jessica with opportunities for continued cultural exploration and expression. She said:

> I try to embrace my culture more, especially in classes like English, where I get to write and so I try to often choose topics that pertain to, like, my culture, to Asia, I think in well,

> we have… I do academic decathlon, and so we get to choose, like, which presentation we would like to research more about. And I often choose, like, the topics that relate to Asia, because I want to learn more about that part of the region that I didn't really get to learn after I left. So that's… I think that's how I try to, like, retain my culture almost.

Jessica shared a story of her teacher who "really loves [...] culture and trying [...] new food." For Lunar New Year, "he brought in food that he had gotten from an Asian market down in Portland, and he shared it with the entire class." She noted, "It's something he normally does." Jessica's teacher practiced cultural competence by normalizing cuisine as well as celebrations outside of foods and traditions typical of his predominantly White students' experiences. Aligned with the findings of Slaton et al. (2023), teachers' cultural humility and competence enhances student relationships and students' of Color sense of belonging at school. Similarly, Jessica talked about a lunch survey at her high school that sought feedback; when Jessica responded with a request for more culturally diverse food and ~~she~~ noticed a resulting shift in their menu, she felt heard and validated.

Jessica appreciated the ability to have educational experiences outside of the classroom walls, experiences that afforded her the opportunity to explore other cultures beyond her own and beyond the White habitus of her rural, predominantly White high school.

> And that's [diversity] something that I also look forward to, especially when I'm taking field trips in school where we get to go out of state. I think we went to Pittsburgh this last weekend where we got to enjoy food like Indian food, Mexican food which are experiences that I don't normally get to have in rural Maine. So that's something that I always look forward to.

When asked about what else would be important to know about the experience of being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school in Maine, Jessica responded with a recommendation:

> Yeah, I think, just to encourage other students, regardless of their race, to explore the different cultures that there are in the world. I think it really opens my mind. It really broadens my perspective. And something that I really enjoyed back in middle school was we had… I forgot what it was called… but we had, like people of different cultures come into the school and kind of explain like their culture, but also, like their food, and like different aspects of how they live, which contrasts greatly to how we live in rural Maine. And I really liked having that experience. I think I went to a Russian one, and I really loved, like, enjoying, like, Russian food and watching Russian dances. And so, I think, like, weaving that into education is just as important, or maybe even more important, than like basic core courses like math and English.

Summary. Jessica described her transition to America when she was 8 years old as jarring. She attributed her startlement to the visual shift from being surrounded by predominantly Vietnamese people to predominantly White people. Over time, Jessica found that her shock eased, and she reported sometimes forgetting that she was Asian due to the Whiteness of her spaces, and her Asian features not being reflected back to her. Jessica was one of only a few Asian American students at her school and the only of Vietnamese descent, which fostered what Jessica referred to as "singularity experiences." Jessica's singularity in high school was mirrored in her community, characterized by the racial and spatial isolation that is endemic to rural, predominantly White spaces.

Still, Jessica reported feeling welcome in her community; she felt part of her community. Jessica identified various ways in which her high school supported an appropriate measure of visibility that resulted in a sense of validation and belonging. Jessica felt seen and validated when she was recognized for having a cultural heritage that was different from her White peers. She expressed pride in her culture and noted that it was important to her that she retain her culture.

Though Jessica expressed feeling a sense of belonging, a narrative tension emerged when she chronicled singularity experiences and instances of being othered through hypervisibility, particularly with regard to food and to language. Jessica recalled negative reactions from White peers in the cafeteria when she brought in food from home and echoed the term "negative reactions" when she shared what began as an experience with belonging when her teacher brought in Asian cuisine to share with her class for Lunar New Year. In class, White peers referred to Asian cuisine as "dog food," and Jessica felt dehumanized. Similarly, Jessica reflected on feeling like a "zoo animal on display" when she spoke Vietnamese at school. Jessica described her high school as largely silent on race, though she identified that her White peers' entry into racial discourse was through racist stereotypes. Jessica shared that she felt hypervisible in her Asianness through her peers' operationalization of a racist stereotype that disregarded her work ethic and attributed her academic success to her Asianness; she concurrently held a position of invisibility where she did not feel seen as an individual for her accomplishments.

Jessica's experience of being an "only" in a rural, predominantly White high school catalyzed her to seek colleges with diverse student bodies and active Asian American and Vietnamese American student organizations. Jessica honored the importance of diversity, of

learning about others' lived experiences. Jessica valued her own experiences of learning about other cultures and noted that those experiences broadened her perspective. Jessica advocated for embedding cultural diversity into the American public educational system and prioritizing it together with traditional curricular core content.

Angela

Angela was an 18-year-old who self-identified as an African American woman. She described her mother as White and her father as Black. Angela was raised by her mother and her stepfather, who was also White. She was born and raised in Maine, though her father was from Ghana. Angela's first language was English. At the time of the interview, Angela was 1 month away from graduating high school and planned to attend college in the fall.

"Spotlight is on me." – Hypervisibility and Eurocentric Beauty Standards. During Angela's early school years, she lived in a racially diverse community. Angela felt that "being mixed was an especially hard thing," for her to socially navigate. Angela "group[ed] around people who were Black" but "didn't know how to connect to them, because [she] felt too White" but also "too Black to connect with some White people." Angela reflected that she occupied the space "in between" and therefore fell somewhere undefined.

The space Angela occupied became more clearly defined in rural, predominantly White schools. Angela characterized her elementary and middle school years as an "isolating time" when she felt "new" and "different." She explained, "I felt very alone, especially [...] in my like… younger years, where I was… still… I didn't understand race and I didn't understand the fact that it was very rural, what that meant… the fact that I looked different." Angela explained that she "was aware that she felt different" due to "not really [being] around a lot of other people of Color" in the rural, predominantly White spaces she inhabited while growing up. Angela

described her household as "White" and referred to growing up in a White household as compounding her feeling of being "different." She shared: "I kind of always felt like I stood out in *not* a way that I liked." But a narrative tension emerged, however, when Angela shared, "Um, honestly. I don't think I had a lot of experiences where I felt very seen growing up." Her positionalities of hypervisibility and invisibility appear oppositional but were in fact co-occurring.

Angela noted the Whiteness of her high school:

> -or sometimes like being the only Black person in a room. Or I'm usually the only Black person in the entire classroom in my school, because it's very small and rural. So I've kind of gotten used to that. But I remember before, sometimes I would become hyper aware of the fact that I was the only person who looked like that. And most of the time I would kind of just got used to it, and it was… that was how it was, but sometimes I would have moments where I was like, "Oh, wow! I look very different from everyone else," and it would kind of bother me sometimes.

Though she acclimated to predominantly White spaces, Angela reported at times feeling "very like… like spotlight is on me," suggesting that hypervisibility placed her central to but separate from White space, outside the boundaries of belonging.

Spotlight experiences, exacerbated by racial silence, had implications on Angela's self-image and confidence, in relation to Eurocentric beauty standards. Angela explained:

> No one talked about it with me. I obviously understand why I looked different, because my mom is White, and my dad is Black and science. But nobody sat me down to be like, "It's okay. Other people look like you, too."

Angela talked about a specific experience in middle school when she "had a crush" on a White boy and when he found out, he told one of her friends that she was "just too dark for him." Angela shared that as she grew up and had "crushes on lots of White boys" in her predominantly White middle and high schools, she felt she "wasn't going to be attractive enough" or like it "wasn't a possibility for [White boys] to like [her]." Growing up, Angela "had a lot of insecurity about being Black" because there were not "a lot of people who looked like [her]" and she "didn't fit the beauty standard" of White spaces. Angela shared, "I did have a lot of, like shame and kind of feeling like I wanted to change to fit in more."

Angela's hypervisibility persisted into high school, yet she described a qualitative shift as she transitioned to high school, both in her peers and in herself. She noted that while her peers were "more blunt" during her younger years, making experiences of being othered more stark, in high school she felt people were "more kind." As a result of increased peer kindness and Angela's own understanding that she could not change her appearance, Angela more fully embraced her Black aesthetic. She shared that, in high school, "People, like compliment my features or people tell me, 'Actually I really love, like your hair. I think it's really beautiful. I wish I had hair like that,' or things like that." Angela said that feeling seen in a positive way was "really nice." These experiences of validating visibility had a mitigating impact on her hypervisibility and a positive impact on her self-image.

A narrative tension emerged between the kindness and callousness of her peers:

> Um, but sometimes feeling too seen where people will pick out a feature of mine that is African American, or more Black, and like, comment about it. Like I remember my sophomore year another girl [...] made a comment about my nose, and she was like, "Oh,

> your nose is really big, like you have a really big nose," and I was like, "Oh." So I would feel more like, I don't know… I would feel more insecure about my Black features [...]

Angela indicated feeling hypervisible particularly when she would "do something different with [her] hair." When she wore braids to school for the first time during her junior year, she received "lots of comments" and "a lot of questions." Angela detailed: "I have to prepare myself to know that people might touch my hair." The act of forcible touch from her predominantly White peers functioned to other and separate Angela, who was hypervisible yet outside the boundaries of belonging.

The narrative thread exploring the innocence and intentionality of peer interactions is further explored later; however, the tension aligns with an additional narrative tension between Angela's contrasting perceptions of self.

> I noticed that, like someone commented.... I was talking to someone about a couple of things I felt insecure about, you know, and they were like, "You do realize those are mostly your Black features, like your hair and your nose." Those… and it's because you feel like you can't assimilate to like the Eurocentric like beauty standards that… you know.

"I would just have to kind of alter myself." – Locus of Control. Angela "felt different" in her Blackness but during her elementary years, she "wasn't aware" that she "could navigate it" because she was "not really around a lot of other people of Color." However, while reflecting on her social experiences growing up, Angela expressed a level of control over and responsibility for her social health and sense of belonging. She elaborated:

> I think that, um, a lot of the belonging was me having to kind of try to focus more on the things that I could have in common with other people, whether it was like interests.

> Um… yeah. mostly interests, like academic interests or sports or just finding… Up until high school, I didn't have a person of Color best friend. All my friends were White, so it was trying to find ways that I could connect with them through books or playing with them at recess. Just trying to share. And yeah, and trying not to focus so much on the race aspect of it, and more of like a… I guess, personal connection. That was my like... I belonged.

Angela exhibited a locus of control over her sense of belonging and illustrated that her sense of belonging was contingent upon eschewing race in order to find personal connections. Angela hinted at taking a colorblind approach to friendships, focusing not on "the race aspect" but rather on "personal connection." When she disregarded race, Angela felt a greater sense of belonging, indicating that, when racialized, she felt as though she did not belong or that her sense of belonging was adversely impacted. Angela's reference to not having a person of Color best friend until high school draws a distinction between her experience with White friends and her experience with her best friend of Color, such that she distinguished the time when all her friends were White and explored ways that she took ownership for or tried to manage her sense of belonging. Angela expounded:

> Express belonging. Um, I guess I just tried to make, I guess, make myself more likable. More friendly. I didn't want to come off as… I felt like… I remember growing up, thinking that if I was going to be Black, I… and… people… I noticed people would see me differently upon appearance. I had to make sure that I was doing everything else right. Um, like academically, or personality wise in order to compensate for that so that way I would be likable, and I would seem approachable. So I guess, to express

> belonging, I would just have to kind of alter myself to be more flexible and likable in social situations, in order to belong.

Angela recognized that her White peers would other her upon appearance. In drawing the parallel between being Black and therefore needing to do "everything *else* right" [emphasis added], Angela inferred her peers' equation of Blackness with "wrong." Angela, therefore, saw her Blackness as a deficit and employed strategies to assuage the social impact on her experience of belonging. In an attempt to remain within the boundaries of belonging determined by her White peers, Angela acted in what she felt were compensatory ways to keep herself within the boundaries of belonging. Angela adapted this strategy as she transitioned to high school:

> In order to kind of blend in, or feel more accepted by others, I would kind of use myself as a joke… like I would initiate the jokes first, rather than letting them make the joke, so that way… I guess it would feel more okay to me that they were making the joke. I could normalize it, and it wouldn't hurt as bad. But yeah, I think that's a big way that I noticed is that in order to like, assimilate, or like, get validation or feel more liked cause I didn't want to be seen as being too sensitive when people made jokes. I didn't want to seem like I was too bothered by it, like I didn't want to seem like I was… I was the one making everything about race, so I would just make jokes in order to kind of feel more accepted.

Angela echoed her need to take a colorblind approach by not "making everything about race." Angela initiated race-based jokes and subverted the power of her White peers by exercising a locus of control over language. Angela described that in order to belong, she had to yield to racist jokes and employed them as a tool to enhance her sense of belonging. Angela worried about being seen as "sensitive" or "bothered" or the one who made "everything about race" and so mimicked her White peers' engagement with race through racist jokes.

Angela experienced a weakened locus of control in social situations where her White peers made racist jokes. She felt "a little bit insecure" about "standing up for [her]self" and therefore felt like she was "not fully able to bring [her]self to school." These comments imply that bringing her full self to school would have meant standing up for herself, would have meant defending herself in her Blackness, suggesting that in not standing up for herself, she surrendered her Blackness at the schoolhouse door in order to experience a sense of belonging. Though Angela wanted to stand up for herself, she shared that she "struggle[d] a lot with being assertive." She explained:

> There's a big, like stigma at my school about being like someone who's too liberal or too I guess, too woke, and that I'm accusing them of being a racist if I express that I don't like something, or it kind of was like a little too far. So I think that I still struggle with that… like enforcing a boundary with that.

Angela shared a specific example of when she first wore braids to school:

> There were two comments in particular that I remember two different people where I was just kinda like, "Uhh… I don't know what to like…" One person said in particular that they liked my rapper hair, and another person said that it made me look gangster. And I was like, "I don't know how to approach…." [...] and make it all seem like [...] a bigger deal than it was. I guess the microaggression side of it… like little microaggressions. I don't know how to stand up for myself.

Angela recognized a compromised locus of control due to the likelihood of being othered if she addressed racist speech.

"I'd like to think they're harmless." – Racial Discourse and Unconditional Positive Regard. Angela recognized that her White peers had not "really interacted with other Black people" and described the resulting impact on their interactions with her. During her younger years, Angela found that her peers were "more blunt" about "how they felt about [her] being a different skin color." Angela shared that in elementary school, peers often repeated things they heard from their parents, or they took a position of inquiry. Angela understood her Blackness as a disruption to White space, as outside the White normative experience, and empathized that her White peers weren't "used to it" [the entry of race in their predominantly White spaces]. Angela's White classmates therefore asked questions like, "Oh, well, why is your hair like that? Why is your nose like that? Why is your skin color like that? Why do you look different?" Lines of inquiry such as this made Angela feel on exhibition and put her into a state of hypervisibility where she felt like the "spotlight [was] on [her]." She noted that her elementary aged peers pointed out her race because they weren't "used to it." Angela depicted social interactions during her elementary school years:

> I think sometimes like growing up, especially in elementary, middle school, like the kids say things, and they don't think about it… but like the random moments where White friends would point out things that I was different. Or my hair, or just make it more just… un.. unnecessarily point out my race like when we were, we would have moments where we were having a great time… we were bonding, and then they would just make a joke um... and it just kind of felt like a dig, and I was especially insecure about my race at the time so it kind of felt like being Black was a negative, like a negative thing. So when they would point it out, it felt like a jab or insult, um, and something that I should be insecure about, especially being mixed.

Angela referred to her White peers' general disregard for but pointed invocation of race. Angela's White peers did not have to engage with race in the way that Angela did because they saw themselves as raceless in their predominantly White space. Angela suggested that they "didn't think about" the things they said because they lacked an understanding of race.

Angela noticed a qualitative difference in her transition to high school; she related: "It's been better for me in high school than […] elementary and middle school." She attributed that to students being "more self-aware of maybe their impact or their words." She held her peers in ultimate positive regard and shared:

> It's more if there are comments on my race, usually, I'd like to think they're more harmless, but it's more jokes. Uh, a lot of the comments on my race are more joke-based, like jokes about stereotypes or I get comments about my hair sometimes, whether they are meant to be positive or not. Um, but mostly it's not meant with malintention, but it does happen sometimes.

Angela shared that when she wore braids to school for the first time, she received "a lot of questions" from her White peers, "whether they [were] with malintention or not." Angela continued to assume ultimate positive regard for her peers. About the "rapper" and "gangster" comments when she wore braids for the first time, Angela stated:

> I don't wanna assume that they meant it… I mean, it was kind of like racial in a way… like assuming that it made me look gangster because they were braids…. [verbal interruptions, pauses and breaks, which is uncharacteristic of her speech pattern] But I didn't, but I also didn't explain it to them if they didn't know… and [I did not want to] make it seem like I was assuming they were racist…

Though Angela did not want to assume malintent, a tension emerged in her recognition of these comments as microaggressions.

Angela acknowledged that her peers' entry to racial dialogue was through racist jokes, stereotypes and microaggressions. However, she did not want to misinterpret their intentionality by being the "one [to make] everything about race." While she generally assumed positive intent of her peers, Angela was also concerned about others' perceptions of her. She did not want to be seen as accusing someone of being racist if she "didn't like something" or if a joke went "a little too far." However, Angela was aware that this was an act of self-preservation. She shared, "There's a big, like stigma at my school about being someone who's too liberal or too I guess, too woke." Angela recognized that if she addressed racist jokes, stereotypes, or microaggressions, she would be pushed out of the boundaries of belonging, stigmatized as the "other" who is "liberal" and "woke." In order to hold a position within the boundaries of belonging, Angela engaged in racist jokes and shared that she initiated jokes as a form of social currency.

"It wasn't a possibility." – The Power of Representation. Angela remembered feeling insecure about being Black when she was growing up because there weren't "a lot of people who look[ed] like [her]." She was typically the "only Black person in the room" and, though she acclimated to these onlying experiences over time, she recognized the cumulative impact on her. Angela experienced a lack of representation in the faces around her which was exacerbated by the lack of representation in the spaces around her. Angela stated that she did not feel very seen growing up, because she did not see herself in others, which hints at the reflexivity of visibility: that she did not feel seen because she could not see herself in those around her. Angela explained:

> Um, honestly, I don't think I had a lot of experiences where I felt very seen growing up. Um, I didn't have a lot of movies where there were um, Black characters… Black especially… I think one thing that really bothered me was that there weren't a lot of movies where there were Black women who were dating White men so growing up and having crushes on lots of like White boys, and because there weren't other people of Color, I felt as though I wasn't going to be attractive enough or, like I… it wasn't a possibility for them to like me. There wasn't a lot of representation at that time with kids' movies about that, or being Black in a rural school, so.

Angela did not see her experience represented anywhere in her rural, predominantly White high school or in her predominantly White household. Angela explained that her mom is White; her stepfather is White, and her mom's whole side of the family is White. Angela stated the only Black people in her life are her dad and brothers, and the few Black students at school. Angela discussed the power of representation and the importance of representation in education:

> I think a really important thing… that would have been really beneficial for me is that representation. Because I felt very alone, especially in my like… younger years, where I was… still, I didn't understand race and I didn't understand the fact that it was very rural, what that meant… the fact that I looked different. Just having more, even though… even if you can't bring more like Black or people of Color like in person, like finding resources maybe to show materials where there are other people who look different. And I think that would be beneficial for… the other… like the White kids, too, because they're less likely maybe to be like, "Huh, like, oh, you look kind of weird and different," and point out this thing because they're more used to it.

Angela explored the benefit of diverse racial representation for students of Color as well as for White students in predominantly White schools. Angela noted that racial representation fractures the boundary of belonging. She referred to "spotlight" experiences in her elementary school years when White students, not having had interactions with people of Color, asked questions about her appearance. Angela explained that diverse racial representation normalizes racially diverse appearances.

Angela seemed to digress from the topic of representation and the importance of racial diversity in representation when she continued:

> So just having more representation so that way it can be more normalized um. Unless… I hate I... I don't really like the idea of making it so that way people don't see race like the whole like, 'Oh, race doesn't exist. There's no like…' I don't like that, because it… I think it's very important to acknowledge that people are different, but rather just de… make it not a negative thing. Rather than saying that different races are negative, just say that there are many different races… this is what they are, and they're all equal and normal. I just… yeah. I never really liked that… the people who would be like, 'I'm not racist. I don't see color.' Like, do you? But, just more representation, I feel, would be the biggest… biggest thing [at the] foundational level.

However, a more granular look at the structural organization of Angela's words suggests Angela's correlation of a lack of representation with colorblind racial ideology. Angela asserted the importance of openly discussing race to equalize and normalize all racial identities, aesthetics, and experiences. She denied the existence of the colorblind eye and further recognized the importance of color consciousness as the only pathway toward engaging with race in a way that honors diversity and aims at equality. Angela shared that before she ever

talked about her experiences she "didn't have a way to process how [she] felt being in a White rural high school." Angela drew a parallel between lack of representation and her ability to process her experiences. Though she "felt different," she did not know how to voice it.

Summary. Angela's early school experiences of hypervisibility made her feel insecure. Angela was not represented or reflected in the Whiteness of her school, her community, or her home. Angela related the power of not having anyone tell her, "It's okay. Other people look like you, too." She was aware that she did not fit Eurocentric beauty standards, which had implications on states of visibility, her sense of belonging, and her perception of self.

At a young age, Angela felt that she would have to compensate for her Blackness by "doing everything else right." Angela shared that it was important for her to seem approachable, likable, and friendly. She exercised a locus of control over her social health and friendships by taking a colorblind approach, saying that she focused "less on the race aspect" and more on commonalities or shared interests.

Angela acknowledged that her White peers did not have opportunities to engage with people of Color. Her White peers' entry to racial dialogue was generally through racist jokes, stereotypes, or microaggressions; however, Angela held her peers in ultimate positive regard and perceived their dialogue as uninformed, not malintended. A narrative tension emerged, however, between the innocence and intentionality of Angela's White peers. Angela indicated that she wanted to stand up for herself when confronted with microaggressions but that she did not know how. Angela did not want to be seen as "making everything about race," "too sensitive," or "woke."

Though Angela felt she had to adopt a colorblind approach for her social health, she recognized the importance of color consciousness and identified representation through racial

diversity as an important step toward equality. Angela advocated for more representation of people of Color in rural, predominantly White schools through curricular resources and other materials. Angela recognized the importance of representation not just for students of Color but also for White students. Angela drew parallels between the importance of representation and color consciousness as equally important to the experiences of *all* students in rural, predominantly White high schools.

Emma

Emma was an 18-year-old who self-identified as an Asian American woman. She described her mother as Indian and her father as White. Emma was raised by her mother and her stepfather, who was White and to whom she referred as her father. Emma's mother and stepfather divorced when she was in middle school. She lived primarily with her stepfather until she moved to live with her mother during her junior year of high school. Emma was born and raised in Maine. Emma's first language was English. At the time of the interview, Emma was 2 weeks away from graduating high school.

"I'm a normal person." – Defining "Normal" and Defending Belonging in White Spaces. Emma expressed that she had "always been treated as a *normal* high school student" [emphasis added]. Emma employed the term "normal" once more when she recalled a time that another student referred to her as "Indian girl." Emma remembered telling him, "Excuse me. I'm a *normal* person, and you can call me by my name" [emphasis added]. Emma's use of the term "normal" is complex and suggests that, though she felt included and treated as *normal*, she understood her skin color as outside the normative experience in her rural, predominantly White high school. However, Emma defended her belongingness in the space. Relative to the student's reference of her as "Indian girl," Emma noted that she "stuck up for herself" and

harnessed the power of language to correct the student's racist and reductionist view of her. Emma asserted her humanity by calling upon the student to say her name.

Emma continued to define the term "normal" once more when, sharing that, through middle school, she believed it was "normal for your friends to bully you." Emma shared her early school experiences in juxtaposition with her high school experiences to underscore her evolution. Emma explained that as she grew, she developed a strong sense of self, which empowered her to redefine "normal" by delimiting boundaries of what she would accept from other people. However, a narrative tension emerged between Emma's boundaries and how they existed *within* boundaries of belonging. While sharing a story of working through a racist incident with the only Black staff member at her school, Emma recalled his words to her. Voicing her teacher, she shared:

> As a Black man, I've gone through it my entire life, and people have bullied me, and they've made fun of me. But I try my hardest to not listen to them [...] People are gonna… people are gonna try to bring me down for my skin color, my entire life like, you know, it's gonna happen. But [...] you just need to find the best in it and just stay positive.

A narrative tension emerged between Emma's expression of being treated like a "normal" high school student and her implication of racism as normative in rural, predominantly White spaces. Emma's resignation to the existence of racism in rural, predominantly White spaces alluded to a normalization of experienced racism within them.

Emma asserted her belongingness within her rural, predominantly White high school and within the human condition:

> I might be, you know, darker than a lot of people, but that doesn't define who I am at all, you know. So I think… I think it's important for teachers, and everybody to understand that, you know, we're still human, you know, we… we still can do the same things that everybody else can do, and we can still love the same. We just have a unique skin color, you know.

Emma's statement signified a defense of the abilities and humanity of students of Color but simultaneously inferred that she had encountered perspectives or positionalities in opposition, which necessitated her to make the affirmation. Emma's assertion that students of Color can "do the same things that everybody else can do" hints at an assumed deficit mentality, though it is unclear if she perceived that to be the normative perspective endemic to her rural, predominantly White high school or to predominantly White spaces more generally.

Emma referenced racial justice more globally:

> I hate… I hate the… how much hatred there is in this world just because of somebody's skin color. You know, we're all… everybody's unique in their own way, you know. And that's… that's how I feel. Everybody is unique and beautiful in their own way.

Emma's words fracture the concept of "normal" entirely. By employing the term "unique," Emma honors individuality and presents the importance of recognizing people as individuals.

"It's definitely shifted as I got older." – The Evolution of Self-perception and Presentation. Emma did not feel like she belonged with her friend group during her early school years. She said she felt like she always had to be "quiet" and that she often felt like she had to "hide," implying a connection between visibility and voice. Emma described her middle school years as particularly difficult, in part due to feeling "insecure" and "uncomfortable" and in part due to shifting family dynamics catalyzed by her mother and stepfather's divorce. Emma

remembered: “I was never really myself. I always hid. I didn't… I stopped playing sports. I kind of lost my friends. [...] So I never really talked to anybody.” Emma felt she “had to hide” and “definitely wore a mask.” Though Emma expressed a sense of agency over her visibility, her primary expression of visibility was *invisibility*. Emma elaborated:

> That's where I honestly did not feel like I… I belonged with them. I always felt like I had to be quiet. I didn't... You know I was never really happy. I didn't feel confident with myself. I always had a low self-esteem. So I really… I think it was with her and our friends.

The language Emma employed was consistent when talking about her experiences in middle school and when talking about her parents’ divorce, which drew a strong correlation between those lived experiences. Emma noted a sense of external invalidation; consequently, she felt as though she had to “hide” and “be quiet” which had an impact on her self-perception and presentation.

Emma remembered feeling “insecure” about her skin color throughout elementary and middle school and shared one particularly poignant memory:

> You know, my best friend. She… she's like, looks like the definition of a Barbie, you know. She's beautiful, and I was always so insecure… insecure around her. And I remember when we were in like [...] third grade, we were laying in the sun, and she… she was getting tan lines, and I didn't understand what those were yet, right? So I look and I'm like, “Oh, like, look [...], I have a tan line. Look, if I wore a whole bunch of clothes, like if I wore a hoodie in the summer, I'd be as White as you are.” And you know, not thinking of it like… like that's really sad that I would… you know, I didn't love my skin color at the time. Sad that I wanted to be someone different.

Emma's reflection that it was "sad [she] wanted to be someone different" underscored a shift in her perspective. In a position of reflection, Emma stated, "I wish that I could tell my younger self that I'm beautiful, you know [...] I feel very confident now. I'm happier. [...] And you know, I don't have people bringing me down." Emma associated her insecurity not with her stage of development but instead with her friend group; she shared that no longer being part of that friend group changed her. Emma noted the significance of this change as she transitioned to high school. Emma began playing soccer again and recognized that was where she felt "seen." She shared that her teammates included her, and she felt like she "belonged there." Beyond soccer, during high school, Emma "never felt left out, especially with friend groups." She felt "included in a lot of stuff."

When asked, "In what ways were you able to bring your full self to school?," Emma responded:

> Honestly, I feel like… I feel like the biggest thing for me is just being able to be confident. I love my skin color. I'm very… I love it, and I will always say that, like… I'm very proud of my skin color. So you know, going into school. I'm always, you know. I'm just like, okay, like, I feel good. You know, I'm happy. I'm always tan. I go out in the sun for 10 minutes and I'm… I'm dark, like… very, yeah. I'm very happy. So I always feel like I can bring my full self to school, you know, now I do cause I'm just confident. I feel good about myself. It's definitely shifted as I got older. [...] But other than that, I mean, I'm very confident with myself, and I love who I am. I love my skin color. I think it's very unique.

Emma's emerging inclusion aligned with emerging self-confidence, though it is unclear which preceded the other. Her self-perception and representation indicated a sense of belonging to

herself. Emma's sense of belonging to herself happened in tandem with a sense of belonging at school and in her community.

"Everyone should be one." – Inclusion and Separation. Emma explained that in middle school, she was friends with "the wrong group of people." She chronicled that "they made fun of [her], and they would bring [her] down [...] They never were really positive." Emma characterized her friend group as affluent and "super popular." With that friend group, Emma felt "uncomfortable" and fell silent. She said during that time in her life, she did not feel like she belonged. Emma interpreted her separation as externally designated and felt cast out of the boundaries of belonging by her friends. She drew parallels between that social experience and her experience after COVID-19. Emma was in 8th grade at the onset of COVID-19; she noted the impact on her social health: "I lost my social ability, I guess, with other teenagers my age. I've lost, like, being able to talk to people." Emma's loss of social ability presented a barrier to belonging, which stood in stark contrast to the sense of inclusion that she expressed throughout her interview.

In high school, Emma said her soccer teammates included her, that she felt "seen," and that she felt like she "belonged." Emma additionally became involved with, and so felt part of, her school and with her community through various clubs and through work in childcare at the local YMCA. She navigated these rural, predominantly White spaces by "including [her]self" and "putting [her]self out there." She noted that her high school and community involvement helped her feel included. Emma "made a lot of friends, [...] never felt left out, [and …] felt included in a lot of stuff." Emma added: "Everybody accepts me… accepts me for who I am." Emma generalized about her high school experiences that she felt "belonged" and affirmed "I belong there."

However, a narrative tension emerged between inclusion and separation, between belonging and othering. Though Emma spoke about being included, she frequently referenced being bullied, a mechanism of separation. Emma said that she "had a few kids that have bullied [her] throughout the years" and noted that her mom "got bullied, *too*" [emphasis added]. Emma shared a personal experience from high school: "Like one kid… he offered me a piece of gum, and he said, 'Hey, Indian girl, do you want a piece?' Like he was… that hurt my feelings a lot." Emma's peer employed divisive language that functioned to other her and Emma expressed feeling hurt over being reduced to an ethnic designation.

Emma similarly shared an experience of hypervisibility where she felt "used" and "bullied" that separated her from experiences of inclusion.

> And remember when the Black Lives Matter thing was going on? Like, I guess I was being bullied. And they [friends] were like… they were saying [...] they supported me and all these things, but I was never really… like, I... I didn't feel like I was kind of included in that, because I'm not, you know, African American. So I feel like a lot of people will mistake me for being African American, but I'm not and so, you know, those friends would [...] bully me and kinda use me, I guess, for being of Color. [...] They would use me like on social media, just to look better. You know, I would be in the picture just because I'm of Color, and it made them look better for being friends with the person of Color.

Emma's racial identity was reappropriated by her peers in order to attach themselves to the Black Lives Matter movement. Emma did not identify with the Black Lives Matter movement, so though her peers' projection of hypervisibility onto Emma was presented as an attempt at inclusion and solidarity, instead Emma felt tokenized and exploited on social media. Emma felt

"used" for "being of Color" and, in an imposed state of hypervisibility, was disconnected from belonging.

Emma reflected on the "issue of separation" at her school more generally and noted that the biggest barrier to belonging at her school was separation. She elucidated:

> I feel like the biggest problem is separating kids. You know, there's some students that are…. they [people] think that are better. And some kids that aren't, and I think… I think there shouldn't be any separation. You know, I think everybody should be one. [...] And so I think teachers should understand that we shouldn't be separated. And I think that's one of… one of the problems that my school is… you know, kids are being separated [...] Like we have… we have this one classroom for the asylum seekers that had came from… I can't remember where they came from. But they're in a different classroom, like they're completely separated from the entire school. And I… I don't… I don't know. Maybe it's just because they're learning English. But I just… I don't know. I never liked that. I don't like the idea of that. I feel like they should be in a normal classroom, and they should be out with everybody else.

Emma highlighted the literal and symbolic separation of students. Though she was familiar with the students, she did not know from where they came, suggesting that the students were not generally *known*, and recognized the likely impact on their sense of belonging. Emma noted that these students, separated and invisible, though also hypervisible through segregation, were outside the boundaries of belonging, both spatially and symbolically.

"They really make me feel like I am belonged." – Systems of Support. A narrative thread woven throughout Emma's experiences was systems of support. Emma acknowledged four primary systems: her mother, her friends, teachers, and her school community. Emma

referred to her mother often throughout her interview. She drew strength from her mother and stated that her mom understood her experiences because her mom had "been bullied, too."

> And so I feel like my mom's definitely been that support … support system for me. [...] My mom's always supported me, and she understands. Like, when she was in high school she got bullied, too, so you know, she… and she also didn't understand cause she was adopted. So, I feel like my mom's really helped me with a lot of who I am today.

Emma trusted in her mother to support and guide her. Emma chronicled a period of separation from her mother, dictated by custodial agreements that resulted from her parents' divorce. Emma talked about the challenges she endured with her stepfather and expressed not feeling a sense of belonging with him or in his home:

> I felt like a lot of it is, my dad is very racist. That's how my mom feels, too, and it's weird to say that cause he has two children that are of Color. So yeah. And he makes very like racial comments. He'll, you know, make fun of people, so it's just not a place that I wanna be.

Though Emma did not make a correlation between separation from her mom and the time at school when she felt she had to hide and be quiet, the periods of time did align. In that way, Emma seemed to draw power from her mother. Of her burgeoning self-confidence, Emma stated: "I love my skin color. I think it's very unique. And you know, my mom, my mom blessed me with it." Emma came to see her skin color as a blessing and a gift from her mother. Her correlation of support with her mother infers a sense of belonging with her mother through their shared skin color and experiences in rural, predominantly White spaces.

Emma reaffirmed her self-perception and presentation when identifying friends as another system of support:

> I feel like… I've also just… I've learned, you know, like people are gonna love me for who I am, and my friends are very supportive of me, and they don't… you know, they don't care about what I look like, you know… if I'm pretty, if I'm not. They're always very supportive of just me and my goals and my dreams. And honestly, they've really supported me. So yeah, I don't… I don't feel like I'm ever getting criticized ever.

Emma's expression of her friends "not caring" about her appearances suggests an appropriate threshold of visibility. Emma felt seen in a validating way, in a way that honored her full self, her goals and her dreams.

An additional system of support that Emma highlighted were her teachers. Emma noted that she sought support from a Black teacher, the only Black teacher at her high school, after enduring a racist interaction. She said, "I went over and I talked to him about it, and you know he was very helpful and he helped me a lot through that. [...] yeah, he really helped me." Though the racist incident othered Emma, the impact on her sense of belonging was mediated by her teacher, who expressed a sense of knowing. Emma felt solidarity with her teacher through their shared experience and the insight he provided. Emma took heart in and was supported by her teacher's words. About teachers more generally, Emma stated, "All the teachers are very kind and respectful."

Emma summarized her systems of support:

> Like, I said, when you know, playing soccer. And you know, being a part of, like a family, you know, I felt… I felt important. I felt safe and loved. And also, you know, also in my school, too, I feel like, you know, [town name] has really helped me. Um, you know? They… they really make me feel like I am belonged. I belong there. And I know that I can get the support that I need from anybody.

Emma felt a sense of belonging with her soccer team, with her friends, with her family, and with her mother specifically. She felt she could get support "from anybody." She felt a sense of belonging at school and within her greater community. Emma felt "important" and "safe" and "loved."

Summary. Emma explored the meaning of "normal" at her rural, predominantly White high school. She shared that she was treated as a normal student, though she implied a normalization of experienced racism. Emma seemed to employ a level of resignation toward racism as endemic to White space. Emma defended the belongingness of people of Color within rural, predominantly White spaces and within the human condition. She deconstructed conceptualizations of "normal" and emphasized the importance of seeing people as individuals.

Emma juxtaposed her elementary and middle school years with her high school years. Throughout her childhood and early adolescence, Emma shared that she was "quiet" and "hid." These early experiences of silence and invisibility aligned with feelings of discomfort and insecurity; yet, Emma noted that things shifted as she got older. Concurrently, Emma became involved in sports and activities in her school and community while her perception and presentation of self evolved. Emma expressed confidence in herself and in her ability to bring her full self to high school. Emma attributed her sense of belonging to four systems of support: her mother, her friends, her teachers, and her school community. She recalled that she felt "important, safe, and loved."

A narrative tension emerged, however, between inclusion and separation. Though Emma expressed feeling a sense of belonging, she referred to being "bullied" and the experiences she shared were specific to the color of her skin; those experiences resulted in separation. Emma felt

as though separation was the biggest barrier to belonging at her school. She chronicled the experience of asylum seekers in her school who were spatially and symbolically separated from the mainstream. Emma expressed that she hated "how much hatred there is in this world because of somebody's skin color" and affirmed "everyone should be one."

Lucas

Lucas was an 18-year-old who self-identified as a Black man. Lucas described his mother and his father as Black. Lucas was raised by his mother; his father died. Lucas was born in Africa and lived there until he was 17 years old, when he moved to the United States. Lucas came to Maine alone and lived with a host family. English was not Lucas's first language. At the time of the interview, Lucas was 2 weeks away from graduating high school.

"I had to hide." – Degrees of Visibility and Voice through Transition. Lucas attended school in Africa until moving to Maine during his junior year of high school. In Africa, Lucas described, he was with "full Black people" and "no White people." Lucas said the transition from "all Black people [to…] like maybe 10 Black people [...] was not easy." Lucas referenced the statistical unlikelihood of having class with another Black student and therefore often "being the only Black guy in the class," which suggests both hypervisibility and an experience of singularity. He explained:

> We don't have a lot of Black people in the school, so everyone knows who I am. And I don't know everyone, but everyone knows who I am [...] And I know they don't know me because I did something great, but it's just because I'm Black. So, it's easy to know me.

Lucas shared that being one of only a few Black students at his high school resulted in a state of imposed hypervisibility. He recognized that people did not know him for his character or for his abilities (because he "did something great") but rather for his Blackness. Lucas's hypervisibility

aligned with a sense of isolation which was exacerbated by what he characterized as a period of separation when he transitioned to his high school in the United States. He shared, "First semester, I used to just go into like two classes: just the gym class, and then there is another class like, English for other language speakers. I would just spend like all the time there."

Lucas's spatial separation translated to symbolic separation:

> Like for the first semester, I feel like I did not belong to the school or the community 'cause I did not take the first place, like the first place of the people, and no one did, no one asked me. No one asked me how it felt, no one, no one came to me. I could just talk to teachers, ask them what I needed to ask them… the… the coaches… and that's it. No one else. And then just go home, do what I have to do, then go back to school. I would not talk to anyone. It felt like… this is not a good thing. Like, I need people, but no one wants to talk to me. [...] Even the people on my track team for the first semester, for the winter sports, not everyone talked to me. So, I did not feel good.

Spatially and symbolically separated from the mainstream in his high school forced Lucas outside the boundaries of belonging. Lucas expressed not holding a place of importance and chronicled an isolating existence that hinted at invisibility. Lucas correlated experiences of invisibility with experiences of silence. Lucas described limited communication with school staff, with teachers and coaches. Within the segregated classrooms at his high school, Lucas shared that he was often not able to communicate with other students from his home country in Africa: "We don't speak the same language, but the little I had. They don't even speak a lot of English."

Lucas presented the reflexivity of silence. He noted that teachers, classmates, and teammates did not talk to him, and that he "did not talk to anyone." He described himself as

"quiet" and though he felt that people wondered "what was wrong with him" for his silence, he shared that he was "trying to adapt to see." He elaborated, "'Cause I have not been with White people this much. And it was not easy to just go off and say what I would say." Lucas's silence was an observational strategy aimed at understanding his rural, predominantly White high school. Additionally, Lucas detailed being quiet "to avoid doing something that may hurt someone."

> Similarly, as he did with voice, Lucas expressed agency over his visibility and shared: I tried to hide. I tried to hide like some things cause I know some people might not appreciate things we… we do. and I… sometimes I tried to hide some things because I know they might not understand what I'm doing and… but I tried to keep to do… the schoolwork.

Lucas hid in order to preserve his potential to enter into the boundaries of belonging. He expressed concern that full visibility put him at risk for being othered due to people not understanding him.

However, Lucas detailed that not being his full self also functioned to separate him from belonging; he stated, "It hurt… like… it hurt to not be fully me. To be separate." Lucas expressed feeling hurt when he could not fully be himself, yet he identified that he had to "use first semester" to "observe and see how things are done in school. See who really needs to talk to me. See who really is good." Lucas leveraged his silence and invisibility as a measure of self-protection, to understand with whom he could share his full self.

"You don't know how these people will see how you are." – The Experience of Double Consciousness. Lucas noted his concurrent positions of hypervisibility and of voyeur; he was simultaneously being observed and observing (surveying others' perceptions of him). Lucas cautiously observed others to determine how and when to express visibility and voice at school. He elucidated: "And sometimes it's not easy to just… be you, just do what you want to do, 'cause you don't know how these people will… will see how you are."

Lucas discussed how his White peers engaged with race and the impact on their perceptions of him: "And sometimes when you do talk to people they think… so that's the thing… they see on like social media, stuff like that, they see most Black people are open. They do… they do like… talk openly, and most people expect every Black person to be like that." Lucas shared that his White peers thought something was wrong with him for his quietude.

Lucas continued to explore his White peers' engagement with race, with his Blackness, primarily through racial generalizations and stereotype:

> The other thing is um, oh! You know, we have some like gym classes. You know, we do some like… work outside. Outside like classes, building shelters… in the woods and stuff like that. Yeah. So sometimes people think, 'cause I was from Africa, sometimes people think that yeah, the thing we're doing. So yeah, that's how they used to see me. Right. They had to change 'cause I did not know the thing. They have to understand, like how I am through the time I spent with them.

Lucas explained his White peers had expectations of who they believed him to be and of what they believed him capable. He was seen as representative of Africa and of their conceptualizations of Africa. Lucas's White peers had an understanding of his lived experiences

based on stereotype. Lucas fractured his peers' perception and noted that personal experiences with him compelled them to renegotiate their understandings.

Lucas recognized how others saw him and leveraged power over his visibility in order to retain his humanity. He shared:

> When I was in my gym class, we had this thing of actually like the… the… arrows and bows and shooting things like that. People expected me to be good in doing that. And I know I am good at doing that, but cause people expected me… expected me to be better in showing the thing, I decided not to do the thing, just to prove them wrong. Yeah, cause if I did the thing, and I was better than everyone, they would say, "Oh, he's from Africa."

Lucas refused participation in the activity involving bows and arrows in his gym class in order to deflect hypervisibility that he predicted was likely to result in stereotype. Lucas forecasted that his peers would ascribe his ability with bows and arrows to his race, stripping him of his ability and individuality. Instead of participating in the activity and showcasing his skillset, Lucas elected to hide himself, employing a self-imposed state of invisibility as an act of self-preservation.

A narrative tension emerged, however, when Lucas shared an experience with stereotype, with being reduced to his race, as having a different impact on him. He explained:

> The only time it was good is when I started doing track. People could just say, "Oh, he's fast like... We know he's fast 'cause he's Black. He's fast." So, it motivated me because I had to do well in the track. After now, I'm doing good, so it has motivated me to do better than what I did.

Lucas expressed feeling the need to live up to the expectations of his peers. Instead of having a dehumanizing or demeaning effect as did the potential for bows and arrows did, the perception of Lucas being fast due to his Blackness motivated him.

Lucas analyzed his White peers' engagement with him. He shared:

> And I guess I haven't seen or been in a situation where, how people see me or how they think I am made me feel bad 'cause most people just stay quiet. They don't say what they have in their heads 'cause they might feel like they might offend me. So, they have… they sometimes keep quiet.

Lucas invoked the concept of race talk, of color consciousness, as racism and postulated the possibility of his White peers' discomfort with race alongside concern with offending him. A more granular look at Lucas's word hints at the possibility that Lucas believed his White peers had thoughts in their heads that may have offended him, suggesting negative perceptions of him.

In parallel with Lucas's reflections on White student perceptions of him was his reflections on Black MLL (multi-lingual learners) student perceptions of White students. Lucas expounded:

> So, this is not about me. But other people like, I have found this with other people like… they… […] the Black students that go to [my high school], most of them, just… have in their heads like… if the person doesn't talk to them, that person is racist. That's the thing. Most people, most of them, that's the thing they have in their heads. […] If they tried to talk to the person and that person doesn't talk to them, or they are in a class, like full of White people and no one wants to talk to them, they feel like the person is racist. They don't… they don't know why, but they don't wanna talk to, but… that's the thing they have in themselves, like they feel like… yeah, that person is racist.

Lucas theorized that his Black MLL student peers' perception of White students was that they were racist; however, he presented that perception as internal to his Black MLL student peers and not something that was inherent to his White peers. Lucas's interpretation established a stalemate in communication, cementing spatial and symbolic separation. Lucas identified that his White peers had misperceptions of his Black MLL student peers and that they were perhaps uncomfortable with race; Lucas identified that his Black MLL student peers generally believed his White peers to be racist. In presenting these barriers, Lucas recognized the need to break them down in order to progress toward communication and belonging.

"I did ask the thing for myself." – Locus of Control. Lucas expressed a locus of control over his identity and peer perceptions of him by leveraging his visibility to a degree. During the first semester at his high school, Lucas decided not to participate in the gym class activity involving bows and arrows to "prove [his White peers] wrong" in order to avoid their reduction of him to stereotype, to their conceptualizations of Africa. Lucas explained:

> So, I had to do… had to just let them win, and then they will not say the thing [attributing his skill to his being from Africa] cause if… if they say the thing, it might have been somehow not good to me. It would not have felt good to me. So I had to let them win.

Lucas anticipated the impact of stereotype on him and stated that it would not feel good to have his skills ascribed to his Blackness. Another layer of complexity was added, however, when Lucas stated:

> You know, there's a situation we get in, and… you don't wanna be the top guy… you don't wanna be the one to take everything. And you have to just let people… some people win. And then they have to take the credit somehow.

Lucas suggested not wanting to disrupt the social order, perhaps as an attempt to experience belonging in the existing social structure. Similarly, Lucas noted that when he first came to America, he remained quiet in order to "avoid doing something that may hurt someone." He described himself as always nice and never rude. He detailed that he intentionally hid himself in order to not incidentally offend others and in order to prevent misperceptions of him. These strategies seemed to aim toward preserving the potential for belonging.

He expressed a locus of control in his transition to second semester and exercised agency over his learning experience when he advocated for himself to be mainstreamed at his high school. Lucas stated something had to change for the second semester in order for him to bring his "whole self to school." Further, Lucas recognized the importance of social connection and belonging to his wellbeing. He recalled:

> And, for the second semester, I said, "If I keep doing this, I will not… nothing will change. So, now I have to take full classes." I said, "Put me in classes with, like real people. I need to see people, like the whole day. If we have, like an assignment to do, I need to be seeing someone next to me, and then I'll ask them. If they don't wanna help me, I'll just turn around and ask the other person." […] I did ask the thing for myself [to go mainstream]. I went to my guidance counselor and said, "Yeah, I need to be in a real class. I don't care if the classes are hard." But yeah, I'm doing the classes. I know I'm just gonna be with people, and I will not fail when I see people around me. It will help me. If they don't? I don't know if they will help me. But I had to ask that thing for myself. That's the thing for myself. And then she says, "Yeah, that's good. That's good, 'cause we will help you." […] And yeah, that's when things changed. That's when I changed, like whole classes. And then, yeah, I had to have people help me. I would ask

> them every question I had cause sometimes it's not easy to do the work alone so I would just ask people. Yeah, that's when everything changed, cause I would talk to people and the friendship… the friendship started from there. I think right now, I'm me. I do what I'm supposed to do. I'm not hiding nothing. Now, I'm me. I do what I feel like doing. I don't hide nothing, 'cause it was not good to be separate. […] But now, I'm me.

After enduring the effects of separation and not belonging during his first semester, Lucas knew he "needed people." Lucas gave himself the space of the first semester to adjust to his rural, predominantly White high school in order to better understand his peers and their perceptions of him. However, he understood the detrimental effects that silence and separation had on him. He understood the innate need to be connected with others, the innate need to belong. Lucas expressed a locus of control when he met with his school counselor to advocate that he be placed in mainstream classes with his mainstream peers. Lucas demonstrated faith in the humanity and goodwill of his White peers. Though Lucas's transition was an act of vulnerability and a leap of faith, he said that his peers did in fact help him, which created connections that manifested into friendships.

However, Lucas recognized that he had to initiate interactions. He said, "But, I had to change the thing. I had to talk to them first. I saw that no one was the type of person to talk to me. So I had to talk to them." So, he began to "talk to everyone." Lucas relayed a specific example of encouraging his track teammates, especially when they had "a bad day." He would tell them, "You did good. Next time, you will do better." He felt that supporting his peers prompted them to do the same for him. He shared, "The same people I used to talk to, that I would motivate them, they are the people now who are pushing me."

Lucas noticed a shift in his perspective: “I feel like they are not failing to talk to me. I don’t feel awkward. It’s good.” Over time, Lucas communicated that he was “open to say and do what [he] wanted]” and explained, “Cause now I understand how they see me. I understand how they listen to what I say.” Lucas pointed to reciprocal communication as enhancing his social connections. He stated that as a result, “Yeah, it helped cause now I feel like I belong to the community.” Lucas’s transition to the mainstream with his predominantly White peers promoted Lucas’s feeling of being known: “‘Cause I know now people know who I am; they know how I feel.” Lucas summarized, “I think I now feel, belong… like I belong to the community and outside the school. […] I feel… feel good. I feel like I belong to the community.

A narrative tension emerged, however, when Lucas shared, “The other thing is… if people don't agree with me, I'll… I'll just stay quiet cause I don't wanna go into something deep.” Lucas’s reference to employing silence to avoid “something deep” echoes his silence as a mechanism to protect his potential for belonging during his first semester; it suggests that Lucas was continuing to assess others’ perceptions of him and further suggests the possibility of reservation on Lucas’s part.

When asked what else would be important to know about the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools, Lucas made recommendations:

> I would say, I did make some research about other schools […] and I mean, I like [two city schools]. They have a lot of Black people there. They have, like many things that make the Black people, like the Black students, get involved in everything. Like, and just… [my town] has things like… it’s only White. They don’t have anything for Black people to do. I’ve seen like… when… if… you do talk to some people from those

> schools, they will tell you that they do have like activities that make them engaged, like they feel welcome, they feel like… They are from there. But [my town]? Nothing. It's just… so… I think if they do… if people who make like communities… who make like everyone feel belonging, like, they feel belonged to a place, they would learn from research about other schools who have like… who have the Black people and White people all together and then see what those schools have, and then they could just try to implement the things in the other schools to help them.

Lucas contrasted his high school with two larger city schools that had existing structures for Black student inclusion and engagement. Lucas drew a distinction between the two larger city schools where Black students "get involved in everything," "feel welcome" and "feel like they are from there" and his rural, predominantly White school where everything was "only White." At his rural, predominantly White high school, Lucas expressed a locus of control in doing the "work" of belonging for himself, yet his recommendation urges stakeholders in education to create systems designed to foster a sense of belonging for all students.

Summary. Lucas described his transition to America as "not easy" due to the stark contrast between the predominantly Black spaces he occupied for the majority of his life and the predominantly White spaces he entered. The transition period was marked by silence and separation. Lucas spent the majority of his time with MLL students, though he did participate in a mainstream gym class. Lucas utilized that time as a period of observation to understand his White peers, their perception of him, and how he could fit into the existing social structure. Lucas explored his White peers' engagement with his Blackness and with race more generally through stereotype. Lucas additionally inferred that his White peers were quiet because they did

not want to say something to offend him, which hints at their discomfort with race and potential equation of color consciousness with racism.

Lucas understood the detrimental effects that silence and separation had on him; he identified the innate need to be connected with others, the innate need to belong. At the start of second semester, Lucas saw his guidance counselor and requested to be placed in mainstream classes. Lucas exercised a locus of control over his social health, over his sense of belonging and acted to build connections and relationships with others. Lucas recognized that White peers would not talk with him first, so he took the initiative to connect with peers.

Lucas identified two larger city schools that he had learned more about and explained the structural supports for students of Color. Lucas acknowledged the importance of a macrosystemic look at belonging. He called upon stakeholders involved in cultivating belonging to learn from the examples he shared and from other places that have "Black people and White people all together" in order to enhance sense of belonging for students of Color.

Rachel

Rachel was an 18-year-old who self-identified as a Black woman. Rachel described her mother and father, by whom she was raised, as Black. Rachel was born in Africa and lived there until she was 17 years old, when she moved to the United States. English is not Rachel's first language. At the time of the interview, Rachel was 2 weeks away from graduating high school.

"There's a really wrong image about Africa that we live with lions." – Peer Engagement with Race. Rachel conveyed feeling "shock" through her transition to the United States. She stated that where she lived in Africa was "predominantly Black people" and her community in Maine "doesn't have that much Black people." She was initially met with curiosity from her White peers, which she described as "normal." She elaborated, "It was really

okay for me, cause it's… of course, it's [being Black in a rural, predominantly White space] a different thing. But I'm getting used to it. So, it's not hard to talk about it." She understood the curiosity of her peers and stated that she would "ask something like that to people with different ethnics as [her]." She explained that she understood genuine interest: "I get it when people are really… are actually curious and want to know more about because they… they're not used to see like, how do you do, I don't know… your hair or something like that." However, Rachel differentiated between inquisitive curiosity and degradative voyeurism. Rachel shared, "When it's just because you're not used to it, and you're just trying to make this person feel different, yeah, that's… that's when it's not good." Rachel's second example of questioning highlights an intentional act of separation, of othering, which functions to push people out of the boundaries of belonging. While the first line of inquiry Rachel shared was aimed at understanding and connection, the second line of inquiry Rachel shared was aimed at degradation and division. Rachel added, "We can always tell [the intention of the questioner]."

> Rachel additionally shared that her peers engaged with race through stereotype:
>
> And people in general here believe that because we came from Africa, because there's a really wrong image about Africa, that we live with lions or stuff like that. That is not how it happens. It may happen in some countries, but not in every country. And people normally think that we don't know how to… how to be in society.

Rachel identified the hurtful and harmful implications of stereotype and, more specifically, of the stereotype she shared that was employed by her peers. The stereotype conjured conceptualizations of the wild and consequently implied the animalism of Black African people. This stereotype summons a racist view of Black people as uncivilized and unfit for society.

> Rachel defended her humanity and the humanity of all students of Color:
>
> I would like people to know that, like we're not… we're not… like different. We're all humans. We all have the same blood. So, treat everybody the same way you would treat somebody of your color. So, just act normal.

Rachel advised her White peers to "act normal," as they would with people of their own color. Rachel's use of the word "color" to refer to White people suggests the racialization of Whiteness; Rachel "raced" her White peers, though they did not generally have to engage with race and therefore likely saw themselves as raceless, which impacted how they viewed and engaged with Rachel as well as with students of Color more generally.

Rachel said that, reciprocally, she tried to act normal with her White peers. She tried to "be kind to everybody," which created pathways to connection. She explained that as a result of her kindness, people were able to get to know her, to a degree, and reacted in positive ways. Rachel said her peers would note of her, "Oh, you're nice, or something like that." Rachel "used those opportunities, every opportunity [she] got to talk to other people or have them talk to [her]." She said she "used those opportunities… to feel seen." Where she felt given opportunities to feel seen most was in her EMT class, where she said that "everybody treats you good, like the same way they would treat everybody is the way they treat me. So there, I really feel that I belong."

"Everybody was just staring." – The Invisibility of Hypervisibility. When Rachel first entered her rural, predominantly White high school, she felt "too visible." She shared that hypervisibility was a common experience in predominantly White spaces where "people look[ed] at [her] a different way." She asserted the undeniability of this practice ("there's not how to deny this, because that's the true") and explained further:

> It feels like… sometimes it feels like… well, how can I explain this? Like when for example, if you let something fall in your clothes and you get dirty; you know that people are staring at you because you're dirty. So yeah, that's basically their look… is like of something dirty, like that I'm kind of, like dirty or something is wrong with me.

Paradoxically, Rachel identified moments of hypervisibility as, concurrently, moments of invisibility. She explained that, though hypervisibility was projected onto her body, with peers having noticeable reactions to her, she felt invisible. She clarified: "Sometimes, like people don't give you the attention because of your color." Consequently, Rachel shared that she felt like she did not belong.

Rachel employed invisibility as an act of self-preservation. Because she did not feel a healthy degree of visibility or a sense of belonging, she said the only things she showed in school were "superficial things," and she gave the example of things she enjoys doing. She detailed: "I feel like I can't really show… it's my like, my real personality, like my… the way like I… I laugh, or my jokes, or how I behave when I'm comfortable. Yeah, that's something that I don't really show." Rachel revealed that she could not bring her full self to school and held back pieces of herself. She related her withholding to not feeling comfortable at her rural, predominantly White high school.

Rachel expressed a degree of validating visibility in schoolwork. She said:

> I normally feel seen when we're talking about things that I know. For example, like something that has to do with school, actually like work and stuff like that, that I know that is where I can actually shine to show that… yeah, to show that I know some things. And at those times, I really feel seen.

Rachel felt seen in academic settings where she could engage with the material and "shine;" she felt seen when she was validated for her academic abilities. However, Rachel also shared an experience with hypervisibility in the classroom:

> Once I had a teacher. and we were talking about some country in Africa, so he was putting me in the spotlight, like I am the one who came from there, so I am the one who knows everything. And he was kind of mocking me because of that. So yeah, it was really uncomfortable.

Rachel's teacher, in a central position within the classroom, shone a spotlight on Rachel, placing her into a state of hypervisibility. Further, Rachel's teacher identified her as a representative of Africa. Rachel shared that she chose silence in the moment of hypervisibility, "[I]n the class at the moment I didn't say anything. I just told him that there's no way I can know everything about a continent, because it's a continent." Rachel chose silence to alleviate hypervisibility, to dim the spotlight.

"They shouldn't make us prove ourselves to deserve a place here." – Defending Capacity and Ability. As referenced above, Rachel felt "seen" when discussing material that she knew in the classroom. Rachel asserted, "Sometimes people don't give you the attention because of your color, and they think that you can't do certain things or you don't know how to." Because people at her rural, predominantly White high school believed she could not do things due to the color her skin, she described feeling "validated" when people saw that she was "able to do things like that." She elaborated: "Validating was when people saw that I'm able to do things like that. I'm really capable of that. I'm not just here because… I don't know but…"

Rachel applied the misconception of her capacity and ability to teachers as well:

> So I really hope… something that will be good is that teachers stop thinking that we can't do things, like that… that we don't understand, because we do. We may speak different, at least a different language, but we do understand things. We understand orders; we understand limits; we understand everything. So yeah, the only thing I would like for teachers to know is that they should… they shouldn't try to like, make us prove ourselves to deserve a place in here.

Rachel asserted that she deserved a place in her rural, predominantly White high school; she asserted her belonging. Though she did not feel "included" or "connected" or "belonged," that she asserted her place suggests the reason she did not have it was because she was denied it. Rachel shared that people othered her by believing she was not capable of or able to do things within the White habitus, which cast her outside the boundaries of belonging.

Often throughout her interview, Rachel used the pronoun "we" instead of "I" which suggests a communal mindset; she was not focused on herself and the impact hypervisibility or othering had on her, but rather she was focused on students of Color more generally and on students from her country in Africa more specifically. When asked, "What else would be important to know about the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools?," Rachel shared:

> I don't know if it's something important that I have to say, but like we're… we're… we're… we're a happy, a happy culture. We're happy; we're happy people. So, we like to talk. We like just express ourselves. And sometimes our way to express ourselves may be different, because here people are really quiet. So. but yeah just yeah, it's important like to maintain our culture. And we like, we really like the way we are. And we respect everybody as they are. So yeah, we would like to feel the same way.

Rachel described people from her country in Africa as happy and talked more about how it is important to her and others to maintain their culture. Though Rachel depicted being denied and having to fight for a place in her rural, predominantly White high school, she affirmed that she deserved a place, racially and culturally, just as she was.

Through the member checking process, Rachel requested to add:

> Everything we are going through now, all of the things we are letting happen, everything we are desperately trying to change is so that in the future our little brothers and sisters don't have to go through it again, don't have to feel rejected by the society, don't have to worry about how being themselves will affect their life in a majority White society.

Summary. Rachel characterized her transition to the United States as a period of shock. Transitioning from being immersed in predominantly Black spaces to predominantly White spaces resulted in experiences of hypervisibility, which she analogized with a spotlight and with the way people stare when one is wearing a shirt with a stain. Rachel underscored the invisibilizing nature of hypervisibility and shared that she did not feel seen.

Rachel explored the engagement of her White peers with race. She shared that people often asked her questions but differentiated between lines of inquiry based on the intention of the questioner. She understood questions for understanding and genuine curiosity, which she viewed as inquisitive. However, she stated that she could tell if a person was asking questions with the intention of demeaning or othering her or her experiences. Rachel further shared that her peers engaged ~~in~~ with race through stereotype, depicting Africa as animalistic or uncivilized, which translated into false perceptions of her, as well as of her abilities.

Rachel asserted that her White peers and teachers did not believe in the abilities or capacities of students of Color. Rachel explored how, from a position of other, she had to prove

herself worthy. Nevertheless, she persisted and defended her right to "a place" [of belonging] in her rural, predominantly White high school.

Themes

The participants of the present study were incalculably diversified in their lived experiences and perspectives, including the students who attended the same school. However, all participants were unified in the shared experience of being a student of Color at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine. Consequently, though the experiences and perspectives of the study participants were multifaceted and distinct, four common themes emerged and are explored below.

Theme 1: The Complexity of and Synergism Between Hypervisibility, Invisibility, and Singularity

Participant experiences of hypervisibility were complex and multifaceted, with literal and symbolic hypervisibility (of bodies and ways of being) operating alongside externally imposed hypervisibility and internally felt hypervisibility. Participants explored literal and symbolic hypervisibility: the first, projected onto their Black and Brown bodies upon sight; the second, projected onto their Black and Brown bodies through reactions to existences or ways of being that deviated from White normativity. Hypervisibility originated from the vision and perspective of their White peers and was felt internally by participants during experiences of singularity.

Garcia talked about the experience of being hypervisible due to the absence of people of Color at her rural, predominantly White high school and of her peers' lives more generally. Garcia described that her body and her existence deviated from White normativity, and she understood her presence as a disruption of White space. Angela and Lucas similarly noted their hypervisibility as a product of the Whiteness of their high schools. Lucas asserted that everyone

at his high school knew who he was due to the low enrollment of Black students. He clarified, however, that they did not know him for his character or for his abilities but rather for his Blackness. Rachel and Angela both referred to "spotlight" experiences while Garcia and Rachel referred to the resulting "stares" of their White peers. Rachel analogized stares with the look one receives when wearing a food-stained shirt and equated the look with a response to that of something dirty or something wrong. Peer engagement with race is further explored in theme 2. These invocations of hypervisibility, though experienced and expressed differently, centralized participants' bodies of Color while also demarcating the confines of belonging within White space and casting them outside.

Experiences of hypervisibility coincided with singularity experiences, though it is unclear which preceded the other—whether hypervisibility produced singularity experiences, whether singularity experiences produced hypervisibility, or if the two were co-occurring and mutually reinforcing. Participants felt hypervisible during singularity experiences *and* felt like "the only" (singularity) during experiences of imposed hypervisibility. Lucas explored the feeling of being the only Black person in a classroom, while Angela explored the feeling of being the only Black person in her school. Both shared that they were "hyper aware" of their Blackness in those predominantly White contexts. Jessica discussed singularity experiences and quantified the number of Asian American students in her school as well as the number of Asian American people in her community, in order to highlight both her hypervisibility and her singularity.

Jessica's experience with hypervisibility was the inverse of other participants. Jessica characterized her experience with the hypervisibility of White people when she moved from Asia as jarring. Jessica noted that, over time, she sometimes forgot she was Asian due to her Asian features not being reflected back to her. Though Jessica did not explore the hypervisibility *of her*

body, a contrast with other participants in the study, she highlighted singularity experiences in relation to the hypervisibility of her Asianness through reactions to her ways of being. Jessica and Garcia explored hypervisibility deriving from language and food. Jessica centralized language as a foundational element of her identity, but when she spoke Vietnamese at school she felt "like a zoo animal on display." Garcia, like Jessica, explored hypervisibility through language; though she spoke English fluently, her accent placed her in a position of hypervisibility. Coincidingly, Angela described particular experiences of hypervisibility with regard to her hair. She shared that she had to prepare herself for her peers to forcibly touch her when she would change her hair and detailed an example of the first time she wore braids. Her experience echoed Jessica's experience with language where she felt like a "zoo animal on display." When asked about examples of feeling seen or not feeling seen, Garcia and Jessica talked about lunchtime being especially hard, with peers moving away from them. In a state of imposed hypervisibility, Garcia, Jessica, and Angela did not feel seen and experienced literal and symbolic separation, effectively casting them out of White space, though they were embedded within it.

Five of the six participants excavated the invisibility / hypervisibility binary as they characterized their experiences at their rural, predominantly White spaces high schools. The positionalities of hypervisibility and invisibility appeared oppositional but were in fact co-occurring. Rachel identified moments of hypervisibility as, concurrently, moments of invisibility. Jessica shared that she felt hypervisible for her Asianness due to her peers' association of her academic prowess with her race, which made her "feel like [her] abilities weren't seen… more like [her] race was seen," rendering her invisible as an individual. As a result, she felt "hypervisible but for the wrong thing." Similarly, Rachel and Lucas felt

hypervisible for their Blackness but invisible for their humanity, for their characters and abilities. Rachel explained that, though hypervisibility was projected onto her body, with peers having noticeable reactions to her, she felt invisible. She clarified: "Sometimes, like people don't give you the attention because of your color." Consequently, Rachel shared that she felt like she did not belong. Angela also expressed feeling that she stood out "not in a way that [she] liked" yet explained that she did not have "a lot of experiences where [she] felt seen." While Garcia explored hypervisibility in-depth, when asked how she experienced visibility, she referred to *not* being seen. Participants expressed feeling at once hypervisible (for their race) and invisible (for their humanity); they were "the Black kid," "the Asian kid." Being known for their race superseded anything they could be known for otherwise and suggests that they were reduced to, and therefore a token of, their respective races.

Participants explored the impact of hypervisibility, and though their experiences and expressions varied, the general essence of hypervisibility was harmful and distressing. When discussing effects, Garcia employed words such as "small" and "looked down upon;" Angela and Emma used words like "insecure;" Rachel used words like "dirty" and, like Lucas, "wrong." Participants' bodies of Color deviated from White normativity, emphasizing their hypervisibility, and participants expressed feeling pushed out of White space, separated and othered. Paradoxically, participants were embedded, even centralized, within White space due to hypervisibility, but were simultaneously cast out of it.

Theme 2: Reflections on and Understandings of White Peer Engagement with Race: Pathways and Intentions

None of the participants described that they engaged with peers about their races specifically or about race more generally; however, their White peers *did* engage with race in

various ways. Participants deconstructed peer engagement with race, to include pathways (silences, questions, stereotypes and generalizations, jokes, and microaggressions) and intentions (inquisition, innocence, separation, and degradation). Due to the rural, predominantly White structure of their high schools, most participants expressed an understanding that their White peers had largely not interacted with people of Color. Garcia noted that her peers "didn't know [about the identities or lived experiences of people of Color]," while Angela noted that her White peers had not "really interacted with other Black people;" as a result, their White peers were "uncomfortable." Angela, Rachel, and Garcia recognized their Black and Brown bodies as disruptions to White space, as outside the White normative experience, and empathized that their White peers were not used to their spaces being racialized.

Angela and Rachel understood that their White peers did not have to engage with race in the same way they did; their White peers likely saw themselves as raceless in predominantly White spaces, which impacted how they viewed and engaged with students of Color. Angela suggested that they did not "think about race" because they did not need to and so they lacked a general understanding of race. Garcia identified that her peers did not know how to engage with something or with someone they perceived as outside the White normative experience and deduced that living within a rural, predominantly White space profoundly impacted, even dictated, how her White peers viewed race. Conditioned within the White habitus, participants' expressed that their White peers did not have to think about nor did they understand those with lived experiences or identities outside of it.

Jessica and Lucas discussed the racial silence of their high schools. A visual and verbal correlation presented at Jessica's high school in the parallel between invisibility and what she largely described as racial silence, whereas Lucas's experience with racial silence was

exacerbated during his first semester when he not engaged in conversations on race, and not engaged in conversations at all. Lucas shared that no one came to him, no one asked him how he felt, no one talked to him. Lucas analyzed his White peers' disengagement with him and hypothesized that they may not have "[said] what they [had] in their heads 'cause they might [have felt] like they might offend [him]." Lucas inferred that his White peers, encultured within the White habitus, may have felt uncomfortable with race talk (color consciousness), which they likely associated with racism. Lucas's reference to their silence further implied that his peers may have had negative perceptions of him that they quietly kept to themselves.

Angela, Garcia, and Rachel explored peer engagement with race through inquiry. When Rachel arrived at her rural, predominantly White high school from Africa, she was met with curiosity from her White peers. Rachel understood that peers wanted to know more about her and understood genuine interest. However, Rachel differentiated between inquisitive curiosity (with an aim to understand and connect) and degradative voyeurism (with an aim to demean and divide). Rachel noted that students of Color "can always tell [the difference between lines of inquiry]." Angela's, Garcia's, and Jessica's experiences with peer inquisition aligned with Rachel's second example of questioning, highlighting intentional acts of separation, of othering. Lines of inquiry from Angela's classmates made her feel as though she were on exhibition, like the "spotlight" was on her. Garcia similarly described lines of inquiry from her White peers as voyeuristic, also placing her into a position of exhibition. Jessica also felt as though she were on exhibition through peer inquisition when she spoke Vietnamese at school, though she believed her peers meant no harm. These questions served as verbal cues to Rachel, Garcia, Angela, and Jessica that their existences and experiences deviated from White normativity, emphasizing their hypervisibility, their otherness, and casting them outside the boundaries of belonging.

A narrative tension, that of peer innocence or intentionality, emerged across participant experiences and perspectives, across individual narratives. Garcia depicted her White peers as nescient and naïve. She ascribed hurtful interactions to her White peers' lack of understanding or unfamiliarity with people of Color and even empathized with her White peers, sharing that they "just didn't know" because they had not had experiences outside of their rural, predominantly White spaces. Garcia associated her peers' uncertainty or discomfort with not knowing how to explore interactions. Garcia "*want[ed] to think* that [her White peers] didn't understand" [emphasis added] and therefore "*just didn't know* how to communicate" [emphasis added]. Angela similarly held her peers in ultimate positive regard and shared, "*I'd like to think* they're more harmless, […] whether they are meant to be positive or not. Um, but mostly it's not meant with malintention, but it does happen sometimes" [emphasis added]. Angela and Garcia *wanted to believe* in the inherent goodness of their White peers, in the inherent goodness of the human condition; they wanted to believe that their peers did not intend for their comments or actions to cause harm. Angela additionally shared that she did not want to offend her White peers and she did not want to, out of social self-preservation, appear "woke." Garcia utilized terms such as "miscommunication" and other indicators that effectively removed culpability from her White peers, while Angela stated that she did not want to assume malintent. A tension emerged across all individual narratives, however, in the space between function and purpose, between innocence and intentionality. Garcia elucidated, "They really want to, like, [pause, crying] separate you from everyone else […] Sometimes *they just want to hurt you* because it's unknown, and they just don't know how to deal with it" [emphasis added].

All participants explored White peer engagement with race through the invocation of racial generalizations or stereotype. Angela suggested that stereotype and regurgitation of what

her peers heard at home was the simplest pathway to engaging with race. Angela talked about students referring to her "gangster" hair and her "rapper" hair when she got braids; Garcia shared that her peers assumed she was from "the ghetto." Garcia further explained that her peers projected criminality onto her Brown body (by accusing her of stealing) and further assumed that she was in America "illegally." Jessica and Lucas referred to stereotypes propagated on social media, then consumed and deployed by peers. Whereas Jessica's peers ascribed her academic ability to her race, Lucas's peers expected him to be outgoing and talkative, as Lucas explained, to be like "every Black person [they saw on social media]." Jessica detailed racist stereotypes regarding her food, that peers referred to as smelling like "cat food" or "dog food."

Lucas described that he was seen by peers as representative of Africa and of his peers' conceptualizations of Africa; Rachel explored the widely-held "wrong image" of Africa, "that we live with lions or stuff like that"—a racist stereotype that implied the wild animalism of Black African people, uncivilized and unfit for society. Coincidingly, Lucas's peers expected him to be good at building shelters and at shooting a bow and arrow because he was from Africa. Lucas and Rachel explained that the function of these stereotypes shaped who their peers believed them to be and of what they believed them capable. Rachel explained that sometimes people thought that people of Color could not "do certain things" or "don't know how to."

In response to misconceptions about her identity and ability, Rachel stated that it was important for people to know that students of Color "are still human" and "can do the same things that everybody else can do." Emma shared a similar sentiment, that students of Color "can do the same things that everybody else can do" which hinted at an assumed deficit mentality, though it is unclear if she perceived that to be the normative perspective endemic to her rural, predominantly White high school or to predominantly White spaces more generally.

Rachel's and Emma's assertions signified a defense of the abilities and humanity of students of Color but simultaneously inferred that they had encountered perspectives or positionalities in opposition, which necessitated them to make the affirmation.

In addition to stereotype, tokenism, and reduction to racial designations, Angela acknowledged another entry point through which her peers entered racial dialogue was racist jokes and microaggressions. Angela shared a particular microaggression involving her hair. She detailed when she "did something different with [her] hair," she would have to "prepare [her]self to know that people might touch [her] hair." Emma also shared an experience with a microaggression when another student, offering her a piece of gum, reduced her to a racial designation: "Indian girl." The acts of forcible separation, through touch in Angela's experience and through language in Emma's experience, from their predominantly White peers functioned to other and separate them, which rendered them hypervisible yet outside the boundaries of belonging.

Participants expressed the impact of stereotype, and though Lucas shared a specific experience that deviated from the rest (when the stereotype of being fast due to his Blackness motivated him to meet the expectation set by his peers), stereotype was harmful and hurtful; it functioned to separate and other. Experiences of stereotype and racial generalization were dehumanizing. Participants were positioned as tokens or as representatives of their respective races. Peers reappropriated participant races to fit conceptualizations they held and therefore projected back onto participants. Emma shared a specific example when students used her for being a person of Color during the Black Lives Matter movement. Students took photos with her to post on social media "just to look better" and reappropriated her color for their social benefit. Emma, like all participants who were reduced to a stereotype, was tokenized and exploited.

Jessica, Lucas, and Rachel similarly explained that they felt hypervisible for their race but invisible as individuals. Jessica described White peer reactions to Asian food as "dehumanizing," "jarring," and "hurtful." Garcia felt "small" and "looked down upon." Though Angela, Jessica, Lucas, and Emma expressed feeling a sense of belonging in their rural, predominantly White high schools, operationalized stereotype fractured their experiences of belonging and pushed them outside of the White normative experience and, at times, outside of the human experience.

Reflecting on the phenomenon of separation, Garcia echoed Bonilla-Silva's (2022) notion of the White habitus that results in "a sense of group belonging (a White culture of solidarity) (p. 172). Garcia said that her White peers are "already very linked together, everyone" so students of Color (who may be seen as a "threat" to the White habitus) are "just pushed out." Emma similarly noted that the barrier to belonging at her school was separation; however, she expressed resignation to the conditions. She shared, while voicing the only Black teacher at her school whom she leaned upon to guide her through a racist incident: "People are gonna try to bring [you] down for [your] skin color [your] entire life, you know, it's gonna happen." Emma's resignation to the existence of racism in rural, predominantly White spaces alluded to a normalization of experienced racism within those spaces. Both Emma and Rachel defended their humanity, the humanity of all students of Color. They asserted and wanted others, peers and teachers, to know: "We're all human." Rachel appealed to physiological universality and asserted: "We all have the same blood" while Emma appealed to emotional universality and asserted: "We can love the same." Both defended their participation in the human condition.

Theme 3: Navigational Strategies Designed Toward Belonging

Participants expressed various strategies for navigating their rural, predominantly White high schools. All participants described the need for social connection, for belonging, and explored navigational approaches they employed toward it. Participants utilized silence and voice, wielded invisibility and hypervisibility, initiated personal connection, and identified or created systems of support, which they described as impacting their sense of belonging.

Though participants expressed and experienced imposed invisibility and hypervisibility (often both concurrently), they held an internal locus of control (to an extent) over states of their visibility and also wielded invisibility and hypervisibility. Lucas characterized his first semester, after arriving to Maine from Africa, as one of separation and solitude. Lucas employed silence as an observational strategy aimed at understanding his rural, predominantly White high school and the social structure within it. He shared that he utilized his first semester to "observe and see how things are done in school" and was "trying to adapt to see" how others would perceive him, to see "who really is good," to see how and where he fit. Lucas's silence corresponded with employed invisibility; he said he "tried to hide […] some things" that he knew "people might not appreciate [… or] might not understand."

Jessica also leveraged power over her visibility by employing invisibility. She identified language and food as two integral facets of her culture. As a result of negative peer reactions to both, which catalyzed states of hypervisibility, Jessica stopped bringing Asian cuisine to and stopped speaking Vietnamese at school. Jessica understood both deployments of invisibility as subconscious efforts to mitigate hypervisibility and thereby increase her sense of belonging. Jessica further conjured the range of visibility when she explained how she Americanized her name because, when speaking Vietnamese, she felt like "a zoo animal on display." Jessica's

employment of invisibility aimed to moderate her visibility toward belonging. Angela comparatively talked about "blending in" and "assimilating." She asserted that due to her Blackness, in order to belong, she would need to "do everything else right." Angela acted in what she felt were compensatory ways to keep herself within the boundaries of belonging, which included eschewing race with her White friends and "trying not to focus so much on the race aspect of it" but rather on "personal connection." In addition to "alter[ing] [her]self" to make herself "likable" and "approachable," Angela maintained silence when peers engaged in racist jokes, stereotypes, or microaggressions. During her interview, Angela reflected that not standing up for herself meant that she did not bring her full self to school, suggesting that she had to relinquish her Blackness at the schoolhouse door, employing both silence and invisibility. Angela avoided addressing racist encounters so that she did not appear "too sensitive," "bothered," "liberal," or "woke" and therefore relegated to the social periphery. While Lucas leveraged his silence and invisibility as a measure of cautious surveillance—to understand with whom he could share his full self, to understand the boundaries of belonging—Jessica and Angela, having been in the United States most or all of their lives, respectively, already had an understanding of with whom they could be their full selves, already had an understanding of the boundaries of belonging and what would force them out as "other."

Lucas, Jessica, and Angela employed racial silence and invisibility as a navigational strategy aimed at experiencing belonging or at preserving their potential to experience belonging in the social structure of their rural, predominantly White high schools. Rachel similarly employed invisibility and silences. She described existing at school only in a superficial way and detailed that she held back pieces of herself. A contrast emerged, however, in purpose. Whereas Lucas, Jessica, and Angela employed silence and invisibility to preserve pathways for

belonging in the examples highlighted above, Rachel employed silence and invisibility to preserve *herself*. Rachel associated withholding her true self (her personality, her laugh, how she behaves) with not feeling comfortable at her rural, predominantly White high school, indicating that she did not feel emotionally safe. Though Lucas, like Jessica and Angela employed invisibility and silence toward belonging, he also shared experiences of protecting his emotional safety. When he anticipated that students would ascribe his ability with making shelters or with shooting a bow and arrow to his race, he "let them win" because if they had ascribed his ability to his Blackness through stereotype, Lucas stated that it would not have "felt good to [him]." Instead of participating in those activities with his peers, he employed invisibility in order to protect himself from emotional harm.

Similarly, Angela explained that she mimicked her White peers' engagement with race through racist jokes; she initiated jokes both as a form of social currency and as a method for reducing harm to herself ("it would feel more okay to me that they were making the joke [if she made it first, and…] it wouldn't hurt as bad."). She identified that she got validation and felt "more liked" by initiating jokes or stereotypes. Angela initiated race-based jokes and subverted the power of her White peers by exercising an internal locus of control over language while simultaneously enhancing her belonging. After developing an understanding of the social structure at his high school, Lucas found ways to navigate it to enhance his sense of belonging. He shared, "You don't wanna be the one to take everything. And you have to just let people… *some* people win. And then they have to take the credit somehow" [emphasis added]. A tertiary reason Lucas shared that he did not participate in the highlighted gym class activities was "to prove [his White peers] wrong," to subvert or fracture their perceptions of him and their conceptualizations of Africa. Seemingly contrastingly, Emma described standing up for herself

when a White peer referenced her as “Indian girl.” However, Emma, Lucas, and Angela demonstrated a degree of control over their identities and peer perceptions of them by leveraging ranges of voice and visibility.

Lucas discovered that not being his full self, that employing silence and invisibility and experiencing silence and the hypervisibility / invisibility binary “hurt.” Lucas understood his innate need to belong and the impact that separation had on him. At the turn of the semester, he expressed a locus of control by meeting with his school counselor to advocate that he be placed in mainstream classes, rather than separated into a single classroom with multi-lingual learners because he “needed people.” Though Lucas felt a greater sense of belonging during his second semester, he shared that he continued to employ silence as a tool for belonging; if others did not agree with him, he would stay “quiet” to avoid getting “into something deep.” Lucas’s reference to employing silence to avoid “something deep” echoed his silence as a mechanism to protect his potential for belonging during his first semester; it suggests that Lucas was continuing to assess others’ perceptions of him and further suggests the possibility of reservation on Lucas’s part. Lucas’s experiences from his first semester to second semester mirror Emma’s experiences from middle school, when she felt she had to “hide” and “be quiet,” to high school, when she felt a greater sense of self.

Participants in this study wielded hypervisibility as another navigational strategy. Already in a state of *imposed* hypervisibility, several participants expressed that they *leveraged* hypervisibility toward social connection or belonging. Hypervisibility is complex, however, and was employed in a variety of ways by participants. Though in an imposed state of hypervisibility, Garcia expressed that she was pushed out of White space, she harnessed the power of her voice to reappropriate her hypervisibility as a device for connection. Garcia

indicated that her peers did not know how to engage with something or with someone they perceived as outside the White normative experience and noted that her peers were uncomfortable when they saw people of Color, which created a barrier to connection. Garcia took the initiative to "bring in that trust" by creating personal connections with White peers. Garcia invited students into dialogic space ("Hey, you know, I am just like you" and "I know you didn't mean the worst, but this made me feel a certain way") by reducing barriers and identifying opportunities for connection. Garcia's autonomy over and control of her voice and visibility empowered her to leverage both: "So I just put myself out there. I started talking." Garcia made herself hypervisible as a guest speaker in a predominantly White classroom and deployed her voice as a way of facilitating connections to and for her White peers. Garcia understood the universal human experience of enduring "hard things;" she excavated suffering and struggle as an opportunity to create connections with her peers. As a result, her peers were able to see themselves in her experiences, to draw similarities between their own lived experiences within the White habitus and Garcia's experiences outside and within it. Lucas also leveraged his visibility and voice toward personal connection. He said, "But, I had to change the thing. I had to talk to them first. I saw that no one was the type of person to talk to me. So, I had to talk to them." Lucas "talk[ed] to everyone" and, over time, found that his White peers reciprocated communication with him. He shared, "I would talk to people and the friendship started from there." Rachel likewise underscored the importance of personal connection. Rachel tried to "be kind to everybody" in order to create pathways to connection and, as a result of her kindness, she formed connections with her peers. Rachel said her peers would note of her (with a tone of surprise in her voice), "Oh, you're nice! Or something like that." Rachel "used those opportunities, every opportunity [she] got to talk to other people or have them talk to [her]." She

said she "used those opportunities… to feel seen." Rachel, Lucas, and Garcia fractured their peers' perceptions of them and noted that personal connections compelled White peers to renegotiate understandings of them. Engagement with and connection to Rachel's, Lucas's, and Garcia's experiences on an individual and personal level may have excavated student perspectives of who belonged in rural, predominantly White space and therefore redefined the racially homogeneous spaces of their high schools.

Participants additionally navigated their rural, predominantly White high schools by identifying, creating, or leaning into systems of support. Throughout her interview, Garcia emphasized the importance of connection, the importance of "finding your people," while Emma emphasized the importance of systems of support. Participants discovered systems of support and connection in a variety of modes: Garcia engaged with the platforms of civil rights, student government, and genders and sexualities alliances which connected her to peers with whom she aligned perspectives, goals, or ways of knowing and existing. Emma joined clubs and sports, and worked at her local YMCA. Rachel participated in the EMT program and sought connection through academics. Jessica also sought connection through academics and participated in academic decathlon. Angela participated in sports and sought connection through academics. Emma, Jessica, and Garcia identified teachers as another pillar of support.

Participants further navigated their rural, predominantly White high schools through a strong sense of self, which sometimes included racial and / or cultural pride. Garcia correlated her wielded hypervisibility and verbal expression with the process of "accepting [her]self," though it is unclear which preceded the other, or if these experiences happened in tandem. Wielded hypervisibility through voice enabled Garcia to take control of her identity and to author narratives about her, about her lived experiences; it further enabled her to take power back from

peers who had "pushed her out" of the boundaries of belonging. Emma's emerging inclusion similarly aligned with emerging self-confidence, though again it is unclear which of these processes preceded the other. Emma explained that as she grew, she developed a strong sense of self, which prompted her to renegotiate peer relationships. Emma's self-perception and representation indicated a sense of belonging to herself, which coincided with a sense of belonging at school and in her community. When asked, "In what ways were you able to bring your full self to school?," Emma responded: "[T]he biggest thing for me is just being able to be confident. I love my skin color […] I'm very proud of my skin color. […] I'm very confident with myself, and I love who I am." Emma's sense of self correlated with her racial pride, as did Garcia's. Garcia shared that she was "proud" and that she wanted to "make sure that everyone [knew that she was] Brazilian." She declared that her cultural heritage and connection were important to her. Jessica also expressed how important retaining her culture was to her sense of self and how she expressed that in the schoolhouse. Jessica blended academic and cultural growth by "exhibiting that part [her cultural identity] of [her]self in school." Additionally, when peers brought up conversations related to race or related to Asia, she "didn't shy away from the topic" but rather, she tried to "participate in the discussion as best as [she] could."

Participants expressed varied experiences and impacts resulting from the intersection of their navigational strategies and environmental factors, to include peer interactions and perceptions, within their rural, predominantly White high schools. Emma shared that she felt "belonged." She asserted that she could "get support from anybody" and felt a sense of belonging at school and within her greater community. When talking about her sense of belonging, Emma shared that she felt "important," "safe," and "loved." Jessica and Angela presented their senses of belonging as less static and contingent upon states of visibility; Jessica

felt a sense of belonging when she was recognized in a positive way for having a different cultural heritage; Angela felt a sense of belonging when she took a colorblind approach to social connections. Lucas asserted that as communication increased with his peers and as he developed systems of support, he felt like he belonged at school and in his community. He shared, "I think right now, I'm me. […] I'm not hiding nothing. Now, I'm me. […] 'Cause it was not good to be separate." Rachel shared that she felt a sense of belonging in the pocket of her EMT class but that she did not feel belonging elsewhere or otherwise. Similarly, though Garcia stated that she "connected with everyone okay," she very clearly and distinctly differentiated between connection and belonging, stating, "Me, personally, I have never experienced, like, anything like that [belonging]."

Theme 4: Expressions of Advocacy for Systems Level Change

All participants engaged with the systems of their rural, predominantly White high schools and / or with the system of public education as an institution through: (a) identification of critical issues such as segregation or separation; (b) social activism calling for support, representation, color consciousness and cultural competence; (c) recommendations for change; and (d) calls to action of educational stakeholders. Garcia asserted "that the American school system, especially around here [in Maine] is not made for immigrants, and it's definitely not made for people of Color." Emma's resignation to experiences of racism ("it's gonna happen") alluded to a normalization of experienced racism within rural, predominantly White spaces. Coincidingly, Rachel asserted her place, her belongingness in her rural, predominantly White high school but paradoxically explained that she did not feel a sense of belonging, suggesting that the reason she did not have "a place," or experience belonging was because she was denied it. In addition to the social challenges that came with inhabiting White space, participants

identified structural issues within the system of education both within and beyond their own rural, predominantly White high schools.

Garcia, Jessica, and Lucas chronicled experiences of separation when they first arrived to the United States. While Garcia talked about being "plopped" into a classroom and "told to learn English," Lucas shared that he spent the majority of his time in one classroom with other multi-lingual learners, joining his predominantly White mainstream peers only for gym class. During that time, Lucas felt like he "did not belong to the school or the community" because he was "separate" and explored the detrimental impacts that spatial and symbolic social isolation had on him. Lucas understood his innate need to be connected with others, his innate need to belong; Lucas knew he "needed people" and separation "did not feel good." Lucas redesigned the system for himself when he met with his school counselor to advocate that he be placed in mainstream classes. Lucas recognized that spatial and symbolic separation created barriers to communication and belonging with White peers; he shared that the system of separation exacerbated White peers' discomfort with race and misperceptions of his Black MLL peers; Lucas, in parallel, shared that the system of separation exacerbated his Black MLL peers' perceptions of their White peers as racist. Lucas recognized the need to bridge separation in order to progress toward communication and belonging.

Emma likewise reflected on the "issue of separation" at her school and noted that separation was the biggest barrier to belonging. Though Emma understood the educational philosophy and intention of supporting MLL students as they acquired or developed the English language, she lamented that they were "completely separated from the entire school." She argued that MLL students should be "in a normal classroom, […] out with everybody else." She explained that, as a result of separation, "There's some students that are… they [people] think

that are better." To mitigate othering and the social hierarchy fueled by separation, Emma recommended: "Everybody should be one."

Jessica was placed into mainstream classes immediately upon arrival from her country in Asia; however, like Lucas, she explored social isolation due to not being able to communicate with her peers and teachers. Garcia echoed language being a barrier to belonging and referred to being "all by [her]self." Garcia identified the lack of support for students whose profile does not reflect that of a typical White student: she explored the experiences of being an immigrant, of being a student of Color, of being a first-generation college student and having questions about "everything and anything," yet having no natural or structural support in place for her to access. She empathized with immigrant students who had to flee from war and who had "past trauma." Although Garcia did not have an existing system of support to access, she did find support with her MLL teacher and with her English teacher. Garcia shared that she and her MLL teacher "had lots of conversations about how the school system here [in Maine] is not made for us [students of Color and immigrant students], and how there are many things that need to be changed."

Experiences chronicled by participants highlighted the various ways that teachers, predominantly White and largely encultured within the White habitus of the schools and communities they teach, functioned. Garcia asserted that "teachers are not ready [… and] are not trained" to "welcome change and welcome different people." She classified the unreadiness of teachers as a systemic issue; Garcia described an interaction she had with a teacher when she asked the teacher questions in a way that projected her own experiences as a student of Color and as an immigrant student at her rural, predominantly White high school onto her teacher; her teacher replied, "I have never, ever been taught this in my career." Tangentially, Rachel implored teachers to "stop thinking that we [students of Color] can't do things" or that "we

[students of Color] don't understand." Rachel indicated that teachers applied a deficit mentality to students of Color and therefore "made [them] prove [them]selves to deserve a place [in rural, predominantly White high schools]." Emma also asserted her ability, capacity, and humanity. She asserted that her skin color does not define her and further underscored: "It's important for teachers and everybody to understand that […] we're still human […] we can do the same things that everybody else can do, and we can still love the same." Emma's statement echoed Rachel's defense of the abilities and humanity of students of Color and simultaneously inferred that she had encountered perspectives or positionalities in opposition, which necessitated her to make the affirmation.

However, similar to Garcia, Emma expressed feeling supported by her teachers. Emma specifically identified the only Black teacher in her high school as a mentor, from whom she sought guidance and support. Jessica also explored her relationship with a teacher at her school who practiced cultural competence. She shared that he had a "love" for culture and for "trying new food." For Lunar New Year, he brought in Asian cuisine and shared it with the whole class. Jessica noted that this was a common educational practice for her teacher who, by exercising cultural competence, normalized cuisines as well as celebrations outside of foods and traditions typical of his rural, predominantly White students. Jessica highlighted the example of her teacher's cultural competence as contributing to validating states of visibility and belonging. Garcia's, Emma's, and Jessica's experiences reinforce the findings of Slaton et al. (2023) that revealed a positive correlation between teachers' cultural humility and competence and students' sense of belonging at school.

Angela experienced a lack of representation in the spaces and faces around her. Angela stated that she did not feel very seen growing up, because she did not see herself in others, that

she did not feel seen because she could not see herself in those around her. Though Angela acclimated to onlying experiences over time, she recognized the cumulative impact on her and advocated for representation in rural, predominantly White high schools like hers where there weren't "a lot of people who look[ed] like her." Angela talked about the specific dynamic of liking White boys but not seeing interracial relationships depicting Black women with White men; she, therefore, stated that she felt like was not possible for White boys to reciprocate her feelings. Shifting from the specificity of Angela's example to a broader, macrolevel application, her statement, "I didn't think it was a possibility" due to lack of representation is profound. Angela shared that representation would have been important to her throughout her education because she "felt very alone." Angela advocated for representation as "foundational" to educational systems.

Angela differentiated between and explored representation through racial diversity of staff and students and representation through curricular content and other educational materials. Angela acknowledged, due to the racial homogeneity of states like Maine, it may not be possible to "bring more Black people or people of Color in person," and recommended that educational stakeholders "find resources to show materials where there are other people who look different [than White people]." Jessica echoed Angela's recommendation and affirmed the importance of opportunities for students in rural, predominantly White high schools to explore various cultures. Jessica shared her personal experiences of culturally diverse educational opportunities. She underscored an experience of going on a school trip to Pittsburgh, where she was able to enjoy multicultural food, "which are experiences that [she didn't] normally get to have in rural Maine." She also discussed an experience with a cultural showcase where people shared "different aspects of how they live, which contrasts greatly to how we live in rural Maine." Of these

cultural experiences, Jessica said they broadened her perspective and opened her mind, catalyzing her to assert that a multi-cultural education is "as important, or maybe even more important, than like basic core courses like math and English."

Angela explored the benefit of diverse racial representation and educational opportunities for students of Color and for White students in rural, predominantly White schools. Angela referred to "spotlight" experiences in her elementary school years when White students, not having had interactions with people of Color, asked questions about her appearance. Angela explained that a racially and culturally diverse education normalizes racially diverse identities, appearances, and experiences; she further explained that a racially and culturally diverse education was affirming for students of Color who would benefit from representation, from seeing themselves in educators, in community members, and in educational material *and* was advantageous for White students who would benefit from a greater understanding of and connections to the people and world within which they were situated. Further, Angela remarked that White students would be less likely to engage in racist interactions with peers of Color who they saw as outside of their normative experience. Angela noted that racial representation fractures the boundary of belonging. She stated that diverse racial representation would make "[being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White school] more normalized."

Participants chronicled having to work to correct peer perceptions of them, to excavate and redress racist stereotype, a primary pathway to peer engagement with race. Participants identified the hurtful and harmful impacts of stereotype generally and of stereotypes that were operationalized to other them specifically. Angela infused her discussion of representation with a discussion of colorblind racial ideology and, of the oppositional force—color consciousness. Angela associated a lack of representation with colorblind racial ideology. She endorsed the

importance of color consciousness, the importance of acknowledging that all people are "different" and "equal" and "normal." Angela denounced the existence and practicality of colorblind ideology ("The people who would be like, 'I'm not racist. I don't see color.' Like, do you?" and "I don't really like the idea of making it so that way people don't see race […] like, 'Oh, race doesn't exist.'"). Colorblind racial ideology operationalized at Angela's rural, predominantly White high school worked to erase part of her identity. Angela asserted the importance of openly discussing race to equalize and normalize all racial identities, aesthetics, and experiences. She denied the existence of the colorblind eye and further recognized the importance of color consciousness as the only pathway toward engaging with race in a way that honors diversity and aims at equality. Angela shared that before she ever talked about her experiences she "didn't have a way to process how [she] felt being in a White rural high school." Angela drew a parallel between lack of representation and her ability to process her experiences. Though she "felt different," she did not know how to voice it. Correspondingly, Lucas postulated that his White peers' discomfort in engaging with race was attributable to their association of color consciousness with racism. Angela's and Lucas's experiences, perspectives, and insights urge color consciousness in rural, predominantly White high schools.

Participants expressed and detailed a range of social activism related to advocacy for systems level change. For participants of Color, existing in their rural, predominantly White high schools, developing strategies for navigation, and persevering constituted acts of social activism. Their experiences and identities as students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools significantly impacted those spaces. Garcia found validation by becoming an agent of social change. She said that she realized if she did not "push forward to make change, no one [would]." Garcia implemented a multi-tiered strategy of meeting and talking with

administrators, teachers, and students to activate change within her rural, predominantly White high school. Garcia explained the importance of breaking down barriers to dismantle systemic racism. To that end, Garcia visited sophomore classes to support their learning through an immigration unit and to share her lived experiences as an immigrant; she worked with teachers in her high school to build connections that would empower them to engage with uncomfortable but important racial dialogue; finally, she met with administrators at her high school to say, "This is the problem. And these are the ways that *we* can fix this" [emphasis added]. Garcia's implication of self here (and again when she referred to what *she* should change in the school system) emphasizes her commitment to taking up the charge for social change.

Lucas advocated not to be separate, which paved the way toward integration for other MLL students of Color. Additionally, during his interview, Lucas contrasted his high school with two larger urban Maine high schools that had existing structures for Black student inclusion and engagement. Lucas drew a distinction between the two larger city schools where Black students "get involved in everything" and his rural, predominantly White school where everything was "only White." Lucas encouraged the researcher, and educational stakeholders, to "talk to some people from those schools" to understand how to create or cultivate conditions where Black students "feel like they are from there [the community]." Lucas called upon community builders and educational stakeholders (upon "people who make […] communities… who make […] everyone feel belonging, like, they feel belonged to a place") to learn from communities where Black and White people are "all together," where students of Color report a strong sense of belonging and replicate conditions toward belonging in rural, predominantly White schools. Lucas, like Garcia, expressed an internal locus of control in doing the "work" of

belonging for himself, yet his recommendation urges stakeholders in education to create systems designed to foster a sense of belonging for all students.

Garcia shared that she felt validated as she blazed a path for students of Color to exist at her high school in the fullest expression of themselves and therefore redefine the historically predominantly White space of her high school and conceptualizations of it. She further shared that she felt validated as she normalized the experiences of students of Color in her rural, predominantly White high school while expanding the collective imagination of rural, predominantly White spaces to include the experiences of students of color. Additionally, because Garcia endured hardship as a student of Color in her rural, predominantly White high school, she wanted to ease it for others. Rachel echoed Garcia's delineation of purpose in social advocacy. She shared that the things students of Color endured and were "desperately trying to change" was for the future, for their little brothers and sisters, so they "don't have to go through it again, don't have to feel rejected by the society, don't have to worry about how being themselves will affect their life in a majority White society."

Summary

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Six participants who attended rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine participated in individual semi-structured interviews. During the interviews, participants were asked about their experiences as students of Color who attended a rural, predominantly White high school, to include how they experienced and expressed belonging (if they did) and how they experienced and expressed visibility (if they did). Participants were additionally asked to reflect on ways in which they

were able to bring their full selves to school or ways in which they were not able to bring their full selves to school.

The raw data of language was analyzed from transcripts: first coded through the use of in vivo coding ("use of the participants' own words" (Volpe White, 2019, 7:55)) then developed into narrative threads to authentically capture the experiences and perspectives of participants. Member checks were performed on individual narratives and, once complete, themes were organized. Individual narrative threads informed collective themes that reflected the shared experiences and perspectives of participants while honoring their diversity and individuality.

The data presented in this chapter depict the nuanced complexity and diversity of experiences and perspectives of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine. The themes chronicled participants' experienced and expressed visibility and belonging in their rural, predominantly White high schools. Four collective themes emerged: 1) the complexity of and synergism between hypervisibility, invisibility, and singularity, 2) reflections on and understandings of White peer engagement with race: pathways and intentions, 3) navigational strategies designed toward belonging and 4) expressions of advocacy for systems level change. The data captured in these themes, and in individual narratives, fractures conceptualizations of rurality, fractures conceptualization of who belongs in and who has the right to exist in predominantly White spaces, in *rural* predominantly White spaces, and concurrently adds to the scant body of literature exploring the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this qualitative narrative inquiry was to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Students of Color were defined as students who identify as Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, or two or more races (NCES, 2023). Rural, predominantly White high schools were defined as schools that are situated within geographic spaces that are not urban or metropolitan and whose student populations in grades 9 through 12 are racially identified as majority (greater than 50%) White.

Using narrative inquiry to explore the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools, from the perspectives of students of Color, the aim of this study was to disrupt normative perspectives of White bodies (individual and institutional) by building counternarratives that center experiences of students of Color through testimony focused on visibility and belonging to inform school structures (processes, policies, procedures, curriculum, climate, culture) that impact the social-emotional wellbeing and academic outcomes resulting from students' of Color sense of belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools. In doing so, the problem addressed in this study was the lack of research exploring the experiences of students of Color (especially from the perspectives of students of Color) in rural, predominantly White high schools (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019).

Three research questions guided this study:

Research Question 1: How do students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 2: How do students of Color experience and navigate visibility in rural, predominantly White high schools?

Research Question 3: How do students of Color experience and navigate belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools?

To answer these questions, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with six participants who were students of Color, age 18, and members of the graduating class of 2024 at rural, predominantly White high schools across the state of Maine.

Through data analysis processes including restorying, coding, theme development, bracketing, and member checking, four themes emerged in response to the research questions that framed this study. First, participants chronicled the complexity of and synergism between hypervisibility, invisibility, and singularity. Second, participants reflected on and shared understandings of White peer (pathways toward and intentions of) engagement with race. Third, participants shared navigational strategies they employed toward belonging. Finally, participants advocated the need for systems level change.

Interpretation and Importance of Findings

The individual themes presented in the previous chapter excavate and organize, through the presentation of narratives, participant experiences with degrees of visibility and with sense of belonging within rural, predominantly White high schools. Narrative inquiry details the shape and character of the human experience, of individual human experiences that inform collective human experiences (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Individual narrative threads were harnessed to build collective themes that were supported with evidence from multiple participants through a narrative approach of identifying patterns, threads, tensions, dichotomies, gaps, and silences within and across narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The

findings of the present study are related to and were derived from those collective themes. As part of the data collection process for the present study, each participant was asked interview questions that were informed by the research questions about visibility and sense of school belonging for students of Color within rural, predominantly White high schools. The data collected through semi structured interviews were connected to existing literature and interpreted through the lenses of belonging theory and visibility theory to further discuss the four findings of the current study as they relate to the three research questions.

Research Question 1

The present study was framed by research questions that opened the space for participants to describe and reflect on their experiences with visibility and with a sense of belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools. The first research question, "How do students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools?," sought to capture the experiences of students of Color more generally in rural, predominantly White high schools; a thorough literature review revealed a consequential gap in research exploring the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022). The present study was undergirded by the work of Allen et al. (2022) and Lardier et al. (2019) which identified school settings as critical research sites to examine belonging, especially through the lenses of cultural and social identities and by the work of Edenborg (2017) which suggested future study on the role of visibility in fostering or denying belonging. The present study was further undergirded by the work of other educational researchers who underscored the importance of centering the perspectives and insights of students of Color (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Farrington, 2020; Glass & Berry, 2022; Joseph et al., 2016; Mayfield, 2021; Rogers et al., 2021; Ruggiano, 2022).

This narrative inquiry explored, through story, the experiences of students of Color, at the nexus of visibility and belonging, in rural, predominantly White high schools. When asked to talk about their experiences more generally, participants shared experiences of belonging and not belonging, of feeling too seen and not seen at all. Perhaps these responses were derived from the study promotional material contextualizing interviews through the lenses of visibility and belonging or perhaps they were an indication that all social experiences, including in the context of school, can be seen through these lenses.

Broad impressions can be deduced. First, all participants described personal experiences with racism; however, Emma is the only participant who explicitly discussed experiencing racism at her rural, predominantly White high school and implied the normalization of experienced racism in those spaces ("it's gonna happen") despite the strongest expressions of belonging compared to her peers in the study. Further, a tension existed across participant experiences and perspectives regarding the function and purpose of racialized interactions. In this way, commonalities emerged between participants in the present study and participants in Yull's (2014) study who described personal experiences of overt and covert acts of racism, yet who applied a colorblind approach to those racial interactions through interpretation of peer intention. Hailey (2022) noted that schools where students have limited opportunity for engagement with students of a different race than their own act as an epicenter where biases toward racial outgroups are cultivated in various forms, to include racist rhetoric. Nevertheless, the participants in Yull's (2014) study shared racialized experiences but did not attribute their experiences to racist ideology, suggesting that racism "had been almost normalized in the rural community" through colorblindness (p. 7). In this vein, Lucas shared of other Black students that "most of them […] have in their heads like… if the person doesn't talk to them, that person

is racist." Lucas perceived, of his Black peers, "that's the thing they have in themselves, like they feel like… yeah, that person is racist." Lucas theorized that his Black peers' perception of White students was that they were racist; however, he presented that perception as internal to his Black peers and not something that was inherent to his White peers—a perspective that mediated and reflected the conception of his experiences at his rural, predominantly White high school.

Like Lucas, all participants in the present study engaged with the narrative tension between peer innocence and intentionality. Similar to the participants in Yull's (2014) study, Garcia ascribed hurtful interactions to her White peers' lack of understanding or unfamiliarity with people of Color, and shared that they "just didn't know." Garcia utilized terms like "miscommunication" and other indicators that softened or lessened the culpability of her White peers, while Angela stated that she did not want to assume that her peers meant to cause harm. Angela similarly held her peers in ultimate positive regard. Angela, Garcia, and Jessica asserted that peer engagement (through words and actions) with race was not from malintent, though the effects on participants were the same and were a detriment to their sense of belonging (further explored in response to research question 3). Jessica and Rachel talked about understanding their White peers' curiosity about them, but Rachel explained that she could tell the difference between curiosity with the intent to connect and curiosity with the intent to other.

In fact, participants also explored experiences where peers at their rural, predominantly White high schools acted with the intention of separation or harm. Garcia conjured Samuel's (2022) claim that othering is predicated on "the notion that we can achieve belonging only by denying it to those we see as different" (Samuel, 2022, p. 49); Garcia elucidated, "They [her peers] really want to, like, [pause, crying] separate you from everyone else […] Sometimes *they just want to hurt you* because it's unknown, and they just don't know how to deal with it"

[emphasis added]. Garcia, while reflecting on the phenomenon of separation, echoed Bonilla-Silva's (2022) notion of the White habitus that results in "a sense of group belonging (a White culture of solidarity)" (p. 172). Garcia said that her White peers were "already very linked together, everyone" so students of Color (who may be seen as a "threat" to the White habitus) were "just pushed out." Most participants, like Garcia, conjured the idea of a dominant White social group, as did Lucas when he asserted, "You have to just let people… *some* people win" [emphasis added]. Lucas seemed to inherently understand that the deviation from White normativity of subordinated groups of Color magnetizes the dominant group (Crenshaw, 1995); Lucas's perception and resulting action (letting *some* people win) could reasonably be understood as his strategy for not disrupting the social order so that he could find areas of inclusion or connection. Participants generally experienced their rural, predominantly White high schools through social systems that produced feelings of belonging or othering (also further explored in response to research question 3), though they employed navigational strategies to persist in their rural, predominantly White high schools.

For the purpose of the present research, navigate was defined as: "to steer a course through a medium [rural, predominantly White high schools]" (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Participants developed navigational strategies aimed at belonging or, minimally, at inclusion and connection and, corresponding to the research of Schall et al. (2021), expressed various degrees of internal and external locus of control while describing how they navigated their rural, predominantly White high schools. Participants navigated their rural, predominantly White high schools by identifying, creating, or leaning into systems of support, through participation in clubs, activities, sports, work, academic pursuits, and through relationships with peers, teachers, and family. Participants further navigated their rural, predominantly White high schools through

various measures and implementations of a sense of self. Participants discussed their sense of self alongside peer relationships and navigating their high schools more generally. Lucas, Garcia, and Emma highlighted the evolution of their sense of self corresponding to opportunities for peer connection and inclusion, though it is unclear which preceded the other (that is, if participants, having grown confidence, found more opportunities for peer connection and inclusion or if participants, through increased opportunities for peer connection and inclusion, grew confident). Additional navigational strategies are explored through the lenses of visibility and belonging.

Research Question 2

The second research question, "How do students of Color experience and navigate visibility in rural, predominantly White high schools?," that framed the current research explored the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools specifically through the applied framework of visibility. In their responses, participants explored the complexity of and synergism between hypervisibility, invisibility, and singularity. Additionally, participants shared navigational strategies aimed at experiencing validating degrees of visibility and at mitigating invalidating degrees of visibility (hypervisibility and invisibility).

Participants recognized their peers' lack of interaction with people of Color, underscoring both Ruggiano's (2022) findings that rural contexts are contoured by racial and spatial isolation and Riel's (2021) findings that the majority of interracial interactions in rural communities occur in schools. The absence of people of Color in the predominantly White communities within which participants lived imposed hypervisibility upon them, which most described as having the effect of centralizing their bodies of Color while invisibilizing or othering their identities and experiences. Garcia discussed her experiences with hypervisibility through "a lot of stares" and

"a lot of whispers in the halls." Angela discussed "spotlight experiences" and always having felt like she "stood out in *not* a way that [she] liked." Jessica explained her hypervisibility through the metaphor of being a "zoo animal on display." Rachel felt "too visible" in her rural, predominantly White high school and analogized her hypervisibility with a food stain on a shirt, indicating that she was "dirty" or that "something was wrong with her." Lucas talked about being hypervisible through being known for his Blackness. Emma did not relate with a consistent state of hypervisibility; however, she shared a specific example of hypervisibility when peers reappropriated her race for their own use on social media.

Participants understood their bodies, identities, and experiences as a disruption to White space, as outside the White normative experience, and empathized that their White peers weren't "used to it" [the entry of race into predominantly White spaces]. Knowles and Hawkman (2020) found that the normative position of Whiteness functioned to dissociate Whiteness with race; White students were rarely aware of their Whiteness as a racial identity and furthermore did not engage with race, which reinforces Yull's findings that "spatial arrangements" (p. 9) contour racial identity construction. Participant understandings of the predominantly White spaces they inhabited and of the resulting impact of the White habitus on their White peers align with Stoll's (2019) assertion that social isolation is "central to our understanding of race and racism" (p. xi); therefore, the compounding of racial, social, and cultural isolation in spatially isolated areas, particularly in rural, predominantly White areas, further reifies Whiteness as normative (Ruggiano, 2022). The phenomena of social, racial, and spatial isolation is particularly prevalent and is intensifying in the Northeast of the United States (Robson, 2019; Showalter, 2019; Tatum, 2017), which for most participants of the current study, resulted in experiences of inquiry from peers. Angela, Garcia, Jessica, and Rachel explored hypervisibility produced by lines of

inquiry. While Rachel explicitly differentiated between inquisitive curiosity (with an aim to understand and connect) and degradative voyeurism (with an aim to demean and divide), the other participants named here engaged primarily with the latter. Lines of inquiry made participants feel as though they were exhibition and, therefore, hypervisible. This style of questioning was a verbal cue to participants that their existences and experiences deviated from White normativity, emphasizing their hypervisibility and impacting their sense of belonging.

Participants' feelings of hypervisibility both catalyzed and were induced by "onlying" (singularity) experiences. Echoing Ruggiano's (2022) findings, participants in the current study chronicled "onlying" experiences; participants' experiences of hypervisibility produced experiences of being "the only" and, in parallel, participants' experiences of being "the only" produced experiences of hypervisibility. Participants in the present study all shared being one of "few" students of Color in their high schools. Lucas referred to being aware that he was often "the only Black guy in the class." Jessica, Garcia, and Angela similarly shared experiences of being "the only." Angela described feeling hyper aware of being the only Black person in her classroom or even in her entire school; Jessica described her "onlyness" in her school and in her greater community. In addition to conjuring Ruggiano's (2022) findings of the racial and spatial isolation that is characteristic of rural, predominantly White spaces, these experiences suggest a correlation between hypervisibility and onlying experiences.

Participants indicated feeling hypervisible as embodiments of their respective races but concurrently invisible as individuals. When asked how they experienced visibility as students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools, most participants referred to not being seen due to the hypervisibility of their race, due (in part) to the lack of engagement with people of Color by their White peers. Participants communicated feeling hypervisible but, concurrently,

"not seen" (a dynamic that more clearly signifies visibility as a recognitive tool (Honneth, 2001). Brighenti (2010) determined that invisibility deprives people of recognition; Edenborg (2017) extended the claim further by asserting that visibility is a prerequisite to belonging. Participants were at once in the center, but outside, of White space. A few examples of literal and symbolic separation occurring in tandem help to more clearly and tangibly illuminate the phenomena of coexisting hypervisibility and invisibility. Hypervisibility was exacerbated by participant engagement with cultural elements such as language or food, as reflected in Garcia's, Jessica's, and Lucas's experiences. Garcia and Jessica described lunchtime experiences where they brought in cuisine attributable to their cultures. Students reacted by employing both verbal (disgust, dehumanizing language) and physical (moving away, not sitting at the same table) tools for separation. Similarly, Lucas, during his first semester at his rural, predominantly White high school, was physically separated from his predominantly White mainstream peers in a classroom for multilingual learners. Lucas's literal separation operated in tandem with his symbolic separation, marked by a time of isolation and silence. Emma highlighted the literal and figurative separation of students of Color at her school as well. Though she recognized the potential educational strategy that students were separated to support English language learning, she lamented their spatial and symbolic separation and discussed the ramifications that "there's some students that are… they [people] think that are better."

In addition to spatial invisibility operationalized through physical separation, participants explored symbolic invisibility. Jessica described feeling invisible as an individual despite feeling hypervisible for her Asianness, due to her peers' ascription of her academic ability to an innate intellectual advantage based on a racist stereotype. Angela discussed feeling like she "stood out" but also like she did not have "a lot of experiences growing up where [she] felt very

seen." Rachel explained that hypervisibility projected onto her body, with peers having noticeable reactions to her, made her feel invisible. She described feeling like people did not give her validating attention because of her Color. Garcia talked about feeling "not seen" despite the whispers and stares in hallways. Lucas talked about being known for his Blackness but not for his character. Participant experiences with the hypervisibility / invisibility binary relate to Brighenti's (2010) discussion of social discourses (inscription and projection) that initiate social actions such as classification, a process through which people are socially sorted. The gaze, as conceptualized by Foucault (1963/2003) and conjured by participants of the present study, has been conditioned by "classificatory infrastructures" designed to sort and rank people (Brighenti, 2010, p. 44). Yuval-Davis (2006) contended that the politics of belonging involves "meeting other people and deciding whether they stand inside or outside the imaginary boundary line of the [community] of belonging, whether they are 'us' or 'them'" (p. 204). In their rural, predominantly White high schools, participants' peers employed visibility, which functioned to inscribe hypervisibility or invisibility onto participants, as a tool to determine who did and who did not belong there. Participants in the current study demonstrated the interconnectivity of visibility and belonging.

Participants additionally engaged with the visibility spectrum through discussions of (the lack of) racial representation. In addition to cues from peers toward belonging or othering through hypervisibility and invisibility, the spaces of participants' rural, predominantly White high schools were imbued with signposts for belonging and othering, as explored by Wise (2022). Participants noted the signs around them. Angela engaged extensively with the lack of racial representation in her rural, predominantly White high school. The lack of diverse racial representation infused invisibility and was another signpost for her (not) belonging. Lack of

racial representation is another facet of invisibility. Angela stated that she did not feel very seen growing up, because she did not see herself in others, which hints at the reflexivity of visibility– that she did not feel seen because she could not see herself in those around her. Murphy and Zirkel (2015) found that students of Color determine whether or not they, and others like them, belong by evaluating "whether people like them have a central place in the curriculum and in the organization and running of the school" (p. 21). Angela further shared an example of limiting beliefs, in which she did not see her experience represented and so thought White boys liking her "wasn't a possibility." Wise (2022) affirmed that a sense of not belonging can impact what students of Color "believe is possible" (p. 115). At a fundamental level, that possibility may be whether or not they even belong in a space at all. Jessica, Rachel, and Lucas shared the experiences of entering their rural, predominantly White high schools from their home countries and feeling startled by the Whiteness of the faces and spaces around them. Lack of representation around the participants denoted an element of invisibility.

Angela, Garcia, and Jessica explored the benefit of diverse racial representation for students of Color as well as for White students in predominantly White spaces. Angela explained that diverse racial representation normalizes racially diverse appearances, while Garcia identified opportunities for connection when expanding conceptualizations of who is seen and therefore of who belongs in rural, predominantly White spaces. Participants also suggested that racial representation fractures the boundary of belonging. Grimes and Roosma (2022) and Louie et al. (2022) argue the importance of decentering Whiteness in rural spaces and, more particularly, in rural educational spaces. Frey (2022) suggests the urgency of racial representation in education and of racially diverse educational spaces as demanded by the racial demography of the American population under the age of 18, which is now predominantly

people of Color. Angela correlated the lack of racial representation at her rural, predominantly White high school with colorblindness and shared that "people would be like, 'I'm not racist. I don't see color.'" She questioned the real-world possibility of colorblindness and asserted the importance of color consciousness, of bringing visibility to Color in order to equalize and normalize all racial identities, experiences, and aesthetics. Jessica, Angela, and Garcia engaged with visibility through diverse racial representation in curriculum. Hamilton (2021), Jones et al. (2021) and Margolius et al. (2020) found that colorblind messages are replicated by White curricula in which students of Color do not see themselves or others who look like them. American public-school system curricula are centered around White Western civilizations, ways of knowing and histories that exclude people of Color (Glass & Berry, 2022; Hamilton, 2021; Jones et al., 2021; Margolius et al., 2020) and therefore replicate regimes of invisibility (Brighenti, 2007).

Participants explained the impact of experiencing the hypervisibility / invisibility construct, particularly in the context of school, a place that Ruggiano (2022) and Tatum (2017) identified as the primary site of identity development, mediated by social interaction. More specifically, participants explained the impact of being embedded within but "pushed out" and "not seen" within rural, predominantly White space on their representation and sense of self. For students of Color, experiences of racism without an arrangement of theorization "can trigger mistrust, sap energy, and provoke feelings of anger, grief, inferiority, or shame" (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021, p. 14). Impacts to participants aligned with Cohen's (2022) findings that being othered has implications on self-perception, performance, behavior, interpersonal relationships and with additional findings that colorblind conditions can contribute to alienation and otherness for students of Color (Saleem et al., 2022) which can negatively impact their sense of belonging

(Byrd, 2015), engagement, motivation, and self-efficacy (Saleem et al., 2022). Angela remembered feeling insecure about being Black when she was growing up; spotlight experiences, exacerbated by racial silence, had implications on her self-image and confidence, especially in relation to Eurocentric beauty standards. Garcia felt "small" and "looked down upon." Lucas "did not feel good." Emma identified her elementary and middle school years, when she did not feel a sense of belonging, as a period of time when she felt "insecure" and "uncomfortable," though these experiences were in contrast to the experiences she shared in high school. Pardede et al. (2021) found that repression of one's fullest expression of self due to anticipated or manifested rejection or invisibility in the school environment can result in low levels of belonging or in feeling othered.

However, participants also shared experiences of validating visibility, through platforms of activities, sports, or academics. Rachel and Jessica shared that they felt seen through academic pursuits when they could showcase their abilities. Jessica also felt seen when her peers positively recognized her cultural identity. Lucas felt validating visibility through participation in track and through interpersonal peer connections. Angela shared that feeling seen in a positive way (like compliments for her hair) was "really nice." Garcia felt seen through participation in clubs and activities as well as through engagement in social advocacy. Emma expressed generally feeling seen in a validating way (after a journey through self-confidence and self-love) that honored her full self, her goals, and her dreams. These experiences of validating visibility had a mitigating impact on experiences of hypervisibility and a positive impact on participants' self-perception and representation. Common threads woven through these experiences of validation is that participants felt seen for their abilities, their individuality, and, in some examples, for their racial and cultural identities. With validating visibility, participants were able

to be a fuller expression of themselves. These findings correspond with the findings of Mitchell et al. (2017) and of Saleem et al. (2022) that indicated Black and Latinx students who attended predominantly White schools and who expressed feeling cultural respect and appreciation at school experienced a greater sense of belonging and related outcomes.

Participants in the present study employed navigational strategies, specifically leveraging degrees of visibility, aimed at mitigating experiences of hypervisibility and / or at increasing experiences of validating visibility toward belonging. Lucas made explicit reference to observing how he was being observed "to see how they would see [him]" in order to understand how to navigate the existing social structure. Lucas explored experiences of double consciousness (DuBois, 1903/1999) of seeing himself through what Ramasubramanian et al., (2021) referred to as the "White racial lens" (p. 30). Lucas expressed agency over his visibility and shared that he "tried to hide" during a period of observation. Lucas shared, "I tried to hide like some things 'cause I know some people might not appreciate things we… we do. I… sometimes I tried to hide some things because I know they might not understand what I'm doing." Lucas hid in order to preserve his potential for belonging. He expressed concern that full visibility put him at risk for being othered due to people not understanding him. Rachel, like Lucas, employed invisibility as an act of self-preservation, only sharing herself superficially, and described holding back pieces of herself because she felt like she did not belong. Jessica and Angela similarly shared experiences of employing racial invisibility in order to develop personal connections with peers, while Garcia described navigating visibility by reappropriating her hypervisibility in order to develop personal connections with peers.

For participants of Color, existing in the rural, predominantly White spaces of their high schools and employing strategies for navigation fractured conceptualizations of who is seen and

who belongs in rural, predominantly White high schools. Participant experiences and identities as students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools impacted and reshaped the spaces they inhabited. Participants expressed an internal locus of control over their visibility, to varying degrees. These acts of resistance within the visible correspond with Arrivé's (2020) research and contribute to "another visual order, another visual configuration of the social order" that has the power to "redefine the social contract, to reorganize political bodies and to reshuffle the distribution of attention in the public sphere, maybe outside the perimeter of the strictly visible" (p. 5) and into the boundaries of belonging informed by political and social projects.

Research Question 3

The third research question, "How do students of Color experience and navigate belonging in rural, predominantly White high schools?," that framed the current research explored the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools specifically through the applied framework of belonging theory. According to Slaton et al. (2023), students of Color are more likely to endure adverse experiences at school and are therefore more vulnerable to low senses of belonging or to nonbelonging. Participants in the present study described varying experiences with and senses of belonging or not belonging. Additionally, participants shared stories of employing navigational strategies aimed at feeling a sense of belonging or at mitigating the effects of othering. While Murphy and Zirkel (2015), Hailey (2022), and Gillen-O'Neel and Fuligini (2013) suggested a positive correlation between school racial demographics and sense of belonging for students of Color– that is, that students of Color experience and express greater levels of belonging in schools with higher population levels of same-race peers– Byrd (2015) highlighted the importance of school racial climate, of positive interracial engagement and relationships with other students and with teachers, in relation to

belonging. Participants in the present study engaged with both findings. Angela heavily engaged with the importance of racial representation and the lack of racial representation throughout her rural, predominantly White school experiences. She differentiated between relationships with her White friends and with best friend, who was a student of Color. Garcia and Rachel talked about never feeling a sense of belonging in their respective rural, predominantly White high schools due to the racial demographics of their schools and due to their peer interactions within them. Garcia described feeling the greatest sense of connection with "students who are of Color" or "students who are new," suggesting solidarity with marginalized students. However, Emma expressed a strong sense of school belonging and talked about her friends being mostly White. Lucas similarly expressed a strong sense of school belonging in his second semester and also shared that his friends were all White.

Participant experiences with belonging were socially mediated (Goodenow & Grady, 1993; Korpershoek et al., 2020) through "a complex web of social and personal relationships" (Goodenow and Grady, 1993, p. 60). Particularly relevant were student to student relationships (Cohn-Vargas et al., 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Lardier et al., 2019; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015) and student to teacher relationships (Cohn-Vargas, 2021; Korpershoek et al., 2020). Though scholars vary in their ranking of one over the other in relation to fostering a sense of school belonging, participants explored both.

The role of peers in deploying mechanisms of school belonging was particularly powerful for participants in the present study. Participants deconstructed peer engagement with race, to include pathways (silences, questions, stereotypes and generalizations, jokes, and microaggressions) and intentions (inquisition, innocence, separation, and degradation), as well as the impact on their resulting sense of belonging. All participants explored White peer

engagement with race through the invocation of racial generalizations or stereotypes, which researchers have shown is often employed as a classificatory tool (Bacon, 2020; Block, 2008; Cohen, 2022) to "cluster people into groups with expected traits" (Bacon, 2020; p. 177) that result in societies and cultures of an "'Us' who belongs and a 'Them' who does not" (Cohen, 2022, p. 139). Participants suggested that stereotype was the most common pathway through which their White peers engaged with race. Participants shared personal experiences of stereotype: Angela talked about students referring to her "gangster" hair and her "rapper" hair when she got braids; Garcia shared that her peers assumed she was from "the ghetto" and projected criminality onto her body by accusing her of stealing or of being in the United States illegally; Jessica discussed her peers' ascription of her academic ability to her race and detailed stereotypes that dehumanized her through racist reactions to and analogies of food; Lucas described his peers' attribution of his athletic abilities to his race. These examples reaffirm Schall et al.'s (2016) claim that adolescents assign each other "into social categories based on perceived social characteristics" (p. 463). These examples further reaffirm Cohen's (2022) findings that "categorical aspersions" such as stereotype do not capture "the complexities and contradictions of people" and are reductionist and harmful (Cohen, 2022, p. 109). As a result, participants validated Riel's (2021) and Hailey's (2022) findings that stereotypes and racial generalizations, microinsults, microinvalidations, and microaggressions negatively impacted students' of Color sense of school belonging. Though Angela, Jessica, Lucas, and Emma expressed various positive senses of belonging in their rural, predominantly White high schools, operationalized stereotypes fractured their experiences of belonging.

Moreover, operationalized stereotypes dictated who peers believed the participants to be and of what they believed them capable. Rachel related her peers' and teachers' stereotyped

assumptions of her to presumed *inability*, a deficit mentality. Angela similarly identified her Blackness as a deficit in the eyes of her peers, which made her feel as though she would have to "do everything else right" in order to belong. Rachel and Emma defended the abilities and asserted the humanity of people of Color, that people of Color "can do the same things that everybody else can do." Aligned with Eberhardt and DiMario's (2020) findings that racialized othering results from conceptualizations of Whiteness as the "unmarked category" and of Color as "imbued with essentialized notions of personhood [...] effectively erasing the experiences and perspectives of people of Color" (p. 2), peers reappropriated participant races to fit conceptualizations they held and therefore projected back onto participants. As a result, participants described being positioned as tokens or as representatives of their respective races. Lucas described that he was seen by peers as representative of Africa and of his peers' conceptualizations of Africa; Rachel explored the widely-held "wrong image" of Africa, "that we live with lions or stuff like that"—a racist stereotype that implied the wild animalism of Black African people, uncivilized and unfit for society. Emma explained a dynamic where her White peers posted photos of themselves with her on social media and made specific reference to the Black Lives Matter movement, though, as she stated, she did not identify as Black and though she did not identify with the Black Lives Matter movement. In addition to stereotype, tokenism, and reduction to racial designations, participants acknowledged racist jokes and microaggressions as additional entry points to racial dialogue for their peers.

Alongside peer interactions, participants explored teacher interactions and their mediating role on belonging. Cohen (2022) and Keyes (2019) claimed that the role of teachers overwhelm the role of peers in constructions of student sense of belonging. Teachers are uniquely positioned to facilitate relationships with and between students while fostering a classroom that

enhances both, thus advancing student belonging (Schall et al., 2016). Cohen (2022) identifies factors in the teacher-student relationship that most promote student belonging are respect, encouragement, and the feeling of being heard. Emma described her relationship with the only Black teacher at her high school as "close" and characterized him as her mentor. Emma shared a specific instance when she sought support from him after enduring racism from a White peer. Though the racist incident initiated by a peer functioned to other her, the impact on Emma's sense of belonging was mitigated by her teacher, who expressed a sense of knowing, a sense of solidarity. Of teachers more generally, Emma stated, "All the teachers are very kind and respectful." Garcia similarly described experiences of support by her teachers; she referenced her English teacher and her MLL teacher specifically. Jessica talked about one of her teachers who she described as passionate about culture. He brought in Asian cuisine for Lunar New Year to share with his students; Jessica described that experience as one where she felt seen and included, as one where she felt she belonged. Jessica's experience supports Slaton et al.'s (2023) findings of a correlation between a teacher's cultural humility and a student's sense of classroom belonging despite reportedly low levels of school belonging; Slaton et al (2023) found that even among students who experienced low or no school belonging, the cultural humility of teachers had a moderating effect on classroom belonging for students of Color (Slaton et al., 2023).

However, when asked, "Has a school-based adult or a school-based peer ever asked you about or talked with you about your experience of being a student of color in a rural, predominantly White high school?" all participants responded with various forms of "no," suggesting the colorblindness of their respective schools. Racial silence chronicled by participants in the present study reaffirms Jupp et al.'s (2019) 25-year longitudinal study of

White teacher identities and the correlation with race-evasion. Divisive concepts and transparency legislation exacerbated educators' pre-existing discomfort about teaching race (Niño & Perez-Diaz, 2021). After Jupp et al.'s (2019) study, there was an ensuing attack on the institution of public education, meant to "sow distrust and intimidate teachers" (Friedman qtd. in Walker, 2022, para. 9) which directly and negatively impacted educators (Drapcho, 2022; Kingkade, 2022). Gag orders (Brownstein, 2022; Dee, 2022; Horne, 2022) aimed at surveilling and silencing teachers created an atmosphere of intimidation and fear (Drapcho, 2022; Horne, 2022; Walker, 2022). Exacerbating divisive concepts and transparency legislation were enforcement measures and resulting penalties that intimidated and instilled fear in teachers (Graff, 2022; Frey, 2022; Walker, 2022), which impacted curricular decisions and design (Drapcho, 2022; Kingkade, 2022). Walker (2022) contended, "The perception that hordes of angry parents are constantly monitoring educators' every step has a chilling effect in the classroom" (para. 15). The Whiteness of the teaching profession coalesces with the racial homogeneity in rural, predominantly White high schools and with the discomfort or fear of race talk, which sustains the Whiteness of education (Ramasubramanian et al., 2021; Stoll, 2019) and, relative to the present study, impacts participants' sense of belonging. Of racial silence most explicitly, Angela shared, "No one talked about it [race] with me. I obviously understand why I looked different, because my mom is White, and my dad is Black and science. But nobody sat me down to be like, 'It's okay. Other people look like you, too.'" In contrast, Emma shared one example, previously described, of discussing race with the only Black teacher at her high school; Garcia shared that, with her MLL teacher, she engaged in conversation about how the system of education, especially in Maine, is not designed for students of Color.

All participants described the need for belonging and explored navigational approaches they employed toward it. As Allen et al. (2022) and the many other scholars engaged in belonging research found, the need to belong is visceral, inherent to the human condition, and therefore drives behavior. Participants in the present study explored sense of belonging as it derived from internal and external loci of control. Schall et al. (2016) found that when students perceived a heightened sense of external locus of control, they felt unable to affect their own feelings of belonging and, inversely, when students perceived a heightened sense of internal locus of control, they felt capable of affecting their own feelings of belonging. Pardede et al. (2021) asserted that students of Color in predominantly White high schools may feel powerless in their ability to control or affect their own expressions and manifestations of visibility and belonging. Participant experiences in the present study bolster the findings of Pardede et al. (2021) and of Schall et al. (2016).

Participant experiences of belonging (or minimally, of connection) were largely self-actualized, the result of an internal locus of control. Angela expressed a locus of control over her sense of belonging and shared that she would "alter herself" to make herself more "approachable" and "likable." Angela described "trying not to focus so much on the race aspect of it" but rather on personal connection, illustrating that her sense of belonging was contingent upon eschewing race. When she took a colorblind approach, Angela felt a greater sense of belonging, indicating that, when racialized, she felt as though she did not belong or that her sense of belonging was adversely impacted. Angela signified that she had to relinquish her Blackness in order to retain her belongingness. Angela further exerted an internal locus of control by subverting the power of her White peers through language. Angela mimicked her White peers' engagement with race by initiating racist jokes as both a form of social currency and as a method

for reducing harm to herself ("it wouldn't hurt as bad" [if she made the joke first]). Angela shared that she received validation from her peers when she initiated racist jokes and that she felt "more liked" by her peers, which enhanced her sense of belonging at school. Coincidingly, Angela expressed feeling a weakened sense of belonging in social situations where her White peers made racist jokes and she felt unable to stand up for herself, implying a heightened external locus of control. Angela described feeling powerless in those instances and explained that if she stood up for herself she would appear "too sensitive," "bothered," "liberal," or "woke," which would relegate her to the social periphery and therefore negatively impact her sense of belonging. Jessica, like Angela, expressed experiences of belonging and othering contingent upon internal and external loci of control. When Jessica experienced negative reactions to her food and voyeuristic reactions to her language resulting from a heightened sense of external locus of control, her feelings of belonging were negatively affected. However, Jessica's feelings of belonging were complexly enhanced by internal and external loci of control: student choice, student voice, cultural competence and humility of staff, and opportunities for diverse cultural engagement.

As discussed in response to research question two, Lucas expressed an internal locus of control over his identity and over peer perceptions of him by leveraging his visibility and employing invisibility, like other participants, during his first semester at his rural, predominantly White high school. These strategies seemed to aim toward preserving his potential sense of belonging as he studied the existing social structure. Lucas's internal locus of control initially manifested through the practice of surveillance actualized by silence and invisibility; coincidingly, Lucas identified the spatial and symbolic separation of first semester, resulting from a heightened sense of external locus of control, and its negative impact on his

sense of belonging. However, Lucas noted a shift in his internal locus of control as he transitioned to his second semester. Lucas noted that "everything changed" when he advocated for himself to be placed into mainstream classes with his predominantly White mainstream peers. Lucas emphasized a heightened sense of internal locus of control: "But, *I had to change the thing.* I had to talk to them first. I saw that no one was the type of person to talk to me. So, I had to talk to them" [emphasis added]. So, he began to "talk to everyone" and as he perceived a heightened sense of internal locus of control, he felt a greater sense of belonging. Still, Lucas shared that he continued to employ strategies toward belonging such as "let[ting] some people win" and "stay[ing] quiet" when he did not agree with others, suggesting continued need to renegotiate internal / external loci of control and to employ navigational strategies toward belonging.

Emma, like Lucas, expressed a strong sense of internal locus of control. Supporting the findings of Pardede et al. (2021) and of Schall et al. (2016), Emma, in relation to other participants in the present study, expressed the most consistent and strongest sense of belonging throughout her high school years. Also like Lucas, Emma shared that she "included [her]self" and "put [her]self out there." Through self-inclusion, indicative of a heightened sense of internal locus of control, Emma "made a lot of friends, [... and] never felt left out." As a result of Emma's strong sense of internal locus of control, involvement with various opportunities for engagement, and peer and adult relationships, she felt a strong sense of belonging both at school and in her community; Emma stated that she felt "belonged."

Though Emma shared that she "hid" herself, like other participants in the present study, during a period of time when she felt that she did not belong (middle school), her emerging sense of inclusion into high school aligned with her emerging sense of self-confidence. Korpershoek

et al. (2020) correlated school belonging with self-concept and described experiences of support and praise as enhancing self-perception and regard. Williams et al. (2020), perhaps contrastingly but perhaps in a relationship of reciprocity, correlated positive perception of self with school belonging and described characteristics of confidence as enhancing social connections to peers and adults. Emma shared that things "shifted as [she] got older" and detailed: "I feel like the biggest thing for me is just being able to be confident [...] I'm very proud of my skin color. So you know, going into school [...] I feel good. I'm happy."

Garcia also expressed an evolution of her self-perception alongside conversations about internal and external loci of control and sense of belonging. Garcia shared that her experiences with othering, through which she perceived a heightened external locus of control, made her feel "small" and "looked down upon." Her experiences uphold Pardede et al.'s (2021) assertion that school belonging influences perception of self, "how people appraise themselves, how they feel about themselves" (p. 2). However, like Lucas, Garcia expressed a strong sense of internal locus of control over her sense of belonging. Garcia connected with peers and acted as an agent of social change throughout high school by "putting [her]self out there" and by "bringing [her]self to it." Garcia engaged in social activism by talking with administrators and teachers at her school, by sharing her experiences as an immigrant with classrooms of sophomore students, by participating in the Civil Rights Team and Genders and Sexualities Alliance, as well as by making personal connections with peers. Garcia's expression of a heightened sense of internal locus of control translated to her heightened feelings of connectedness. It is worth noting, however, that though Garcia described feeling "connected with [her] community," she shared that she "never experienced anything like [belonging]." Similarly, despite Rachel's strategy to "be kind to everybody" in order to create pathways and connections with peers, to feel seen, to

feel connected, she indicated not having felt a sense of belonging within her rural, predominantly White high school.

Participants in the present study navigated belonging through a multitude of strategies and with varying expressions of internal and external loci of control. Nevertheless, they persisted and invariably did the work of belonging for themselves. Garcia said that she realized if she did not "push forward to make change, no one [would]." Grimes and Roosma (2022) and Ruggiano (2022), however, contend that schools can and should leverage the social and cultural capital within their learning communities to create space for and facilitate conversations on race in order to serve as sites for engagement and belonging.

Implications

The findings of this narrative inquiry contribute to the scant body of research exploring the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools. The current research excavated rural, predominantly White educational contexts by exploring the experiences of students of Color in those contexts. Just as participants in the study fractured peer perspectives of who belonged in their rural, predominantly White high schools and therefore reshaped those racially homogeneous institutions, the findings resulting from participants' counternarratives serve to fracture and redefine who and what constitutes rural space in America. The participants, however, were metaphorical soloists in an otherwise largely unheard chorus, underscoring the need to listen to more voiced counternarratives by students of Color.

While educational researchers like Knowles' and Hawkman (2020) assert that sense of belonging for White students is generally unaffected by race, that is not the case for students of Color, whose sense of belonging in rural, predominantly White schools may be even more complex and vulnerable. The findings of the present study are a nod toward educational research

exploring the racial gap in school belonging– a gap that is problematic due to the strong correlation of school belonging with positive conditions, outcomes, and opportunities (Fan & Bellmore, 2023; Korpershoek et al., 2020; Margolius et al., 2020; Moffa et al., 2018; Offidani-Bertrand et al., 2022; Pardede et al., 2021; Schall et al., 2016), which have profound impacts within and beyond the schoolhouse and within and beyond the school years (Allen et al., 2021). Therefore, the findings of the present study suggest the need for changes within rural, predominantly White educational systems.

A primary implication of this research, as seen through the lenses of visibility theory and belonging theory, is that power structures within rural, predominantly White high schools should continue to be interrogated and deconstructed. Groundwater et al. (2022) urge educational leaders and researchers to take a critical look at policies, programs, and practices that deny a sense of school belonging equitably to all students. The research findings associated with this study may inform how educators at rural, predominantly White high schools can create conditions where students of Color feel seen and feel a sense of belonging. To do so, educational leaders and researchers must purposefully and meaningfully engage *all* stakeholders (Groundwater et al., 2022). A multifaceted approach that involves students of Color, White students, administrators, teachers, parents, and educational researchers will be necessary to create educational environments that foster validating degrees of visibility and sense of belonging for students of Color.

The findings presented in this research are important because they explain the impact of socially mediated visibility and belonging as well as the conditions under which those interactions can be understood to have positive or negative impacts on students of Color. For educational leaders and other stakeholders situated within rural, predominantly White high

schools, creating environments of greater belonging for students of Color will be complicated, made further complex by their likely nurturance within the White habitus, which impacts how they think about and foster conditions within predominantly White spaces (Eberhardt & DiMario, 2020; Stoll, 2019). To disrupt the echo chamber of White noise (Bonilla-Silva, 2022; Mills, 2007), it is crucial that the experiences of students of Color continue to be explored *from the perspectives of students of Color*. Consideration of the findings from the present study, in tandem with a continual commitment to hearing the lived experiences of students of Color within rural, predominantly White high schools has the potential to propel change: to include reimagining rural space in America and rewriting sense of belonging for students of Color within rural, predominantly White space.

Recommendations for Action

The research presented here represents a small step toward engaging with and learning from the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools. Extant research proves the need to understand the experiences of students of Color, related to belonging and associated positive outcomes, in rural, predominantly White educational settings (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022) and equity demands it. Though participants in the present study made valuable contributions to the body of educational research pertaining to students' of Color experiences in rural, predominantly White high schools, additional research is needed to understand the nuances and complexities within the experiences of students of Color in order to better understand how to foster conditions that cultivate, nurture, and / or sustain a sense of belonging. However, several recommendations for action emerged from this narrative inquiry.

Though scholarship is inconclusive on which is more important to a sense of belonging for students of Color (school racial demographics (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Hailey, 2022; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015) or school racial climate (Byrd, 2015)), findings from the present study suggest the importance of both. Garcia, Angela, Jessica, Rachel, and Lucas described feeling hypervisible in their bodies yet concurrently invisible, which was not likely an experience shared by their White peers. Participants described these experiences as resulting in feelings of "onlyness," loneliness, and otherness which impacted their perception and representation of self. Further, all participants described (explicitly and implicitly) that their White peers engaged with race through various avenues that were reductionist and harmful. The environmental dynamics outlined here could reasonably be understood as indicative of school racial climate. Students of Color should have access to and structured pathways for opportunities to engage with same-race peers, within and across schools in Maine, with whom to engage with the rural, predominantly White institutions they navigate and with whom to co construct identity (Rogers et al., 2021; Ruggiano, 2022; Tatum, 2017). Tatum (2017) expounds on the phenomena of Black kids sitting together in school cafeterias and argues that these same-race relationships foster identity formation and provide support, especially in racist conditions. Ruggiano (2022) also points to the multitude of studies that examine the importance of same-race peer connections, especially during such a critical time as adolescence. Ruggiano (2022) notes that these studies prove same-race peer connections promote "positive racial and academic identity and sense of belonging" for students of Color in rural, predominantly White schools (p. 56).

Moreover, participants described having to work to correct White peer perceptions of them, to include combatting racist stereotypes. As Angela and Jessica explored, diversity in racial representation through staff and student racial identities (to the greatest extent possible)

and through curricular and other educational materials should be prioritized (Gray, 2017; Louie et al., 2022; Slaton et al., 2023). Curricular representation can enhance engagement and belonging as students of Color "see their cultural ways of knowing and being reflected in the pedagogy" (Louie et al., 2022, p. 10); the experience of seeing oneself reflected in the curriculum can be appreciably affirming for students of Color who experience acts and expressions of othering (Mitchell et al., 2017) within rural, predominantly White high schools. Diversifying curriculum to include all expressions of humanity, all identities (individual and collective) provides a comprehensive look at the cognitions and contributions of people of Color (Louie et al., 2022). As exhibited in Garcia's experience, when she did the work of racial representation, when she "put herself out there" and shared her experiences as a student of Color, she described that her peers received her "better." In fact, all participants described the ways in which they connected with peers to build personal connections and deconstruct racial barriers. Diverse racial representation fractures boundaries of belonging in rural, predominantly White spaces by reconstituting who belongs in predominantly White spaces, which can positively impact peer relationships and, therefore, school racial climate. Further, diverse racial representation can be an entry point for White students to engage with uncomfortable but important racial dialogue.

Finally, the findings of the present study urge color consciousness and cultural humility of school staff. Garcia shared the essence of a conversation with one of her teachers, who, after learning more about Garcia's lived racial and cultural experiences, said, "I have never, ever been taught this in my career." Preservice and in-service dialogue and training should afford educators the opportunity to engage with race (their own and others), independently and in relationship. Research conducted with teachers and support staff indicates the desperate need for

professional development and professional support aimed at fostering a sense of belonging in racially diverse student populations (Groundwater et al., 2022; Stoll, 2019). Jupp et al. (2019) demonstrated through a longitudinal, 25-year look at race-evasive White teacher identity study that "identifie[d] the contours of White preservice and in-service teachers' silence, resistance to, engagement in, and pedagogical grappling with race" and concluded that White teachers "evade race in teaching and learning" (p. 25); in the case of Garcia's teacher, because she had never been taught how to do it. Jones et al. (2021) found that White educators, employing colorblind ideology, could not see "how race had patterned the lives of their students" (p. 552). The predominantly White educational teaching staff (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020; Slaton et al., 2023), nurtured within the colorblind ideology that is engendered in hyper segregated White spaces (that are therefore not seen as racialized spaces) (Bonilla-Silva, 2022) means that school staff are largely unprepared or reluctant to facilitate conversations on race (Jupp et al., 2019). However, Mette (2016) asserts that, "Well-planned and facilitated opportunities for authentic speaking and listening, beginning from personal experience, can provide spaces for individuals to surface their existing belief systems in ways that allow assumptions to be examined" (p. 73), which can profoundly impact how all students engage with race (their own and others). Emma talked about her close relationship with the only Black teacher at her high school. He validated her lived experiences and offered guidance and support. Similarly, Jessica described feeling validated and seen when her teacher brought in food from an Asian market to share with students for Lunar New Year. Though cultural competence has gained currency in educational pedagogy in recent years, Slaton et al. (2023) found a positive correlation between teachers' cultural *humility* and students' of Color sense of belonging at school; in fact, even students of Color in Slaton et al.'s (2023) study who experienced low school

belonging had the strongest relationships with teachers who practiced cultural humility. The crux here is that educators are not responsible for being subject matter experts, as with any content, on all cultures or races according to the tenets of cultural humility (Slaton et al., 2023). However, as constructors of educational spaces and experiences, they are ethically bound and educationally called to practice color consciousness and cultural humility and model engagement with race (Jupp et al., 2019; Slaton et al., 2023; Stoll, 2019).

Underpinning all recommendations for action is one central conduit through which change should flow: the centralization of students of Color in planning for, participating in, or reflecting on action. Garcia stated that "the American school system, especially around here [in Maine] is not made for immigrants, and it's definitely not made for people of Color." In this regard and in the spirit of the findings of the current study, educational leaders and researchers must centralize, listen to, and consult with students of Color to understand how to cultivate spaces toward belonging. Ruggiano (2022) calls upon educators and educational researchers to harness the "funds of knowledge" within youth of Color (p. 70). The findings of the present study re-issue Ruggiano's (2022) call and further renew the adage often associated with political and social movements, "Nothing about us without us." However, though students of Color should be consulted and represented in this work, educational leaders, educators, and communities bear the responsibility to facilitate spaces of visibility and belonging for all students—through opportunities to engage with same-race peers within and across schools in Maine, through professional development to promote engagement with race and open racial dialogue, through diverse racial representation in predominantly White spaces, and through color consciousness and cultural humility—so that no student feels the system of education is not made for them.

Recommendations for Further Study

The paucity of literature pertaining to the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools is a potential barrier to the effective implementation of research-based strategies aimed at cultivating or enhancing a sense of belonging for students of Color according to the data collected in this study. Rural, predominantly White high schools and the experiences of students of Color within them need further exploration (Grimes & Roosma, 2022; Riel, 2021; Ruggiano, 2022; Showalter et al., 2019). Similarly, how students of Color understand their experiences of belonging, to include through social constructs, demands further study (Bird, 2015; Hailey, 2022; Yull, 2014). Because this narrative inquiry explored the experiences of only six students of Color (most of whom identified as women) who attended rural, predominantly White high schools, further research should be conducted, using narrative inquiry, to explore the experiences and perspectives of students of Color to contribute to the breadth and depth of understanding their experiences. Quantitative study designs should be employed in future research in order to capture and analyze larger data sets. Additionally, mixed methods study designs should be employed in future research in order to explore both the nuances of quantitative findings and the tensions of qualitative findings.

A primary delimitation of the present study was its collapse of intersectionality. Future research should be conducted to understand consistencies and differences in experiences between races, between cultures, between gender in all of its presentations, between sexualities, and between other ways in which people identify in order to more fully understand how students of Color think about and experience visibility and sense of belonging. Further, because the present study was delimited by the age requirement for participants and so looked at sense of belonging

both at one moment in time *and* in retrospect, future studies should look at sense of belonging for students of Color over time (from elementary or middle school through high school).

Additional research should seek to explore the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools both within and beyond the state of Maine. Six participants in the present study attended three different high schools, representing a small fraction of rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine. In order to understand successful and unsuccessful environmental elements for belonging, researchers should seek to understand how students of Color are experiencing and navigating more rural, predominantly White high schools in Maine. Further study should be conducted to explore the similarities in and differences between rural, predominantly White high schools in various states. Moreover, future study should explore similarities in and differences between sense of school belonging for students of Color in rural, predominantly White schools and in rural, predominantly same-race schools. Future research should also seek to compare students' of Color sense of belonging with that of their White peers in the same educational setting. Finally, four of six participants in the present study identified as immigrant students. Further study should be made exploring the experiences of immigrant students of Color and of students of Color who were born in the United States.

Lastly, future research would benefit from study designs that provide a greater potential for the researcher to build a relationship of trust with participants. Recommendations include: increased frequency and length of interaction between the researcher and participants through narrative inquiry, case study, or ethnographic study; and, careful consideration of the primary investigator's racial identity.

Conclusion

Sense of school belonging is positively correlated with life outcomes that transcend the schoolhouse and the school years (Allen, 2021; Cohen, 2022; Margolius et al., 2020; Wise, 2022). Research demonstrates the impact of school racial climate (Byrd, 2015) and school racial demographics (Gillen-O'Neel & Fuligini, 2013; Hailey, 2022; Murphy & Zirkel, 2015) on sense of school belonging for students of Color, though for White students, race is largely unfactored in sense of school belonging. Extant literature further substantiates the racial gap in school belonging (Groundwater et al., 2022). The present study sought to fill gaps in research related to belonging for students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools *from the perspectives of students of Color* in order to more fully explore "the inferences people make about their belonging and their understanding of why they do or do not belong" and "how people wade through […] incoming social signals to draw conclusions about the degree to which they are accepted and belong" (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1149).

Through narrative inquiry and data analysis processes (coding, theme development, restorying, bracketing, and member checking) inherent to the approach, the current study explored the experiences of students of Color, specifically through the theoretical and conceptual lenses of visibility and belonging, in rural, predominantly White high schools across the state of Maine. Findings emerged through analysis of data collected in semi-structured interviews with six participants. Participants explored their school experiences with belonging or othering and with degrees of visibility (invisibility, validating visibility, hypervisibility) as socially mediated through interactions with peers and with teachers and as spatially mediated through literal and symbolic spaces. Four themes emerged from participant narratives: the complexity of and synergism between hypervisibility, invisibility, and singularity; reflections on and

understandings of White peer (pathways toward and intentions of) engagement with race; navigational strategies designed toward belonging; and expressions of advocacy for systems level change.

Presented findings fill a gap in the academic literature about the experiences of students of Color (more specifically about their degrees of visibility and sense of belonging) in rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine and further inform recommendations for action. To facilitate spaces and structures of school belonging for students of Color, educational stakeholders should create or enhance pathways and opportunities for students of Color to engage with same-race peers within and across schools in Maine, commit to diverse racial representation through staff and student bodies and through educational materials, practice cultural humility, create opportunities for staff to engage with race (their own and others, independently and in relationship with people), and, perhaps most importantly, practice color consciousness to positively impact school racial climate. When asked, "Has a school-based adult or a school-based peer ever asked you about or talked with you about your experience of being a student of color in a rural, predominantly White high school?" participants in the present study responded with various forms of "no," which suggests the racial silence of rural, predominantly White high schools presented in Jupp et. al's (2019) study. The experiences, perspectives, and voices of students of Color should be considered when analyzing social and structural designs for belonging.

The narratives captured in the present study did not represent the totality of experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools and therefore invite other narratives into the conversation. Narratives destabilize the unchanging center of systems and define not only how things are but how things could be (hooks, 1994). As such, change will

require new narratives, both individual and collective. The present study issues the charge to educational stakeholders to continue to explore the counternarratives of students of Color in their rural, predominantly White spaces in order to conceptualize and actualize how things could be.

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APPENDIX A

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL

UNE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER: April 29, 2024

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Nichole Ivey
FACULTY ADVISOR: Rosette M. Obedoza, Ed.D.

PROJECT NUMBER: 0424-22
RECORD NUMBER: 0424-22-01

PROJECT TITLE: (EN)COUNTERING WHITE NOISE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF HOW STUDENTS OF COLOR EXPERIENCE AND NAVIGATE RURAL, PREDOMINANTLY WHITE HIGH SCHOOLS

SUBMISSION TYPE: New Project
SUBMISSION DATE: April 25, 2024

ACTION: Determination of Exempt Status
DECISION DATE: April 29, 2024

REVIEW CATEGORY: Exemption Category # *2(ii)*

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced project and has determined that the proposed work is exempt from IRB review and oversight as defined by 45 CFR 46.104.

You are responsible for conducting this project in accordance with the approved study documents, and all applicable UNE policies and procedures.

If any changes to the design of the study are contemplated (e.g., revision to the research proposal summary, data collection instruments, and/or other approved study documents), the Principal Investigator must submit an amendment for review to ensure the requested change(s) will not alter the exempt status of the project.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number as specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director of Research Integrity

APPENDIX B

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD AMENDMENT APPROVAL

UNE UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Institutional Review Board
Julie Longua Peterson, Chair

Biddeford Campus
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005
(207) 602-2244 T
(207) 602-5905 F

Portland Campus
716 Stevens Avenue
Portland, ME 04103

DATE OF LETTER:	May 6, 2024
PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:	Nichole Ivey
FACULTY ADVISOR:	Rosette M. Obedoza, Ed.D.
PROJECT NUMBER:	0424-22
RECORD NUMBER:	0424-22-02 (Amendment #1)
REVIEW TYPE:	Administrative
PROJECT TITLE:	(EN)COUNTERING WHITE NOISE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF HOW STUDENTS OF COLOR EXPERIENCE AND NAVIGATE RURAL, PREDOMINANTLY WHITE HIGH SCHOOLS
SUBMISSION TYPE:	Amendment
SUBMISSION DATE:	May 4, 2024
DECISION:	Acknowledged
DECISION DATE:	May 6, 2024

The Office of Research Integrity has reviewed the materials submitted in connection with the above-referenced amendment and has acknowledged this submission. No further action is required at this time.

The changes requested as part of this amendment include the following:

- Participant recruitment pathways have been expanded to now include guidance counselors and teachers, as well as the PI's Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat accounts. The research proposal summary has been updated accordingly.

If you have any questions, please send an e-mail to irb@une.edu and reference the project number specified above within the correspondence.

Best Regards,

Bob Kennedy, MS
Director, Research Integrity

APPENDIX C

RECRUITMENT SUPPORT REQUEST LETTER

April 29, 2024

Dear [Administrator],

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *(En)Countering White Noise: A Narrative Study of How Students of Color Experience and Navigate Rural, Predominantly White High Schools* for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. I am seeking six participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

I am writing to request your assistance with posting my recruitment materials via email lists, social media platforms, and / or through posting physical flyers communicating the details of my study as well as my contact information. In order to improve the chances of recruiting an adequate sample of participants, I will ask that you send out the same communication 2 times during a two-week period through email and / or social media. I will also ask that you keep the physical flyers hanging in common spaces or in high traffic areas of your building for a period of two weeks.

Eligibility for this study includes:

- Students of Color
- At least 18 years old, and
- Members of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 1 hour. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of the participant's convenience. If there are more than six people who express interest, only the first six will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, other students or staff, will be deidentified.

Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet, which is also linked via QR code on the flyer, which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures. If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at nivey@une.edu. Thank you for your consideration.

Respectfully,

Nichole Ivey
Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Candidate
University of New England

APPENDIX D

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

(EN)COUNTERING WHITE NOISE: A NARRATIVE STUDY OF HOW STUDENTS OF COLOR EXPERIENCE AND NAVIGATE RURAL, PREDOMINANTLY WHITE HIGH SCHOOLS

NICHOLE IVEY

Dear Student of Color,

I am currently a doctoral student at the University of New England. I am conducting a study titled *(En)Countering White Noise: A Narrative Study of How Students of Color Experience and Navigate Rural, Predominantly White High Schools* for my dissertation. The purpose of this research study is to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. I am seeking six participants to participate in my doctoral research study.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are:

- At least 18 years old
- A student of Color
- A member of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine

Participation in this research is voluntary. Participation will consist of one recorded interview of approximately 1 hour. The interview will be conducted on Zoom at a time of your convenience. If there are more than six people who express interest, only the first six will be selected to interview. All data will be kept confidential and pseudonyms will be used to protect the identities of respondents. All identifying information, including school names, locations, and the names of other students or staff, will be deidentified.

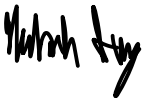
Please review the attached Participant Information Sheet which outlines the specific details of this study including confidentiality and privacy measures.

If you are interested in sharing your experience of being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school, please contact me via email at nivey@une.edu and we can set up a time for an interview over Zoom.

If you would like additional information or have any questions, please reach out to me at the above listed email.

Thank you for your consideration of participation in this study.

Sincerely,



Nichole Ivey
Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Candidate
University of New England

APPENDIX E

RECRUITMENT FLYER

PARTICIPANTS NEEDED FOR A DOCTORAL STUDY

Purpose of the Study

To explore how students of color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools.

Participation

Voluntary. Confidential. One hour online interview with the primary investigator.

Participant Requirements

- *Must be at least 18 years old.*
- *Must be a student of color (Black, Asian, Native American, Pacific Islander, Latinx, or two or more races).*
- *Must be a member of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine.*

Scan for study details

1 HOUR ONLINE INTERVIEW $25

For more information, to confirm eligibility, or to enroll, contact:

Nichole Ivey, Doctoral Candidate
University of New England

nivey@une.edu
(603) 767-0253

APPENDIX F

PARTICIPANT INTERVIEW CONFIRMATION EMAIL

Dear [Student Name],

Thank you for your interest in participating in my doctoral study. The purpose of my study is to explore how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools. Through my study and resulting research, I hope to address the gap in research exploring the experiences of students of Color in rural, predominantly White high schools and subsequently offer policy and practical implications for school districts and educational leaders to consider as they work to cultivate or foster inclusive educational environments where all students feel a sense of belonging.

You are eligible to participate in this study if you are a student of Color, at least 18 years old, who is a member of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine. Participation in the study is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time. Your identity and the identity of your school will be kept confidential. For further information about your privacy protections and about the study more generally, please review the Participant Information Sheet that is attached to this email.

If you are still interested in participating in the study, I would like to schedule an interview at a time that is convenient for you. The length of the interview will be approximately 60 minutes. The interview will be recorded and transcribed through Zoom, an online meeting platform. Upon conclusion of our interview, a $25 Visa gift card will be sent to the email you have provided. Please respond to this email with three preferred meeting dates and times. After I receive your availability, I will respond to your email with a confirmation of the date and time of your interview, as well as with a link for a Zoom meeting.

Thank you for your time and consideration. Your contributions to this study have the potential to help educators foster inclusive school environments where all students feel a sense of belonging. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Nichole Ivey
Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) Candidate
University of New England

APPENDIX G

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ENGLAND

INNOVATION FOR A HEALTHIER PLANET

Office of Research Integrity
Institutional Review Board

Participant Information Sheet

Version Date:	April 25, 2024
IRB Project #:	0424-22
Title of Project:	(En)Countering White Noise: A Narrative Study of How Students of Color Experience and Navigate Rural, Predominantly White High Schools
Principal Investigator (PI):	Nichole Ivey
PI Contact Information:	nivey@une.edu / (603) 767-0253

INTRODUCTION

- This is a project being conducted for research purposes. Your participation is completely voluntary.
- The intent of the Participant Information Sheet is to provide you with important details about this research project.
- You are encouraged to ask any questions about this research project, now, during or after the project is complete.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROJECT?

The general purpose of this research project is to explore the experiences of students of Color who attend rural, predominantly White high schools. Six participants will be invited to participate in this research as part of the principal investigator's dissertation research.

WHY ARE YOU BEING ASKED TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS PROJECT?

You are being asked to participate in this research project because you are a student of Color who is at least 18 years old and who is a member of the graduating class of 2024 at a rural, predominantly White high school in the state of Maine.

WHAT IS INVOLVED IN THIS PROJECT?

- You will be asked to participate in one semi-structured interview, with the principal investigator, that will last approximately 1 hour over Zoom, an online meeting platform.
- You will be asked to choose a pseudonym to be used in place of your name for the study.

- You will be given the opportunity to leave your camera on or off during the interview, and your interview will be recorded using Zoom.
- You will be emailed a copy of your individual narrative to review for accuracy. You will have 5 calendar days to respond or the PI will assume that you have no comments and the narrative will be assumed to be accurate.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS OR DISCOMFORTS INVOLVED FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

The risks involved with participation in this research project are minimal and may include an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality. You have the right to skip or not answer any questions, for any reason.

Please see the 'WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY & CONFIDENTIALITY?' section below for steps the primary investigator will take to minimize an invasion of privacy or breach of confidentiality from occurring.

WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE BENEFITS FROM BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

There are no likely benefits to you by being in this research project; however, the information collected may help the primary investigator understand how students of Color experience and navigate rural, predominantly White high schools in the state of Maine.

WILL YOU BE COMPENSATED FOR BEING IN THIS PROJECT?

You will be compensated with a $25 Visa gift card, delivered to your email address, at the conclusion of your interview for participating in this project.

WHAT ABOUT PRIVACY AND CONFIDENTIALITY?

The primary investigator will do her best to keep your personal information private and confidential. However, the primary investigator cannot guarantee absolute confidentiality. Your personal information may be disclosed if required by law. Additionally, your information in this research project could be reviewed by representatives of the University such as the Office of Research Integrity and/or the Institutional Review Board.

The results of this research project may be shown at meetings or published in journals to inform other professionals. If any papers or talks are given about this research, your name will not be used. The primary investigator may use data from this research project that has been permanently stripped of personal identifiers in future research without obtaining your consent.

- Data will only be collected during one on one participant interviews using Zoom; no information will be taken without your consent; and your individual narrative will be checked by you for accuracy before it is added to the study.

- Pseudonyms will be used for all participants and any personally identifying information will be stripped from the interview transcript.
- All names and e-mails gathered during recruitment will be recorded and linked to a uniquely chosen pseudonym within the master list.
- The master list will be kept securely and separately from the study data and accessible only to the principal investigator.
- The interview will be conducted by the primary investigator in a private setting to ensure others cannot hear your conversation.
- You will be given the option to turn off your camera during the Zoom interview.
- After you have verified the accuracy of your narrative, the recorded Zoom interview will be destroyed. Once all individual narratives have been verified by the participants of this project, the master list of personal information will be destroyed.
- All other study data will be retained on record for 3 years after the completion of the project and then destroyed. The study data may be accessed upon request by representatives of the University (e.g., faculty advisors, Office of Research Integrity, etc.) when necessary.
- All data collected will be stored on a password protected personal laptop computer accessible only by the principal investigator.

WHAT IF YOU WANT TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to choose not to participate, or to withdraw your participation at any time until the Master List is destroyed without penalty or loss of benefits. You will not be treated differently if you decide to stop taking part in this project.

If you request to withdraw from this project, the data collected about you will be deleted when the master list is in existence, but the researcher may not be able to do so after the master list is destroyed.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT THIS PROJECT?

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research project. If you have questions about this project, complaints or concerns, you should contact the Principal Investigator listed on the first page of this document.

WHAT IF YOU HAVE QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RIGHTS AS A RESEARCH PARTICIPANT?

If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Office of Research Integrity at (207) 602-2244 or via e-mail at irb@une.edu.

APPENDIX H

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

(En)Countering White Noise: A Narrative Study of How Students of Color Experience and Navigate Rural, Predominantly White High Schools

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS:

Interview Question 1: How old are you?

Interview Question 2: How do you racially identify?

Interview Question 3: What high school do or did you attend? Did you attend for all four years at [high school name]? [If the answer to this question is no, ask where else the student attended high school].

Interview Question 4: Has a school-based adult or a school-based peer ever asked you about or talked with you about your experience of being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school? If so, what was that experience like? If not, what was that experience like?

Interview Question 5: Please tell me about your experience as a student of Color who attends / attended a rural, predominantly White high school.

Interview Question 6: How did you experience visibility as a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school? When and how did you feel seen? When and how did you feel not seen or invisible?

Interview Question 7: How did you express visibility as a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school?

Interview Question 8: In what ways was feeling seen validating or invalidating?

Interview Question 9: How did you experience belonging as a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school? When, where, or how did you feel like you belonged? When, where, or how did you feel like you did *not* belong?

Interview Question 10: How did you express belonging as a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school?

Interview Question 11: In what ways were you able to bring your full self to school? In what ways were you not able to bring your full self to school?

Interview Question 12: What else would be important to know about the experience of being a student of Color in a rural, predominantly White high school?