

“If you don't know my story, please don't judge my walk”: A critical autoethnographic journey
of a Black female counselor transitioning to DEIB leadership

by

Ralita Cheeks

B.S., Kansas Wesleyan University, 2007
M.S., Kansas University, 2013

AN ABSTRACT OF A DISSERTATION

submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

Educational Leadership
College of Education

KANSAS STATE UNIVERSITY
Manhattan, Kansas

2024

Abstract

This critical autoethnographic dissertation delves into the personal journey of a Black female counselor and mother, whose path meanders through the complex terrain of education, leading her to a profound transition into the realm of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) leadership. Drawing from memories, emotions, and ongoing encounters, this critical autoethnography uses braiding as a framework for bringing together stories of identity development, self-reflection, cultural context, social dynamics, while working at the intersection of various counseling and leadership frameworks alongside Black feminism, spirituality, and motherhood. Stories of belonging, faith, family, and community emerge in harmonious and dissonant ways through the autoethnographic process. Yet, these stories also serve as crucial anchors for starting a courageous conversation during a personal and professional transition to DEIB leadership roles. Furthermore, these stories shape the author's sense of self and social presence, along with themes of vulnerability and empowerment while working through systems which intertwine, showcasing the transformative potential of embracing one's unique voice.

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Acknowledgements

To God be the Glory. Galatians 6:9 King James Version: “And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.”

To my loving husband, my rock and confidant,

You are the milk to my cereal. Your unwavering support, love, and partnership have enriched my journey in ways beyond measure. I am truly blessed to share my life with you. I adore you more with each passing day, and I'm eternally thankful for your love.

To my precious children,

You are the embodiment of my hopes and dreams, the legacy of our love. The love and joy you bring into our home are the fuel for the completion of this dissertation. Your presence in my life is a constant reminder of the beauty of family and the importance of nurturing the future. I am forever grateful for the love, laughter, and purpose you bring to my life. Do you good, when you do good, do better. Once you have done better then do your best and when you have done your best lift your hands and continue to trust God and he'll do the rest.

To my dear brothers and sister,

You are my lifelong companions, protectors, accomplices, the keepers of our shared memories, and the ones who truly understand the tapestry of our family. Your presence in my life has been a source of enduring love and connection, and I will forever love you.

To my girls,

You have been my pillars of support, my confidants in moments of doubt, and my partners in moments of joy. Your friendship has been a priceless gift, and I'm thankful for the bonds we've shared, which have enriched my life in countless ways.

To my aunts and uncles,

Your love, wisdom, and unwavering support have enriched my life in ways beyond measure.

To all of my loving Godparents,

Your guidance and love have shaped my journey in profound ways. Your unwavering belief in me has been a source of inspiration and motivation. I'm grateful for the wisdom you've imparted and the love you've shared. Though one of you has passed away, your presence remains alive in my heart and in the stories we share.

And to my gorgeous mommy,

You are my constant, my best friend, and the grounding force in my life. Your love and guidance have been a wellspring of strength, protection, and inspiration. You have always pushed me to greatness, and your unwavering support is a testament to your love and dedication as a mother and child of God. Thank you for teaching me to love God for myself and to trust in him. "O taste and see that the LORD is good: blessed is the man that trusteth in him." King James Version (KJV), Psalms 34:8

I acknowledge the profound impact each of you has had on my life, and I am humbled and grateful for your presence in my journey. Your love and support have been my foundation, and I am eternally thankful for your contributions to my life's story.

Grandma, I did it!! Rest in peace. I pray there are butterflies there for you.

With all my love and gratitude,

Ralita

Dedication

To my husband, whose unwavering support and love have been my anchor throughout this academic journey. To Ascendra, Ashley, and Shantel, whose encouragement and understanding provided me strength during challenging times. To Shalonda, your constructive criticism is a priceless gift, and I cherish you for it.

To my mama, siblings, pastor, professors, uncles, aunts, Mama Moye, mentors, church family, and friends, who generously shared their knowledge and wisdom, I extend my love and gratitude. Your guidance has been invaluable.

To all of you who invested your time and energy in inspiring my pursuit of education and the research behind this dissertation, your stories and experiences have ignited my passion for change. I dedicate this work to each of you with profound appreciation. But above all, this dissertation is dedicated to my seven children. Be more than the world thinks you are and be all that God has called you to be. There are no limits only countless opportunities. What will you do with your opportunities?

Preface

The process of choosing a suitable title for this dissertation was a contemplative one. If given the chance, I would simply entitle it as *If You Don't Know My Story, Please Don't Judge My Walk*. On the front cover, a captivating image would portray a six-inch red stiletto with a diamond heel, symbolizing resilience, courage, and strength. At the base of the heel where the stiletto started, there would be an image of a cross, representing faith as a guiding force in my life which shapes my personal and social identity. In other words, this is a representation of me, my personality, and my voice, through an autoethnographic format, where it is more acceptable to blend unique narrative aesthetic for a variety of purposes as described in the methods portion of this dissertation. As a counselor, I worked to recognize how each child's journey is unique, with their own stories and lived experiences, as all children have different backgrounds and experiences, as do I.

As educators, how can we guide and teach others effectively if we don't know their individual stories? By embracing diversity and taking the time to understand or at least acknowledge a person's narrative, personal and social identity development, we can empower education to be more inclusive, compassionate, and impactful for both student and educator. This critical deep dive into the self, a vulnerable endeavor, is my contribution to helping start a courageous conversation – an opportunity to speak my truth as Singleton (2021) suggests.

As I walk this path of understanding and inclusivity, I am reminded of how my journey is akin to the art of braiding (to be explained in more detail as a framework in Chapters 1 and 3). Each strand and braid symbolize a unique and beautiful combination, much like the diverse narratives and perspectives that are woven through education. Through this braiding of ideas and varied lived experiences we find the true strength and beauty of inclusive education, creating a

harmonious blend that enriches the lives of both educators and students alike. At least that's how I envision the potential of educational systems.

Utilizing critical autoethnographic techniques, this dissertation follows a quasi-traditional format, interweaving personal stories throughout. In Chapter 1, the narrative initiates with a foundational exploration, setting the stage for the ensuing personal narratives. Chapter 2 sheds light on literature where I establish connections between relevant content and theories in my personal journey. Chapter 3 articulates the methodological and autoethnographic processes guiding this dissertation, and engages with the metaphor of braiding narratives, emphasizing the unique beauty found in this journey. Chapter 4 proposes not stopping with a single braid but rather completing an entire head of hair by braiding in my own upbringing, me as a young professional, my educational enrichment, and my experiences as a school counselor. These stories then become foundational to my transition to DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) leadership roles. This chapter is also a blend of what would be in traditional chapters four and five where the stories are being synthesized with the literature alongside discussion and implications for practice, meaning they are all embedded throughout the chapter to align with particular parts of the story.

As you read throughout, with the metaphor of braiding serving as a guiding framework weaving together diverse stories into a cohesive narrative, I offer these stories and a degree of vulnerability as we work towards improving inclusivity and belonging in education. In other words, I am hoping to start a courageous conversation (Singleton, 2021) with you, the reader, to help us better understand how students and professional educators from diverse backgrounds experience our educational systems.

Chapter 1 - Embarking on the Journey: Introducing my Critical Autoethnography

“No one ever talks about the moment you found that you were White. Or the moment you found you were Black. That's a profound revelation. The minute you find that out, something happens. You have to renegotiate everything.”- Toni Morrison

This chapter serves as a personal introduction, allowing me to share my experiences and insights navigating the counseling profession within the context of my intersecting identities. As I reflect on my journey, I unearth the intricacies of identity formation and the unwritten rules that govern the experiences of Black female school counselors in predominantly White institutions. Through candid anecdotes and introspective analysis, I shed light on the challenges and triumphs I encountered along the way. My hope through this autoethnography is that as you get to know me, my stories will start to braid with your own personal experiences to create your own new understanding of how some people experience education as students and professionals. As I continue to grow, I hope to hear your stories, as well. Then, my hope is that we can collaboratively foster a deeper understanding of the intersectional realities faced by school counselors like me, while also paving the way for discussions on how to promote equity, inclusivity, and empowerment and build our collective leadership skills to improve schooling for everyone.

I was born and raised the youngest of five, in Fort Worth, Texas and attended school in White Settlement Independent School District (ISD) for my entire primary education. Both of my parents were in the Air Force and retired from the military while I was in elementary school. I can recall in kindergarten being one of the only two Black students in my entire school, and this never seemed to be a problem for me, except for the times a classmate would pull my hair in

amazement of the textures. Or, when they would point out the significant difference in my nose, lips or other body part which differed from my White peers. By fifth grade there were at least four Black students in my cohort; however, I was never in a class with students who looked like me. I was in seventh grade when I had my first encounter with a Black teacher, Mrs. Ford, my Spanish teacher who I only had for a semester.

In my pursuit of higher education, I moved from Texas to Kansas, to obtain two bachelor's degrees in religion and criminal justice and yet and still I never encountered another educator who looked like me. It was not until I began working on my master's at Kansas State University, that I had the honor of having a Black teacher, Dr. Arelenna Carroll, an Associate Professor in Counseling. This was a three-year program and I only had Dr. Carroll for one summer class, but it made a significant impact on my educational career. Seeing someone who resembled me in the field of education provided a sense of validation and possibility, along with a sense of belonging and inspiration. Reflecting on my experiences, I completed my counseling program at a Kansas University, earning a Master's in school counseling.

As a counselor and educator, I try to be compassionate and understanding with everyone I work with, but I have also been through some traumatic events surrounding my race that have caused pain. However, through time and education, that pain has been transformed into motivation and determination to help lead change, so it now looks like confidence, self-assurance, and self-love. But as I move to a place of peace with myself and my capabilities, the journey here was not easy, nor is it easy to rest in this peace daily. As a strong, opinionated, Black woman, I know that I can be seen as an "angry Black woman". At least this is what I learned when a Black woman shows up at my school to talk about, or work to protect, their Black child.

So, as I begin this critical autoethnography (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021) and my counter story (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002), I start by introducing three key parts of who I am, utilizing some stories that go with those parts of me: A mother, and a counselor, and a new Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB) leader.

Introducing Myself: The Mother, The Counselor, and my Transition to DEIB Leadership

I recall Alex¹, a Black male student who was struggling in some of his classes. His mother was getting phone calls regularly, and it was decided to hold a meeting at the school for Alex and his mother, Cynthia. I attended the meeting as a counselor, and while in the meeting Cynthia never raised her voice or cursed but she also stood her ground and did not back down from her belief that Alex was not being supported in his courses. She would ask the teachers questions like, “What are you doing to support my child? When he failed the test did you meet with him to suggest making corrections or explain to him why he missed the question?” The teachers, seemingly upset, would respond with, “your child knows when I am available, and it is up to him to come to me rather than me pulling him aside.” For this meeting it seemed every voice was heard, and both the teachers and the parents wanted what was best for Alex. However, after the meeting one of my White male colleagues leans to another one of our White female colleagues and says,

“Yet another meeting where we get ripped apart by a mad Black mother.”

¹ The names of individuals and organizations within this dissertation are pseudonyms and any real names were offered with permission from the individuals.

This wasn't the first time I had seen or heard this kind of reaction, but this stereotype is inherently entwined with my own personal role as a Black mother, which I emphasize in this critical autoethnography. Black mothers' resistance is often misinterpreted by educators, who tend to view it from a deficit perspective, rather than recognizing their caregiving style as firm, serious, protective, and forward (Davenport, 2019). Numerous studies focusing on Black mothers and Black women educators depict mothers as advocates and activists (Davenport, 2019; Loder-Jackson, 2011). Unfortunately, any form of activist-oriented involvement that challenges the existing norms is frequently disregarded as counterproductive rather than acknowledged as a form of care (Cooper, 2009). Motherhood, when experienced by Black and White women, yields different outcomes that extend to political and social power dynamics (McDonald, 1997). Unlike White women, Black women have historically faced the need to defend their choice to stay at home and not engage in paid work. The standards of parental involvement, which are often shaped around White cultural norms, inherently raise systemic concerns when it comes to meeting those expectations. It is crucial to remember the historical context of violence and degradation that has profoundly impacted Black mothers. They have not always had control over the circumstances of their motherhood (McDonald, 1997). The legacies of enslavement and ongoing poverty have forced Black mothers to work outside the home, consequently affecting their ability to fulfill the prescribed "standards" of involvement within the educational system. As a counselor I carry my own stories, but also those of my Black students, and while this critical autoethnography forwards my own stories, their stories are inherently attached to my own lived experiences, subjectivities, and socially constructed understandings.

I have recently transitioned from counselor to a learning services consultant who specializes in DEIB. As a facilitator, I work within school districts throughout the state of

Arkansas to better understand students, parents, and communities with diverse backgrounds socially, culturally, and educationally. As a specialized learning services (SLS) consultant, I offer customized professional development opportunities tailored to meet the unique needs of organizations, school buildings, and school districts. Whether district or local cooperatives need targeted training for a small group of staff working with individual students, or district-wide training, as an SLS consultant I support professional learning needs. I also utilize an individualized assessment process where I collaborate with individuals and teams to define goals and work ensuring my services meet their specialized needs.

As an SLS at Evergrove², I am privileged to engage in a multifaceted role that allows me to make a meaningful impact on students' educational journeys. Evergrove's commitment to service learning aligns seamlessly with my own philosophy of fostering growth and empowerment among students. Through this role, I am immersed in a dynamic environment that encourages collaboration, innovation, and student-centered solutions. At Evergrove, service learning transcends the conventional boundaries of education. Evergrove believes in merging classroom education with community engagement and creating a symbiotic relationship where students learn, grow, and simultaneously contribute to the well-being of their communities. This philosophy resonates deeply with me, as I believe that education extends beyond textbooks to instill values, empathy, and active citizenship.

Central to my role as an SLS consultant is my commitment to Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging (DEIB). I believe that a truly inclusive educational system is one where

² Evergrove is a pseudonym used for creative and privacy purposes. The views expressed here are the author's own and do not necessarily reflect the views of any real person or entity.

every student is valued, respected, and provided with equitable opportunities to succeed. As a DEIB leader, I work within districts to facilitate transformative change that aligns with these principles. DEIB leadership involves working collaboratively with district stakeholders to evaluate existing practices, identify disparities, and co-create strategies to address them. It is about empowering students by creating safe spaces where their identities are embraced and celebrated. It is about ensuring that their voices are heard, that their backgrounds are acknowledged, and that their unique strengths are leveraged. With these goals in mind, in this role I encourage educators not only to acknowledge cultural diversity, but also to nurture an environment of empathy and understanding where every student feels valued, heard, and empowered to succeed.

As an SLS consultant focused on DEIB, I find this recent career shift from counseling incredibly fulfilling. As a counselor I noticed I was having an internal struggle. Understanding and recognizing students' intersectional identities, I began recognizing the intersectionality in myself. As I listened to my students and heard their racial struggles, I recalled my own personal conflicts in education going through multiple layers of the system. And rather than continue to separate and try to fight these intersectionalities, I found myself wanting to dig deeper into the stories, searching for some form of wholeness as a Black woman working across predominantly White environments in education. This critical autoethnography gives me that opportunity – to find my voice, while simultaneously speaking my truth in hopes that others might also deepen their own understandings, as well. In other words, I am doing what Boylorn and Orbe (2013) succinctly describe when explaining critical autoethnography as a method: “We write as an Other, and for an Other” (p. 15).

Rationale

The literature review presented in Chapter 2, *Unveiling the Unseen through Literature Review*, offers a comprehensive exploration of critical concepts crucial to understanding societal dynamics, particularly within the context of race, trauma, and resilience. Through an examination of key works by scholars such as DeGruy (2017) and Jackson, Jackson, and Jackson (2018), the existing literature highlights the enduring impact of slavery on African Americans, emphasizing the transmission of trauma across generations and its manifestation in maladaptive behaviors. The literature on Black females in counseling and leadership also tells us about the intersecting layers of oppression and resilience experienced by African American women. Scholars like Collins (2001) and Crenshaw (2022) have illuminated the unique challenges faced by Black women in navigating systems, shedding light on the ways in which race, gender, and other intersecting identities shape their experiences. Within counseling and leadership contexts, understanding the complexities of these experiences is crucial for developing effective interventions and fostering inclusive environments that honor the strengths and voices of Black women. Furthermore, as counseling frameworks continue to evolve with more attention on diversity, and with the development of the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, school counselors are better equipped to address the nuanced needs of diverse populations. This model emphasizes counselors being equipped to work effectively with clients from diverse backgrounds and to advocate for social justice (American Counseling Association, 2014). As a Black female counselor transitioning to a DEIB leadership role, this autoethnographic exploration holds significant value and offers new qualitative perspectives that currently has minimal representation in the literature. It represents a personal journey of deepening understanding and confronting challenges inherent in navigating predominantly White

spaces and does so by offering up a degree of vulnerability on my end - a common norm in autoethnography. By braiding together scholarly insights with personal experiences, the narrative aims not only to help readers develop clarity around these critical concepts but also to illustrate their relevance and intersectionality in everyday life. This autoethnographic approach serves to illuminate the ways in which historical legacies, such as Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (DeGruy, 2017), continue to shape contemporary realities and perpetuate racial disparities. Moreover, it underscores the importance of building trust, addressing systemic inequities, and fostering inclusivity in educational and organizational settings. By centering both scholarly discourse and storied lived experiences across multiple roles and disciplines in the field of education, this autoethnography seeks to contribute to ongoing dialogues surrounding race, trauma, and social justice, ultimately advocating for more equitable and inclusive approaches to leadership and counseling, as well as educational and community empowerment. Overall, my story has value and offers a scholarly contribution to the literature, particularly because these voices are historically marginalized in the literature.

Research Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study is to explore my lived experiences as a Black female school counselor while transitioning to a DEIB leadership role and how I navigate that transition and continue to support students, teachers, and leaders who experience racial conflicts and or tense learning environments.

Research question 1: What are my lived experiences as I reflect on my time as a student in education systems (all levels)?

Research question 2: What were my reactions to my students' lived experiences as a school counselor helping them work through their identities, beliefs, and values related to student diversity?

Research question 3: What were my own lived experiences and internal reflections as I transition from school counselor to DEIB leader as it pertains to my identity, beliefs, and values?

Theoretical and Methodological Frameworks: Critical Autoethnography and Braiding

Boylorn and Orbe (2021) argue that critical autoethnography can help researchers to examine their own experiences within larger social, cultural, and historical contexts, and to uncover the ways in which power operates in society. In critical autoethnography, researchers use their personal experiences to explore and analyze issues of power, identity, and social justice. By examining their own lived experiences, researchers can uncover the ways in which larger social structures and cultural norms shape individual lives and experiences. Boylorn and Orbe (2021) further argue that critical autoethnography is a valuable tool for promoting social justice and equity, as it allows marginalized voices and experiences to be centered in research and challenges dominant narratives that perpetuate inequality. It also allows researchers to engage in reflexivity and critical thinking, which can lead to deeper understandings of social issues and new avenues for activism and social change.

The significance of critical autoethnography in this dissertation lies in its capacity to explore three pivotal dimensions of my journey. First, it enables me to examine my reactions to my students' lived experiences as a school counselor, helping them work through their identities, beliefs, and values related to student diversity. Second, critical autoethnography provides a platform to explore my own lived experiences and internal reflections as I transition from a

school counselor to a DEIB leader as it pertains to my identity, beliefs, and values. Third, through the lens of critical autoethnography, I can illuminate my lived experiences working with predominantly White teachers and leaders engaged in DEIB work.

As mentioned in the preface, this critical autoethnography will also utilize braiding as a metaphor for bringing together my stories, theoretical frameworks, and core content areas associated with the research purpose and questions above. Employing the metaphor of braiding, I work to blend frameworks, theories, and concepts, creating a complex yet harmonious exploration of the self, and blending of narratives. At the heart of this metaphor is my personal story from childhood to my role as a counselor, a foundational strand that lays the groundwork for fostering courageous conversations moving forward. As I transition into a leadership role in DEIB, a second distinct strand is added which is representative of the stories I experience in this new role. The third strand, symbolizing my autoethnographic approach and my ongoing interactions with relevant literature, continues to add layers of depth and context. Therefore, this dissertation mirrors a braid's structure, fortifying with and connecting stories to the overall fabric of research. So, the intertwining of Black motherhood, school counseling, Black feminism, DEIB leadership, spirituality, and personal and social identity comes together to create a coherent whole, a braid that reflects unity's power and diversity's richness. Furthermore, this intricate weaving highlights experiences that transcend linear narratives and shedding light on crucial conversations for change. Moving forward, in the next section I introduce the following theories and frameworks informing this critical autoethnography: Black Feminism, Motherhood, Social Identity, Personal Identity, Spirituality, Courageous Conversations, American School Counseling Association Model, and Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies. In chapters 2 and 3, I will elaborate further on these core concepts.

Black Feminism and My Positionality as a Mother

The Black feminist framework seeks to highlight the intellectual contributions of Black individuals while rejecting opposing viewpoints (Cooper, 2015). This framework provides a platform to recognize the work of Black women who have served their communities and beyond, allowing others to recognize the worth of all Black individuals (Cooper, 2015). Black feminist thought has influenced and articulated the experiences of Black women, revealing how their intersecting identities of class, religion, age, spirituality, and sexual orientation impact their lives (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Additionally, it explores how social systems of privilege and oppression are based on ideologies concerning differences between groups, which are embodied through attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, laws, norms, and practices (Paradies, 2006). The purpose of Black feminist thought is to challenge oppression and empower Black women within the context of social justice (Collins, 2000). This tradition supports all Black Americans navigating racism while maintaining their uniqueness and individuality (Thomson, 2017) and emphasizes how Black women possess a genuine capacity for caring and supporting student development and achievement (Cooper, 2015).

Furthermore, empowering self and children are a maternal responsibility for Black mothers (Davenport, 2019). As a Black female counselor there is a constant struggle to manage how others treat my children and Black students, whom I counsel, and there is a need to tend to the mindfulness against socialization into internalized racism while teaching resilience and resistance (DePouw & Matias, 2016). Overall, fostering positive racial identities is necessary for the emotional welfare and psychological health of Black children (Davenport, 2019; Collins, 2000; Cooper, 2009). Incorporating Black feminist theory into my critical autoethnography

enables me to center the experiences and perspectives of me as a Black woman and other marginalized individuals such as Black students, Black educators, and Black mothers.

Social Identity

Social identity plays an important role in shaping individuals' perceptions of themselves and others within society. According to social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979), people categorize themselves and others into distinct social groups based on shared characteristics, such as race, ethnicity, gender, or nationality. Social Identity is both relational and contextual (Wearing, 2011). This categorization leads individuals to develop a sense of belonging to certain groups, and social identity can create a sense of differentiation for those outside the group. Social identity also influences behavior, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships as individuals tend to favor their in-group members and demonstrate biases against out-group members to enhance their self-esteem and social standing (Wearing, 2011).

Social identity provides a lens through which I can analyze and make sense of my lived experiences within a social setting such as my role as a counselor and leader of DEIB to educators. By exploring how my self-concept is shaped by my membership in various social groups, I gain a deeper understanding of how my identity influences my interactions with others and the world around me and by embracing social identity and the elements of social identity, I can foster a more profound and nuanced analysis of my critical autoethnographic narrative.

Personal Identity

Personal identity is a concept that refers to how individuals perceive themselves and their sense of continuity over time. It encompasses various dimensions, such as traits, behaviors, beliefs, values and skills (Hannum, 2007), aspects which contribute to the formation of a unique and cohesive self-concept. These elements contribute to an overall understanding of who they are

as a person. Additionally, personal identity can be influenced by significant life experiences, relationships with others, and the identification with specific social groups. Exploring and understanding personal identity is essential for individuals to develop a strong sense of self and navigate their roles within society effectively (Wearing, 2011).

By using personal identity, I can gain a deeper understanding of the factors that have influenced the formation of my identity. I can explore how my upbringing, cultural background, and lived experiences have contributed to shaping who I am as an individual. Acknowledging and understanding personal identity gives valuable insight to the complexities of self and shines light on intersectionality, as it unearths new perspectives which contribute to a deeper understanding between the relationship of personal identity and lived experiences.

Spirituality

In an era marked by technological advancement and scientific inquiry, spirituality remains an enduring and profound aspect of the human experience. Across cultures and civilizations, individuals have sought solace, meaning, and connection through spiritual practices, beliefs, and traditions. In recent years, there has been a burgeoning interest in spirituality within the realms of psychology, counseling, and mental health as scholars and practitioners recognize its profound influence on well-being and personal growth. Yet, despite its significance, spirituality is a multifaceted and often elusive concept, encompassing a myriad of beliefs, experiences, and expressions.

Informed by Johnson's (2013) framework emphasizing spirituality in counseling and therapy, this dissertation endeavors to contribute to ongoing dialogue and scholarship surrounding spirituality and mental health, offering practical implications for school counselors, educators, and community. Johnson (2013) outlines seven premises that emphasize the role of

spirituality in mental health, which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 2. Furthermore, Senreich (2013) indicated, spirituality involves constructs grounded in common points of view about the nature of existence that are individual spiritual belief systems in themselves, and do not validate each person's unique relationship to what is unknowable. It is far too amorphous a term, as it incorporates an array of constructs that are associated with culturally derived points of view about spirituality. Rather than clearly defining spirituality as each person's unique relationship to what is unknowable about existence, conceptualizations of spirituality have incorporated a range of ideas associated with prevalent spiritual belief systems (Senreich, 2013, p. 550).

Regardless of meaning, I am deeply rooted in spirituality as it has been a way for me to make sense of situations and people when there seemed to be no explanation, and I had a need for a spiritual connection. Spirituality remains a construct difficult to understand and define, yet many adults indicate it is a major organizing principle that gives their lives meaning (Senreich, 2013; Tisdell & Tolliver, 2003). Sink (2004 as cited in Coles, 1990) indicated that the key element of a "generic" view of spirituality relates to students' attempts at making sense of their lives (Coles, 1990).

Courageous Conversations

This dissertation is also informed by *Courageous Conversations About Race* (Singleton, 2021). According to Singleton (2021), courageous conversations are characterized by a three-part structure necessary for discussing race. The essence of courageous conversations lies in engaging individuals who may be reluctant to participate, maintaining the dialogue even when discomfort or diversion arises, and delving into the discourse until genuine understanding and meaningful actions emerge. By embracing the protocols described by Singleton (2021), I will be able to help lead DEIB conversations with educators. Courageous conversations aim to

deinstitutionalize racism and foster improved student achievement through having conversations around race (Singleton, 2021). The utilization of courageous conversations is important as it allows me to navigate and unpack the complexities of discussing sensitive and challenging topics related to my experiences and identity.

By incorporating courageous conversations, I can offer a deeper understanding of how Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (DeGruy, 2017), societal norms, and systems of oppression have influenced my journey. This approach empowers me to confront uncomfortable truths, acknowledging the impact of racism and discrimination, in my life and the lives of others. Courageous conversations enable me to engage with my own vulnerabilities and emotions, providing an opportunity to express and process my feelings openly. Through such dialogue, I can explore the different aspects of my identity, reflecting on how race, gender, and other social factors intersect and shape my personal identity.

Multicultural and Social Justice School Counseling Frameworks

My autoethnographic process originally began with The American School Counseling Association National Model, which is a comprehensive and widely recognized framework that provides a structured approach to developing effective school counseling programs in the United States (ASCA, 2019). However, the project gained a sharper focus and better alignment as I shifted to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC), a framework essential for fostering a supportive and equitable educational environment. These competencies, crafted by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development (Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, 2015), offer a framework that transcends traditional counseling boundaries. By incorporating principles of cultural humility, social justice advocacy, and intersectionality, school counselors equipped with the MSJCC can effectively address the

diverse needs of students, promote inclusivity, and cultivate an atmosphere conducive to academic success and personal growth.

In the context of this dissertation, the exploration of the MSJCC becomes integral to understanding how these competencies shape the way I interact with students and influence my transition to DEIB leadership. The journey from school counseling to DEIB leadership necessitates a deep understanding of these competencies, as they form the backbone of culturally responsive and socially just practices in educational settings. With this emphasis on counseling, but also my transition to DEIB leadership, I close this chapter sharing some of my perspectives as I make these transitions to becoming a person with more influence to improve our schools.

Shattering Silence: The Urgent Need for Sharing a Black Female Counselor's DEIB Journey

The role of a school counselor is critical for the academic success, socio-emotional development, and career growth of all students. As a school counselor, my work often goes beyond these three areas, yet few examples of such work have been published and validated. Research has shown that societal norms of Whiteness are deeply ingrained in schools, as highlighted by Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995). Additionally, the experiences of Black women have been overlooked in scholarly research and professional practice. To address this gap, this study aims to shed light on the unique experiences of Black female school counselors and their work with Black adolescents. The goal is to contribute practical knowledge to the school counseling profession and enhance the visibility of these important perspectives. Also, note the transition of counselor to specialized learning consultant focusing on diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging and the emotional journey within this transition.

In reflecting on the roles of a school counselor I am reminded of a time when I was sought out because, as the principal told me, I am an expert in equity issues. This was a surprise to me, because at the time I did not serve on the Equity committee in the district, which I considered rather ineffective, anyway. Additionally, I'm not sure anyone knew I was pursuing my doctorate in educational leadership, or a certificate in social justice. I didn't tell anyone because I had a lack of trust within the building, stemming from the racism I experienced just about every other week. But overall, the story below represents the complexity of social and personal identities and intersectional experiences that are not only experienced by our students, but also our leaders and counselors. In truth, as I continue to evolve as a person and professional, I continue to gain new experiences informing how I can approach tough conversations, but here it helps to show how a principal and I wrestled with these tough issues. Furthermore, it shows how our ongoing collaborative work engaging in conversations on tough topics allows us to all become more aware, and more reflective about the complexities of social and personal identity.

This principal, who in the past had made some questionable remarks to me about Blacks, came to see me in my very tiny office. When I heard a knock at my door, I was more than surprised to see him standing there. As he walks in, he says:

"Cheeks I just had my first fight between a Black and a White student, and I think it is because of what is going on in the media right now".

During this specific week, the highly publicized trial concerning the murder of George Floyd was underway, eliciting anticipation and unrest among Black communities across America. There was a palpable sense of apprehension as individuals awaited the verdict, wary of

the possibility that another police officer might be acquitted, citing the use of "appropriate force" in the death of a Black man (Feuer et al., 2020). Or worse, the police officer will be found guilty of Floyd's murder with a minimal sentence leaving Blacks throughout the nation feeling as though Blacks' lives do not matter.

The principal went on to tell me the two students involved handled the situation ideally, each accepting their responsibility for their physical fight because of the racial slurs uttered by the two of them. The principal said: *"You know the Black student, he's the one who is biracial being raised by his adoptive White mom and she adopted all three of the siblings".*

In my head I responded: *"No, I do not know every Black person in this world".*

Rather than verbalizing my thought I simply shook my head "no," letting the principal know I did not know the Black student in question. The principal continued the story stating: *"The Black student hit the White student because the White student called the Black student a 'Nigger'".* The White student said, *"Well you should not have been calling me a kracker'".* The principal asked me to talk to the Black student because the Black student did not see anything wrong with the word kracker". To which I responded,

"Well, it is not our job to tell students why vulgar language is wrong because sometimes vulgar language is used by people and students to take ownership of the insecurities and trauma that the vulgar language has caused to that individual or student using it. However, I can sure talk to the student about appropriate vocabulary within the walls of this school and reinforce the idea that it is never okay to make students or teachers feel less than who they are while at school. So, if a word is deemed offensive by anyone while in school then we should all try to refrain from using it. As we try to provide a safe learning environment for all."

The principal went on for a little bit in disbelief of how great the two interacted but was still taken back by the fact that the Black student would not acknowledge the word kracker was a bad word. In fact, the principal stated: "*The Black kid told the White kid, kracker is not a bad word to me.*" This conversation was one that I wrestled with all night. I felt like it was just me. I felt as though the principal wanted me to fix the problem because it was a racial issue, and I was a person of color. The fact the principal was looking to me to better educate this Black student was daunting because I did not have a relationship with this young man. The whole situation was odd to me, as the principal sought me out to educate the Black student on why kracker was not okay for him to say. Of course, I don't want any students being on the receiving end of insults, but there was also a reliance on me, as a Black woman, as the only one able to reach a Black student.

When I got back to the school building the next morning it hit me. A thought came to me, and it felt like a weight had been taken off my shoulders. The "Black student" was speaking his truth! The Black student is biracial and raised by his White mom and White grandma. So, maybe he heard his mom, grandma or someone in his immediate circle say kracker, or possibly some of her friends or in the media and found nothing wrong with the word as he also identifies with being White, half White or even biracial. In that same light, the student who was perceived as Black by the principal, has heard somewhere that the word Nigger or Nigga is not okay for Whites to say. I then thought,

"The Black student may have been trying to tell the White student there is no difference between you and me because I too am White, and I can say the word kracker because I am half White, White, or even biracial. The Black student may have been trying to convey that he as a

biracial student can use both kracker and Nigger as those terms (for whatever reason) are typically accepted if spoken by the race the word is referring to.”

I went into that principal's office and I brought this perspective forward. We talked for about 30 minutes, and I was able to use my newly found knowledge from my social justice coursework to talk about stereotypes, and social identity (Adams, 2016).

A key takeaway is that we are complex humans with many intersectional identities, and the principal and I were working through our own perceptions as we were exploring how particular students belong to various groups of people, based on their race, ethnicity, gender, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, or other characteristics (Saad & DiAngelo, 2020). I am not sure if I made a difference in how he will approach the next racially charged situation, but it was in this conversation that I realized I am more than a school counselor for students. I am more than a support system for students concerning academic struggles, social and emotional difficulties, mental health concerns, career development, and college planning. I also work with parents, teachers, and administrators to create a safe and supportive learning environment for students. However, to be truly heard I started to consider how I may need to switch to a position that allows me the opportunity to work with different districts to help create safe spaces for children and students. To work with educational teams to collaborate with other professionals and outside agencies to provide interventions and resources to help students succeed academically and personally.

After this conversation I realized I will always have a passion for students and counseling but if I were to change job titles, I could help meet the needs of students on a bigger scale. I left the principal's office feeling empowered because I advocated for the student, and I listened to what he was saying rather than what was being told to me. I utilized some of the new concepts I

was learning as a social justice student and embrace some deeper complexities which recognize that individuals hold multiple and intersecting identities, and that these identities cannot be separated from each other (Edwards & Harris, 2016).

By acquiring new vocabulary related to racial issues and feeling more confident and informed about discussing such topics, coupled with my love for counseling, I embraced the idea of taking on a new role in education. Therefore, I transitioned into a specialized learning services consultant where I am able to build my skills in having courageous conversations (Singleton, 2021) with a focus on DEIB.

While I have transitioned into a DEIB leadership role, my true passion and lifelong commitment lie in school counseling. The path to becoming a DEIB leader felt inevitable for me; DEIB work provides me with the opportunity to strive towards making the world a little better for my former students who are now navigating a world that feels suffocatingly challenging. I am deeply passionate about DEIB because I believe wholeheartedly that it helps create a more accepting environment for my past students. I often tell my students that once they're my babies, they're always my babies. Some affectionately call me "Mama Cheeks," while others insist, they're my favorite (though I can't bear to tell them I don't have favorites). As a DEIB leader, I see an avenue to enact tangible change in the systems and structures that perpetuate inequality and discrimination. My experiences in counseling have equipped me with the skills to support and advocate for students, and I see DEIB leadership as an extension of school counseling—a means to amplify the voices of marginalized individuals and foster inclusive communities where all students can thrive emotionally, academically, and socially. Therefore, while my journey has led me to this current role, my heart remains steadfastly dedicated to the field of school counseling.

Conclusion: Acknowledging Limitations but Embracing Opportunities

“Once you start approaching your body with curiosity rather than with fear everything shifts.”

Bessel van der Kolk

This dissertation's nature is subjective and not applicable to a wide range of individuals or situations. This means that the insights and interpretations presented are based on my personal experiences and perspectives and may not be broadly representative of other individuals or situations. This is a limitation in how transferrable the stories and understandings associated with this autoethnography might be applied to other counselors, leaders, and educational communities. However, despite the subjective nature of this dissertation, readers can still learn from this dissertation and my stories. By sharing my personal experiences and perspectives, I hope to create a connection with readers and provide a relatable narrative that can be informative and enlightening. The connections can be made within the dissertation itself, allowing readers to draw parallels between their own experiences and those presented in the dissertation. By aligning the readers' stories with my own, they may gain a deeper understanding of the topic at hand and potentially identify with perspectives presented in this dissertation. In other words, autoethnography offers a unique opportunity fostering a deeper understanding of the topic at hand, even if the stories are inherently subjective. Simultaneously, as someone who comes from an historically marginalized perspective and working to improve my ability to do my work moving forward, this also offers me an opportunity to find clarity and confidence in this transition – a deeper understanding of the self. As Bhattacharya (2015) describes, sometimes it is necessary that students such as myself need do our “homework” before we do our “fieldwork.”

Chapter 2 - Unveiling the Unseen through Literature Review

Introduction

Unveiling the Unseen through Literature Review represents my own personal exploration of perspectives, insights, and scholarly contributions within the literature that have been mostly outside of my learning to this point in my education. For me, this brings to light many facets in my life that kept me from having a comprehensive understanding of relevant subject matter in my transition from counseling to DEIB leader. In other words, it represents the process of deepening my understanding of the subject areas I traverse and exploring how to braid those with my own stories, and finding the scholarly substance that was previously not within my purview – unseen. In other words, the discovery of this literature lifted a veil and allowed me to develop a new scholarly substance and language around my personal experiences.

This chapter begins with broad historical and social history related to treatment of Blacks, embarking on an exploration of critical concepts integral to understanding societal dynamics, including colorism, trauma, posttraumatic slave syndrome, and intersectionality. After this, I offer examples of literature on Black female counselors and Black educational leaders, before shifting to a discussion of theoretical frameworks such as critical theories, counter storytelling, personal identity, social identity, and the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) and Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, among others. Through the lens of a critical autoethnographic narrative, I aim to not only define these terms but also to illustrate their significance by braiding in my personal experiences in an effort to illuminate the ways in which these concepts intersect with our lives.

Broad Historical, Social and Educational Contexts

DeGruy (2017) states historically, African societies were arranged and based upon kinship relationships. The extended family was an interdependent unit that provided the care of children, the sick, and the elderly. In African culture nieces and nephews would consider themselves brothers and sisters instead of cousins, and the extended family structure was part of a survival strategy. Particularly for Africans, loose kinship ties provided the mechanism for children and social organizations where all the members of the extended family helped to provide for the basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter (DeGruy, 2017). Family co-operation was needed for the survival of a tribe or group. Similarly, in African American culture, not only is there an extended family but also what has come to be known as fictive kinship, meaning that unrelated individuals are granted the status of family by being given the names of aunt, uncle, cousin, sis, bro, and so on.

This sense of family in the African American community was ripped away when Africa was invaded by Whites and the White invaders began to rape and kill many Africans to get them to subdue to the White power. White power which is still present. With the endorsement of slavery as a legal, acceptable, and justifiable institution, the founding fathers committed America's original sin, a sin that continues to plague America (DeGruy, 2017). Allowing slavery to persist at America's inception caused those who signed off on this practice, so eloquently represented in the Declaration of Independence, to perjure themselves in its face and doomed the nation to a future of lies, pain, and struggle (DeGruy, 2017). The essence of American racism and slavery is more than simply disrespect. The grim inheritance of racism and slavery is ever present today. The brutality of White slaveholders and politicians inflicted on Black individuals and families; the devastation surely did not end with the end of slavery (McGee & Stovall,

2015). America's resistance to accepting responsibility for slavery and repairing the damage continues to prevent this nation from taking its place as the world's moral leader (DeGruy, 2017).

There is a difference between accepting responsibility and feeling guilty for one's actions.

Roots of Education for Blacks

It is well established that our educational curricula have historically been designed for White students and Eurocentric points of view, and schools have been used as weapons of assimilation (Spring, 2022). Additionally, what is taught in social studies classes is most often from the perspective of White people rather than that of Black, Brown and Indigenous peoples. Spring (2022) lists six methods to diminish minority cultures: 1) segregation and isolation, 2) forcing the use of the dominant language [English in USA], 3) curriculum reflecting the dominant group, 4) textbooks that reflect content and culture of the dominant group, 5) denial of minority religious and cultural expression, and 6) hiring of teachers from the dominant group. Additionally, it is well known that Blacks as slaves were not allowed to learn to read or write, an action that would result in brutal physical punishment. However, some slaves did learn clandestinely, often by befriending a White child (Goldstein, 2014).

On November 7, 1861, the union army captured the sea islands off the coast of South Carolina. White plantation owners fled, abandoning homes, cotton fields, and 10,000 slaves. When word of the Yankee takeover reached the mainland more slaves arrived, including runaways from parts of the south. The U.S. Treasury Department dispatched a Massachusetts lawyer to the islands to assess how they might be used in the war effort. He reported back that he was more impressed with the character of the former slaves than he thought he would be. They harvested the cotton in their master's absence, and were committed Christians, honest and industrious. What they really needed, as he concluded, were teachers (Goldstein, 2014).

In 1856, free Blacks such as Charlotte Forten (a prominent educator and activist during the late 1800s) and Booker T. Washington (educator, author, and from the last generation of Blacks being born into slavery, he became the leading voice of the former slaves, and their descendants) were intrigued by the notion of teaching other Blacks more than just intellectual instruction (Goldstein, 2014). Forten and Washington were fascinated with the idea of teaching Blacks fundamental lessons of civilization, voluntary industry, self-reliance, honesty and truthfulness, and cleanliness (Goldstein, 2014).

By 1870, Black activists and politicians had driven every state to organize at least a rudimentary public education system with separate schools serving White and Black students. In Black schools with Black educators' students were taught a history of Black inventors, activists, and a sense of self-respect (Goldstein, 2014). Forten, Washington, and other Black activists, including W.E.B. Dubois advocating for the education and rights of Blacks. They understood the importance of education and spoke out to help Blacks receive an education.

W.E.B. DuBois, whose full name was William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, was an American sociologist, socialist, historian, and civil rights activist. During an era of Jim Crow laws, DuBois was skeptical of Whites' capacity to help as well as their interest in helping Blacks (Sall & Khan, 2017). Jim Crow laws were state and local laws introduced in the southern United States in the late 19th and early 20th centuries that enforced racial segregation, the systematic separation of facilities and services such as housing, healthcare, education, employment, and transportation on racial grounds (Stern, 2021). These laws remained in force until the 1960s, but White supremacy, the belief that people with white or white passing skin are better than, and therefore deserve to dominate, over people with brown or black skin (Saad & DiAngelo, 2020), was ever present.

Jim Crow segregation and White supremacy led W.E.B. DuBois to suggest that improving the situation of Black Americans would have to be done by Blacks themselves (Sall & Khan, 2017). This was a concern when schools began to be desegregated after the Brown v. Board of Education ruling in 1954, in which the United States Supreme Court ruled segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

Colorism

DeGruy (2017) expressed it is equally understandable, when viewed in the light of slavery, why an African American might feel threatened by the accomplishments of a peer. The enslaved were divided into many different respects, those that worked in the fields versus those that worked in the house, those that were Black versus those that were Black and White. Often these different designations meant access to or denial of privileges, and sometimes freedom itself. It was common practice for a slave owner to set one class of slave against another. Slave owners perpetuated feelings of separateness and distress by sometimes ordering Black overseers to beat or punish their friends, peers, and relatives. When the master promoted a slave that individual often joined the master in the rank of oppressor (DeGruy, 2017).

The overreaching problem of this millennium continues to be the problem of the color line. Colorism, a form of internalized racism appearing in the form of bias and favor for light-skin, European features and “good hair,” has promoted tension and conflict within Black American society for generations (Wilder, 2009). This ideal of colorism shows up in my daily life. I have a friend named Rosanna and she is from Louisiana. Rosanna shares both Black and Native American heritage. Her mother is White passing, and Rosanna’s skin tone is a light brown color similar to light brown oak. It is a common conversation between the two of us that I

tell Rosanna she is beautiful because she is lighter than me with a White passing mother. The conversation typically goes as follows.

Me: *"You know you light bright."*

Rosanna: *"Ugh, not at all. I don't know why everyone thinks I am light I am just a normal color."*

Me: *"MMMHmm, just like your mama. Ya'll both light! I mean we all can't be as beautiful as you."*

Now Rosanna is never seemingly offended as that is her nature to allow others to have their opinion, but we often have the conversation of...

Me: *"Why is it that you light folk think you're so fine"?*

Rosanna: *"What, not at all!"*

Me: *"Girl, you know ya'll light folk be walking around like you better than everyone else."*

Rosanna: *"Not me, but I know what you're talking about."*

Me: *"You know this concept of 'lighter means better than' goes all the way back to house nigger and field niggers."*

Rosanna: *"Yep."*

Me: *"Blacks working in the house were not as dark as the ones in fields. Not to mention the slave masters were raping the Black women and then having biracial children. Then the slave master would feel bad and try to give their half Black child an easier life by working in the house."*

Now, I'm considering the tone I'm carrying in this exchange, and how this might be connected to intergenerational trauma, which I discuss in the next section.

Trauma and Racism

Trauma manifests in various ways, and its impact can be observed through different lenses. This section will explore trauma, the effects of trauma, post-traumatic slave syndrome, adverse childhood experiences and how trauma intersects with historical events like slavery and cultural trauma. By exploring these ideas, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how trauma is intertwined with racism.

According to the National Trauma Institute (NTI) (2021), trauma is responsible for the highest number of deaths among U.S. citizens aged 1-44 years. Every year, more than 43 million people in the U.S. are admitted to emergency rooms or hospitals due to trauma (NTI, 2021). The American Psychological Association (APA) (2008) reported that by the age of 16, only one third of youths have not experienced trauma, indicating that it is highly likely for a young person to experience at least one traumatic event in their lifetime. Factors such as gender, racial-ethnic identity, income level (APA, 2008), and age (Root, 1992) influence the likelihood of encountering trauma, and people of color and those living in poverty are at a higher risk of experiencing traumatic events (APA, 2008).

Trauma is generally defined as a psychological or emotional response to an event or experience that is deeply distressing or disturbing (Griffin, 2020). According to trauma researcher van der Kolk (1989), traumatization occurs when an individual lacks adequate internal and external resources to cope with external threats. Although trauma has typically been defined at an individual level, it can also be experienced by cultures and communities at sociopolitical, institutional, and systemic levels (Root, 1992). Despite the spiritual injury that follows traumatic experiences (O'Leary, 2005), injuries to the human spirit have historically been neglected as

trauma has only been conceptualized in objective, tangible ways such as natural disasters, wars, and physical abuse (Root, 1992).

Generally, women perceive their leadership approach to include care and nurture (Muzvidziwa, 2015). Bass (2012) emphasizes that nurturing care holds significant potential as a catalyst for positive transformation and resilience within educational leadership. This understanding of maternal influence extends beyond biological ties (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2008; Cooper, 2009).

Research has also shown that students who are marginalized generally benefit from having school staff who understand the racialized experiences that they face in urban classrooms (Bryant et al., 2005; Hines & Wilmot, 2018). One important aspect of counselor leadership is promoting resilience. This can be done through racial socialization practices (APA, 2008) and school-wide exposure to culturally relevant learning activities that reduce academic stress (Dollarhide et al., 2013; Hashem, 2022). Additionally, counselors play a crucial role in addressing the inequities that lead to student alienation within educational spaces (Blake et al., 2011).

To combat feelings of alienation and oppression among diverse populations, including Black students, school counselors can facilitate student groups for collective healing, processing experiences, and combating experiences of isolation (Day-Vines et al., 2003). As such, Collins (2000) argued, that Black women need spaces where they can speak freely and display “resisting objectification as the Other” (p. 111). Similarly, Carter Andrews et al. (2019) addressed the need for a committed and intentional focus by schools toward supporting and developing programs that foster the overall well-being of Black students. Carter Andrews et al. (2019) stated that Black students benefit from having a space of refuge to both individually, and collectively

unpack, share, examine, and make sense of their intersectional experiences that take place both within the school context and outside of school. This introduces the notion that school districts and administration should embrace counselors' leadership as agents of change (West-Olatunji et al., 2010), along with their expertise in development and facilitation of programs to meet Black students' needs.

Through this understanding the idea of having a system or place where Black students can unpack their feelings as they navigate through racially charged situations may prove beneficial for the student and assist him or her in making choices that will benefit his or her life. I can recall the day when one of my African American students, who lived at home with his older brother of two years and his mother, expressed a need. He may have benefited emotionally if there was a process or place designated to allow Black students space of refuge. This space would enable them to both individually and collectively unpack, share, examine, and make sense of their intersectional experiences. His father was in jail for possession with a possibility of being released the following year after serving ten years. I often checked in with this young man because two or three of his seven teachers would tell me how he was problematic in classes because he was unengaged.

The teachers pointed out he is mostly respectful, but he does not do anything. This young man, at the time, was an overweight Black male. He was always well dressed and had a clean high-top cut. One day I sent a pass for him, per the usual, but he did not show up. So, I went looking for him in his next hour only to find he was not in class. During the next passing period I hung out in the halls so I could catch one of his friends. When I caught up with the friend, I was informed that he was suspended from school because a White student punched him in the face, and he punched the White student back. The young man who was informing me also indicated

that the White student was in school today. When I heard this story, I was confused and dismayed, however I made sure to smile to the young man and thank him for the information.

I went back to my office and pulled up the discipline report for the Black student and it stated he received two days of Out of School Suspension (OSS). I then pulled up the discipline referral for the White student in the altercation to which it read half day of ISS. I was overcome with lots of emotions ranging from anger, confusion, and even sadness. I decided to document my findings and follow up with the Black student upon his return.

When the day came for the student to return to school, I arrived early and was in the hallway waiting to see him. I was eager to talk with him, and I wanted him to tell me something that I could not read in his discipline referral. I pulled him out of passing period, right after the first bell. I greeted him with a smile and told him I was happy he was here. I then asked him in a joking matter: *"Did you get suspended or were you sick?"* I knew I was not supposed to ask a guided question as a school counselor, but I really wanted him to tell me something other than what I had been told. He said, *"Mrs. Cheeks I know you know."* I replied, *"Baby I only know what you tell me, so tell me."* He told me he was in the back of the class with his friends, they were laughing, and the kid must have thought they were laughing at him because he got up out of his chair and punched him in the face. I then asked him, *"Well son, were you talking about him?"* He said, *"No, Mrs. Cheeks. We were laughing at our friend 'cause he likes this girl and has no chance."* I asked where the teacher was when he got punched and he said at the front of the class.

The Black student looked down and held his hands and uttered, *"Mrs. Cheeks I **promise** you I tried to let it go but I just couldn't."* The student stated after he got punched, he remained seated, but as he sat there, he thought about what his single mom taught him:

“Don’t let nobody put their hands on you. You have to stand up for yourself.”

So, the Black student stated after about five minutes he got up and punched the White student, and he fell out of his chair and broke his glasses. The teacher started yelling for the Black student to go to the office.

I was quiet, trying to give the story time to linger in the air. He held his head down and said, *“Mrs. Cheeks I already know.”* I replied, *“know what?”* He responded:

“I know that White boy didn’t get suspended.”

My heart sank. There was a time I would have hoped that even though my heart sunk my face would have seemed to display an unbiased countenance in the conversation, but clearly my face or my body language read sadness or heartbreak because that little Black student tried to console me. The little Black boy who was physically assaulted in school with a teacher present and then was suspended because he acted out of the trauma he had seen in his lifetime. He tried to console me by saying:

“It’s okay Mrs. Cheeks; this is just how the world works.

White kids can do whatever they want but we Black kids can’t.”

This comment still hurts me at my core. This student was in 7th grade at the time. But his response sounded like he had given up on a fair chance at life because the world already hated him just because he was Black.

What this young man was talking about is cultural racism. Cultural racism is noticing how some communities and culture are treated and regarded versus how other communities and cultures are treated and regarded. Cultural racism questions which group characteristics are valued, and who is seen as valuable and not valuable in society (Lee & Hicken, 2018).

The curriculum that is void of cultural responsiveness impacts academic achievement (Morris, 2016), warranting trite references to the “achievement gap,” in relation to Black students. This can be seen in the literature that some scholars claim to be riveting but to students of color it is just a harsh reminder of how they differ from their peers.

According to Burkard, Martinez, & Holtz (2009), current problems in education stem from social inequality among ethnic/racial and socioeconomic groups. They suggest that school counselors take a systemic approach to increasing academic equity and access to empowering educational opportunities for all students. Bryan, Kim, and Liu (2023) agree, recommending that school counseling programs facilitate greater proficiency in college and career development for African American girls, through advisement on appropriate course work and by facilitating a college-going culture that benefits both students and families (Burkard et al., 2009). Notably, Carter Andrews et al. (2019) listened to Black high school girls who asserted that their schools did not sufficiently prepare them for careers and/or higher education. Trauma and mental health issues in Black adolescent girls often go unaddressed (Carter Andrews et al., 2019), as many urban schools are under resourced and take a triage approach to addressing issues that are not immediately pressing. In these cases, student achievement levels suffer. Rosenthal & Rosnow (2009) sought connections between mental health and educational outcomes using metrics that included depression, self-esteem, school bonding and mastery. Findings revealed an inverse

relationship between mental health problems and academic achievement, meaning higher mental health occurrences were connected to lower achievement levels.

The Effects of Trauma

The feeling of disbelief is a common experience for me, as I often encounter it when reporting instances of racist comments and microaggressions within predominantly White educational institutions. The scenario I described earlier is just one example of microaggression. These types of incidents are known as racial microaggressions, which can be brief and frequently occurring verbal, behavioral, or environmental insults, whether deliberate or unintentional, that convey negative, derogatory, or hostile racial attitudes towards individuals of color (Williams, Skinta, & Martin-Willett, 2021). The harmful impact of microaggressions on African Americans can be understood through Nietzsche's concept of "active forgetting" and its contribution to the recognition of the damaging effects of collective trauma on cultural identity (p. 1). According to Aydin (2017), severe trauma can have a significant impact on a person's memory and their ability to forget certain experiences. Trauma can also disrupt the balance between what is known or remembered from the past and what is new or unknown. Additionally, it can disrupt the organization of one's thoughts and memories, which can have an impact on the way a culture or society operates.

Understanding trauma and the effects of it, I often wonder about the true reason why my eldest daughter, Tiana, claims to dislike Brooke, considering that trauma can lead a person to forget their experiences. Brooke is a girl who my daughter will see around town from time to time. When Brooke sees Tiana in public, she comes up to her and engages with her, and sometimes she will linger in conversation. Every time Brooke walks away Tiana expresses her disdain for Brooke. It goes something like this.

Brooke: *"Hey Tiana"!*

Tiana: *"Hey Brooke."*

Brooke: *"What are you doing here?!"*

Tiana: *"Nothing just out with my mom."*

Brooke: *"Me too! Are you going to the game later?"*

Tiana: *"No"*

Brooke: *"I am you should come."*

Tiana: *"No thanks."*

Brooke: *"Alright see you!"*

Tiana: *"Bye."*

Tiana typically turns to me and says I can't stand her (yep, every time as if she is telling me she does not like this girl for the first time). One time I asked Tiana why she did not like Brooke, and she said, *"I don't really know it's just something about her."* What I have not reminded Tiana about is when she was five, she was riding the bus home from school with Brooke and Brooke told Tiana:

"You're Black and I'm White and I am better than you."

Tiana came home and told me, and I told her not to listen to Brooke and it was probably something her mom told Brooke. Although the truth was, I was petrified at the thought that Brooke interpreted a lesson at school as White children are better than Black children. Brooke ended up moving away at the end of the year and has been back in town for the last three years, saying *"hi"* to Tiana every chance she gets. As Tiana's mother it is my job to protect her. Does

protection look like reminding Tiana of the negative interaction with Brooke? Or, is protecting Tiana listening to her disdain for Brooke every time they have an encounter?

McGee & Stovall (2015), critical race theorists, recognize that racism and discrimination adversely affect the mental health of students and faculty by diminishing their academic self-concept, and confidence in mental efficacy. Peer victimization can significantly and negatively impact youth's development (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015), and patterns of adjustment for those experiencing victimization have been shown to differ depending on whether victims are identified through self-reports or peer-reports (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

Cultural Trauma

Cultural trauma is a condition or syndrome which occurs when an individual or group has been exposed to an unbearable event or experience that threatens their sense of being, group identity, ethnicity, values meaning, beliefs and purpose, or their cultural worldviews. At the most fundamental level, cultural worldviews provide people with a sense of meaning and value, thereby assuaging existential anxiety (Halloran, 2019; Henderson et al., 2019; Murty & Vyas, 2017). Individuals can develop trauma-induced disorders when they encounter secondary trauma through witnessing or the retelling of the event (Henderson et al., 2019). The question is whether the effects of environmental challenges endured by a parent may be displayed or inherited by the offspring despite the children, themselves, not encountering the same challenges? The effect of this opposition is cultural trauma in which people who suffered a dramatic loss of meaning, identity, and value, would be associated with anxiety-laden thoughts and behavior; ultimately leading to poor health and social outcomes (Halloran, 2019; Henderson et al., 2019). McMullen & Luborsky (2006) define identities as the fluid outcomes of ongoing processes that link personal meanings and cultural discourses. Racial identity is as important as self-esteem to the

mental health of African American adolescents, and it explains variance in their mental health associated with feelings of oneself as an individual (Henderson et al., 2019; Mandara et al., 2009; McMullen & Luborsky, 2006). With the commonalities of trauma, racism, and cultural trauma found in these articles the question of did slavery have an impact on African Americans begins to form. For if slavery did have an impact on African Americans what did it look like?

I can recall, in elementary school, learning about slavery. I can remember being the only Black student in class, looking at Black people in the history book shackled and chained. I remember seeing the slaves' expressions of sorrow, the outlining of their bones showing through their skin due to hunger and mistreatment. Their hair unkept. And, I remember thinking, *"Is this me?" Are these my family members? Is this what it is to be Black?* The lesson portrayed Blacks in a negative light, poor and less than the White people based on their skin color. I remember this sense of confusion as I was trying to identify with the lesson, but the feeling of fear took over. For me to connect with this lesson, I would have to identify with the slaves because those were the people who looked like me. Their pain and their struggles shown in the pictures, and the teacher explaining the hardships of the slaves, was overwhelming. As I sat in class a sense of loneliness settled in. I did not want to be a part of the pain in the books. I did not want to connect with the deprivation, destitution, and poverty the slaves were enduring; so I decided I must not be Black. This notion of not identifying as Black would follow me into adulthood. It would stay with me until the death of George Floyd when I abruptly realized it does not matter how I identify myself, the world around me will only see me as a threat, less than, and Black, which equates to less than, and a threat.

Slavery and the Lasting Impact on African Americans

Slavery has significantly affected African American people as it relates to trauma. This trauma has been carried forward through successive generations, providing an explanation of their current anxiety, related conditions, poor health, and maladaptive behaviors (Halloran, 2019). Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is a theory that explains the etiology, or cause, of many of the adaptive survival behaviors in African American communities throughout the United States, behaviors learned due to the environment individuals found themselves in. These behaviors were developed to keep said individuals and their loved ones alive. PTSS is a condition that exists because of multigenerational oppression of Africans and their descendants, resulting from centuries of chattel, or possessive, slavery (DeGruy, 2017). Chattel slavery is a form of slavery which was based or predicated on the belief that African Americans were inherently, or genetically, inferior to Whites. The belief that slaves, and Black people, were less than White people was then followed by institutionalized racism which continues to perpetuate and injure Black people.

Institutionalized racism still shows its face in my life in many ways. As an example, my family moved to a different town in Kansas. When we moved, we were looking for a house, so we reached out to a local realtor in the town, named Dan. We told Dan our budget and that we didn't want to go over. We were in constant communication with the realtor. One beautiful Saturday morning, we had a lineup of four houses to go see. They were 50-year-old houses in an area which seemed as though it could use some community love as the houses were older and worn. The houses were on streets where the yards were unkept and the panels of the houses seemed to be deteriorating.

And all of the houses we saw on that day were about 50 to \$60,000 under our budget, which was a good thing. My husband, knowing that I didn't love the houses that we were being shown took it upon himself to start looking for different houses. He found a house that was \$30,000 under our budget in a newer part of town and that was fairly close to new developments and a central shopping area. Needless to say, the house was gorgeous and just 10 years old. The house had been on the market for at least three weeks. Knowing that the house had been on the market during the same time we initially started looking for a house prompted my husband on our next meeting with Dan to ask why he did not show us the houses on the newer side of town. Dan looked my husband in the eyes and simply said, "I did not want to go over budget." To which my husband stated, "This house is in our budget as well, so why didn't you show us this house?" It should be noted that this house was in a White community. The other houses that our realtor initially showed us was in a community where our neighbors would have been people of color.

After the meeting with Dan my husband called our realtor from our previous town, Johnathan, and told him about our disdain with Dan. Jonathan stated he could still represent us in finding a house even though he did not live in the town we were looking to reside. Johnathan was a Black man himself and had a good understanding of the hidden rules of the real estate business. He reached out to Anne, who was the realtor for the house we were interested in, and Johnathan shared with Anne our struggles in being shown houses. Johnathan told Anne on the phone over the speaker:

Johnathan: *"Hello, I have a young family here who are interested in your house on Meadows Lane."*

Anne: *"Oh yeah that's a great house it's only been on the market for about three weeks."*

We have had some traffic on that house so I do not think it will be on the market much longer.”

Johnathan: *“Oh yeah? Well, I have a family here who are interested. It would seem Dan from your office did not show the family this house and they were a little concerned about why that would be.”*

Anne: *“Well, I don’t know why either.”*

After several conversations between Anne, Jonathan, my husband, and myself, it came time to close on the gorgeous house on Meadows Lane. It was then, on closing day, Anne explained:

“You know I remember you asking why Dan didn’t show you guys this house at first. And I wanted to make sure that I let you know it is because we don’t have a lot of people of color on this side of town. Now I’m not saying anything bad about your soon to be neighbors, but I wanted to make sure that I at least offered you an explanation of why Dan did not think to show you this house.”

This personal experience highlights the pervasive and insidious nature of institutionalized racism that continues to affect Black individuals and families seeking housing opportunities, which only adds to the trauma and subtle discriminatory nature towards Blacks. The selective showing of houses only in predominantly Black neighborhoods, while overlooking affordable and attractive options in predominantly White communities, is a clear manifestation of how historical beliefs about the inferiority of Black people have seeped into contemporary practices.

As I reflect on this experience, it becomes evident that the legacy of historical discrimination against Black people persists even today. After this experience I was left with a

feeling of not being wanted or accepted in their White community. The feeling of unwanted or less than is a feeling that can be a lasting one which makes situations and stories like this traumatic. After examining the housing communities suggested by the realtor for our family, a disquieting sense of unease and insecurity enveloped us. It felt as though a White man was dictating where, we a Black family belonged. This experience left a lasting impression of worthlessness, evoking emotions that resurface in similar situations. This is how trauma starts, bad situations having a lasting effect. Halloran (2019) conveys trauma has been carried forward through successive generations, providing an explanation of their current anxiety, related conditions, poor health, and maladaptive behaviors.

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome

Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome (PTSS) is a theory proposed by Dr. Joy DeGruy in 2005, which describes a set of behaviors, beliefs, and emotions that are commonly experienced by African Americans as a result of historical and intergenerational trauma. The theory suggests that the psychological impact of slavery has been passed down from generation to generation and continues to affect the mental health and well-being of African Americans today (DeGruy, 2017). PTSS is believed to be the result of multi-generational trauma, which has been experienced by African Americans since the time of slavery. The trauma includes physical abuse, sexual exploitation, and forced labor, as well as the institutionalized racism and discrimination that has continued since slavery was abolished (DeGruy, 2017). The theory suggests that this trauma has resulted in a range of psychological and behavioral symptoms that are commonly experienced by African Americans, including low self-esteem, depression, anxiety, anger, and self-destructive behaviors. According to Dr. DeGruy, PTSS is a result of a complex interplay of factors, including historical trauma, oppression, and institutionalized

racism. She argues that African Americans have been subjected to a range of social, economic, and political barriers, which have prevented them from achieving full equality and freedom (DeGruy, 2017). These barriers have also led to a range of negative health outcomes, including higher rates of chronic diseases, mental health disorders, and mortality rates. PTSS is a theory that highlights the ongoing impact of historical and intergenerational trauma on African American communities. By acknowledging and understanding the impact of this trauma, there is hope that steps can be taken to address the ongoing inequalities and injustices that continue to affect African Americans today in education.

Adverse Childhood Experiences

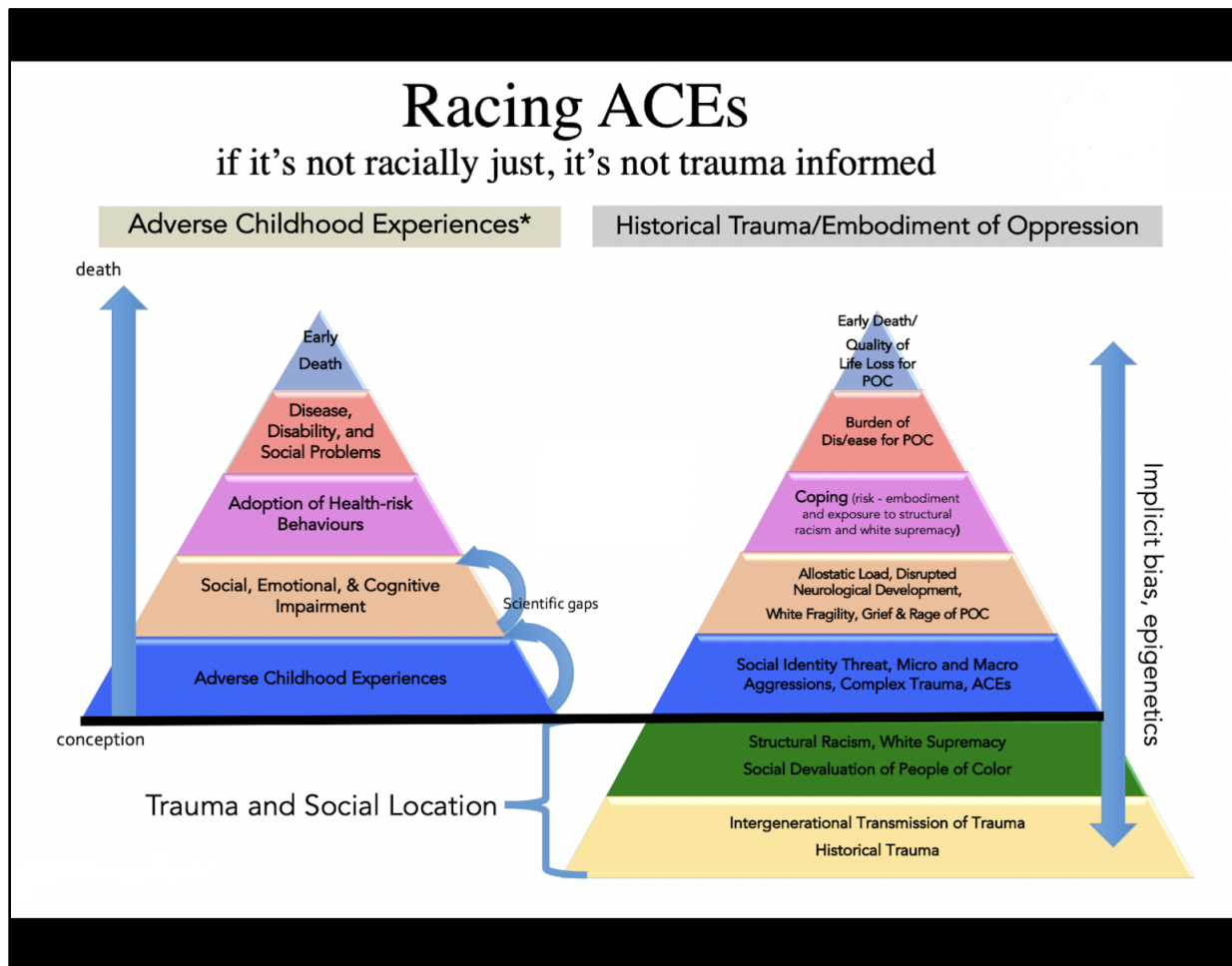
Slavery was the economic cornerstone on which American wealth and power were built - wealth and power - which has lasted to this day, as do the psychosocial consequences of American slavery both for the descendants of the enslaved as well as the descendants of the enslavers (Robinson, 2020). Adverse childhood experiences, such as violence, family psychopathology, or parent death, can have negative effects on lifelong physical and mental health, including learning/behavioral problems (Henderson et al., 2019; Slopen et al., 2016). Wilder (2015), a sociologist, illustrates the diverse ways that color still matters, highlighting its impacts on individual identities and everyday lives - an important contribution to existing understandings of colorism.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) are stressful or traumatic events that occur during childhood, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse, neglect, household dysfunction (such as parental substance abuse or mental illness), and exposure to violence (Anda, 1999). Dr. Vincent Felitti and Dr. Robert Anda, the developers of the ACEs Study, have shown that

exposure to ACEs can have a negative impact on physical and mental health outcomes later in life, such as increased risk for chronic diseases, mental health disorders, and substance abuse. The original study was conducted between 1995 and 1997 and there were over 17,000 participants who received health benefits or checkups in South California. It was in this study where the lead study author Dr. Vincent Felitti found that certain adverse experiences were common in children (Shin et al. 2023). Additionally, ACEs can also impact social, cognitive, and emotional development, and may affect an individual's ability to form healthy relationships and cope with stress (Anda, 1999). It is important to note that not all individuals who experience ACEs will have negative outcomes, and there are protective factors that can mitigate the effects of ACEs, such as a supportive family or community environment, access to mental health services, and positive coping skills.

Figure 2.1 below shows that trauma is historical, structural, and political. This image displays the scientific gaps and the impacts of trauma embodied across generations. There are differentiated responses. White communities are validated, empathized, given resources, while communities of color are shamed, question, ignored, stigmatized, and criminalized (Dhaliwal, 2016).

Figure 2.1. *Racing ACEs*



Literature on Black Female Counselors

Demographic data from a survey administered by the American School Counselor Association (2021) found the majority (77%) of respondents identify as white while 10% identify as Black or African American, 5% as Latinx, and 3% as belonging to two or more racial backgrounds. A smaller percentage, approximately 1%, identify as Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, with 4% preferring not to disclose their race (American School Counselor Association, 2021). Regarding gender, the survey indicates that 87% of respondents are female, 11% are male, and less than 1% identify as nonbinary/third gender, with 2% choosing not to disclose their gender identity (American School Counselor Association, 2021). In terms of sexual orientation, the majority, over 90%, identify as heterosexual, while 2% identify as gay or lesbian, 2% as bisexual, and less than 1% as having a different sexual identity. Additionally, 5% of respondents preferred not to disclose their sexual orientation (American School Counselor Association, 2021).

Regarding age demographics, 38% of respondents were aged 40 or younger, 31% were between 41 and 50, 24% were between 51 and 60, and 6% were aged 61 or older. Similarly, tenure as school counselors varies, with 20% having worked for five or fewer years, 22% for 6–10 years, 18% for 11–15 years, 14% for 16–20 years, and 18% for 20 or more years (American School Counselor Association, 2021).

Black females account for many college degree recipients among Black college graduates in the U.S. The National Center for Education Statistics (2023) reported in 2020-21 that 63 percent of Black females earned associate degrees, 59 percent earned bachelor's degrees, 65 percent earned a master's, and 58 percent earned a doctorate. As for college students who decided to go beyond getting a bachelor's, reports showed that in Fall 2021, some 3.2 million

Black students were enrolled at the postbaccalaureate level programs in the U.S. in 2021 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). Even though there is an increase in minorities pursuing degrees in higher education, specifically African Americans, these degrees are most often obtained from predominantly White institutions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

The Education Trust (EdTrust) is a non-profit organization in the United States that advocates for educational equity and promotes high academic achievement for all students, particularly those who have been historically underserved. Founded in 1996, the Education Trust works to close opportunity and achievement gaps that exist based on race, ethnicity, income, or other factors. They conduct research, provide policy analysis, and offer resources and tools to educators, policymakers, and advocates to advance equity in education. The organization's mission is to ensure that all students, regardless of background, have access to high-quality education and opportunities for success. EdTrust's digital report interviewed Black, Latino, and Asian American students enrolled at predominantly White institutions (PWIs) across 15 states to gain a deeper understanding of their campus experiences. These students voiced frustrations regarding the lack of representation among students of color and faculty, coupled with administrators' shortcomings in acknowledging, reporting, and addressing instances of microaggressions, racism, or discrimination (Cross, 2023). This frustration is a concept and feeling that I too have experienced.

I was pursuing my masters in counseling and was taking a course which focused on group work. This course focused on the benefits of working in a group by not only teaching it but also assigning projects where the class would break into small groups and work on projects to present to the whole class. I recall being the only Black student in class, which was normal to

me, but as we were working on a project that was designed to encourage students to stay in school, one of my White peers suggested we play some Kenny G and include a clip from Seinfeld to make connections with students. My group loved this idea and they quickly started changing our power point to start including these changes. I sat there saying nothing because I did not feel comfortable in the group to *“speak my truth.”* My truth was: *“I had no idea who Kenny G was (at the time I thought he was a member of the KISS rock band I also have never heard the KISS band), and I had never seen a single episode of Seinfeld (I still have not).”*

This truth made me wonder if our goal was to appeal to students, would any Black students be able to relate to the material? With this question in mind, I decided to say something to my group. When I told my group I had no idea who Kenny G was and asked if he was a member of the KISS group, they laughed at me and stated, *“how do you not know Kenny G?”* I wanted to be snarky and ask them did they knew who Kirk Franklin was, but I did not. I also did not say I have never seen Seinfeld. At that point I felt singled out and misunderstood. I did reach out to my professor at the time and asked if I could be placed in another group because I did not feel comfortable, but I was denied. My professor told me that it was important for me to stay because I had so much to offer the group. To my disdain I stayed but when we received our grade for our presentation the comment my professor made on our paper was: *“This is a solid presentation, but it seems one sided. I wonder if students from different backgrounds can relate to this presentation.”* We earned a 90 on the presentation. As someone who has always taken education and grades seriously, I was pissed, and until recently I hadn’t had the words or confidence to push back on these experiences. But this ongoing engagement with the literature connecting to Black students seeking higher education, allows me to better understand my journey from counselor to DEIB leader.

To effectively address issues such as the story I shared above, the literature suggests that counselor education programs should ensure that they are supporting Black student success during training and employment as counselor educators is crucial (Brooks et al., 2023). Research also highlights various barriers that contribute to the low number of tenured Black female counselor education faculty. These barriers include experiences of racism, discrimination, discouragement of publishing ideas, racial and gender bias, and limited availability of tenure positions (Branch Hall, 2021). It is important to highlight and learn from the experiences of successful Black female counselor educators who have overcome these barriers. Similar to American society, the world of academia is dominated by a White racial majority. According to Shaw and Stanton (2012), “women and many racial and ethnic minorities are underrepresented in academia relative to their proportion in the general population” (p. 373). Many Black and other minority students enter predominantly White schools and districts with the possibility of there being no minority faculty (Holcomb-McCoy & Addison-Bradley, 2005). Given this lack of representation, it is essential to understand the developmental experiences of these students during adolescence, as defined by (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014)

Rivas-Drake et al. (2014) defines adolescence as the phase of life where children undergo biological, cognitive, and psychosocial changes that transition them from childhood to adulthood. This period is often fraught with challenges, leaving adolescents vulnerable to stressors as they navigate the path from childhood to adulthood. Evans-Winters (2019) introduced the terms "at-risk" and "high-need" to describe the social, emotional, and academic fragility of adolescents. When referring to Black adolescent girls, the term "marginalized" is also appropriate, as they are often considered "Other" due to their history of being defined by deficit-laden, essentialist stereotypes stemming from chattel slavery, which deprives them of their

innocence and rarely portrays them positively (Joseph, 2012). As a result, numerous studies indicate that Black girls regularly encounter oppressive experiences related to race and gender during adolescence, especially in urban schools in America (e.g., Bryant et al., 2005). Moreover, a range of complex issues further affects their experiences in school.

Morris & Harris-Perry (2018) explore the ways in which Black girls are unfairly and disproportionately punished in American schools, highlighting statistical data and research on the mistreatment of Black girls within the educational system. This underscores the urgent need for intervention. The American School Counselor Association (American School Counselor Association, 2022) mandates that as advocates, school counselors play key roles in supporting the socioemotional needs of all students, particularly those who are subjected to inequitable school practices. By integrating these mandates into their practice, school counselors can actively address the challenges faced by Black girls and work towards creating a more equitable learning environment for all students. The historical and cultural factors that contribute to the mistreatment of Black girls in the education system, include racism, sexism, and the devaluation of Black girls' lives and experiences (Morris & Harris-Perry, 2018). Researchers argue that Black girls are often pushed out of school and marginalized because society doesn't understand or value them (Cheng & Lo, 2015; Collins, 2000; Morris, 2016; Morris & Harris-Perry, 2018). This happens to Black women too, no matter their age or where they work.

As a Black woman who is an educator, researcher, and trainer for teachers, I have had, and still have, many different roles in educational spaces that are influenced by race and gender, just like Black girls in elementary, middle, and high school. For this reason, one might conclude that Black female school counselors possess an intimate understanding of the systemic

oppression of Black adolescents through their own lived experiences and an innate advantage in developing empathy for Black students.

To further explore the experiences of Black female school counselors working with Black girls in education, I am reminded of an encounter with one of my Black female students. It was just another day in the life of a Black female counselor when a Black female student came to my office. She appeared mad and irritated. I had visited this student several times before, so I had a rather good relationship with her and her mother. As this young lady sat in my office, I could see the emotion that was illuminating more than any other was anger. I closed my door and asked, *“What’s wrong baby?”* She instantly raised her voice stating how two White boys were talking, and one of them called her a nigger. I listened to her describe the situation and walk me through what happened. She went on to say how much she hated the school and how she did not like any of the students in school.

I allowed the student to vent and talk through her frustrations. As I was listening, I thought I was going to be able to help the student disassociate from the word which she felt so offended by. As she was slowing down in her rant, I saw an opening for me to speak so I began with, *“So why are you so upset?”* She responded with, *“They called me a nigger.”* Looking back the student wanted me to relate to her. The young lady wanted me to share in her pain, understanding the utterly disgusting way the term nigger can make a Black person feel as though they are less than a human being. Rather than relate with her I simply responded with,

“Then baby you need to not allow yourself to be moved by the word nigger.”

I told her, *“When I hear the word nigger I instantly start to look around because I had to learn at an early age if I cannot get past the rude comments of others, I will not be able to succeed in this world.”* The young lady just sat there in silence. I wanted to be mad with her, and let her know the student was wrong and encourage her to get her mom to request a meeting with the principal, but there was this struggle within me saying:

“No one is going to understand.

This issue will be swept under the rug, she has no proof, so she needs to move past this.”

She was deeply hurt, but I did not know how to make her feel better. I told her what I thought would help her succeed in the world, drawing from what I had been conditioned to believe through my education in a whitewashed education system. But, I did not tell her what would help her stand up for herself. I did not tell her what she needed to know as a soon to be Black woman. I did not even tell her that she had a right to be treated with kindness. Because of the lack of representation, understanding, advocacy, and empowerment through education and educators in my own educational experience I failed to operate these tenets. Thereby I operated out of protocol. I asked, *“did anyone hear it?”* She said, *“the coach did.”* But, when I asked the coach about it, he said, *“No I did not hear that.”* This meant I had to let the young lady know the school would not reprimand the students. She asked me if I believed her and I told her, *“Of course,”* but I could see that was not enough.

This situation is an example where I struggled to effectively counsel a Black female in a predominantly White environment where she experienced a clash of racial identity. In my personal reflections, I have contemplated the internal struggle faced by individuals torn between

reacting to harmful actions toward their race and responding in a manner deemed acceptable by White society. It is evident that not all White society truly comprehends how racist ideology and tactics can be debilitating to people of color. For the student, the interaction with her peers was insulting and painful. Undoubtedly, it will be an event she carries with her into adulthood and will quite possibly be internalized. When she came to me, she hoped I would commiserate in her experience; instead I asked her to not to associate with her color or the struggles of her ancestors' history who struggled so she could have the same right to an education as her White peers. I burdened her by implying that she should disassociate with a word that has caused the Black community pain for hundreds of years.

The truth is, I wish I could have shared with her my struggle and my true feelings. Telling her being called a nigger is degrading and when it comes from your peers it stings worse. I wish I could have understood how past trauma affects students. This young lady was coming to a predominately White school from Louisiana, where as a Black she was not the minority. I also wonder if when she told me she didn't have any friends, was she saying she did not see anyone who looked like her? Was it possible she and her mother had some sort of a connection with me because we are all Black? If nothing else, maybe at least our race would convey a shared understanding of the struggle? Regardless, my response still follows me, and I've internalized it.

There is an internalized component of racism that exists and operates at the internalized level (David et al., 2019). Internalized racism may be defined as "The individual idea of the racist stereotypes, values, images, and ideologies perpetuated by the White dominant society about one's racial group, leading to feelings of self-doubt, disgust, and disrespect for one's race and/or oneself" (Pyke, 2010, p. 553). Simply stated, internalized racism is when an individual

believes the things, mostly negative that have been said about their own group. For example, my wanting to disassociate myself from identifying as Black because through education, media, and early life I have mostly seen Blacks portrayed in a negative light.

Black Leaders Working in Predominantly White Environments

The landmark Supreme Court ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* significantly affected Black teachers and Black leaders during the subsequent desegregation process (Stokes, 1999). According to Warren (1954), *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) was a Supreme Court case in which the justices ruled unanimously that racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional (Tillman, 2004). The dismantling of segregated school systems resulted in the widespread loss of employment opportunities for Black teachers, who faced numerous barriers in securing new positions. Discriminatory practices and policies during the transition to integrated schools often led to the dismissal of Black educators, leading to a depletion of Black teachers and leaders within the educational system (Stokes, 1999). The expertise and contributions of Black teachers were devalued during the desegregation process. Integration efforts frequently marginalized Black educators, denying them opportunities for professional advancement and recognition. Decision-making processes favored White educators and leadership, perpetuating racial inequalities and silencing the voices of Black teachers and leaders (Tillman, 2004). The effects of *Brown v. Board of Education* on Black educators have endured over time. Black teachers continue to face ongoing challenges in finding employment and navigating integrated school environments. Persistent barriers and systemic biases hinder their professional advancement, contributing to the underrepresentation of Black teachers and leaders in the educational system.

The experiences of Black educators during desegregation highlight the need for a comprehensive understanding of the impact of desegregation on Black leadership (Tillman, 2004). By recognizing the systemic challenges, employment losses, and marginalization faced by Black educators, it becomes evident that addressing the ongoing disparities in the educational system requires a joint effort to empower and support Black teachers and Black leaders.

Within the current national context of increased attention to equity and social justice, Black women persistently navigate a climate that perpetuates stigmatization based on race and gender (Williams & Wiggins, 2010). Traditional leadership theory, shaped predominantly by White male perspectives, presumes the relevance of White male ideas and positions of formal authority as the standard for leadership (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Existing leadership literature on women primarily revolves around White women, neglecting the crucial intersectionality of race and racism (Bell, 1992; Ospina & Foldy, 2009). When race is considered, research frequently portrays leaders of color as illegitimate when compared to their White counterparts, viewing them as anomalies devoid of knowledge or theorizing abilities (Ospina & Foldy, 2009). Consequently, within the realms of preparation, practice, and research, the experiences and contributions of Black women and other marginalized groups remain absent from the literature (Alston, 2000).

The practical leadership qualities embodied by Black women in the field of educational leadership are frequently underappreciated. I personally experienced this undervaluation when I began working as a school counselor at a high school in Kansas. Established in 1863, this high school had never before employed a Black female counselor until my appointment. This milestone was not publicly acknowledged within the predominantly White community, but I

only learned of it a few months later while attending St. John's Missionary Baptist Church, a prominent Black church in Salina known as a pillar of the Black community.

Within the Black community, parents of students who attended this high school often expressed their happiness and the importance of my presence in the school. They would share words of appreciation, gratitude, and encouragement, noting me as a leader and inspiration for other young Black people, and recognizing me as a leader and a source of inspiration for other young Black individuals. These positive affirmations were a common occurrence, reflecting the strong support and value placed on my role by Black parents and students. However, it was uncommon to receive such praise and encouragement from White parents or my White colleagues. While they did occasionally express their appreciation, it was not as frequent or effortless as it was from the Black community. I surely was never told by any of my White colleagues that they perceived me as a leader in any capacity.

As a Black woman my perspectives and approaches to power differ from those of male leaders, as women tend to prioritize the betterment of the organization over self-interest (Alston & McClellan, 2011). I am confident in this assertion because in May of 2015, the school statistics for Metropolitan Heights High School indicated a graduation rate of 100% for Black females and 98% for Black males. These graduation rates were presented to the staff of Metropolitan Heights High School during a staff meeting in August of 2015. I remember because as I was smiling ear to ear a biracial colleague turned to me and said:

“Girl that was all you!”

At that time, I imagine my chest was sticking out in pride for those young people and overwhelmed with thinking of myself as a leader to my students, displaying my identity as a Black woman with an education and a career. In that moment when the stats were being read by the principal, I started believing the comments and accolades from the parents of my Black students and other adults from the Black community. However, looking back, I wonder what my White colleagues thought of those numbers or if they even made the connection of how representation matters.

The historical devaluation, misrepresentation, and exclusion of Black women's experiences have persisted for generations (Jean-Marie et al., 2009). A significant underrepresentation of Black women in education is still present within the education system (Alston, 2000). This limited narrative and the lack of contextually relevant analysis have hindered the identification of alternative solutions for children of color within the United States (Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Only recently have Black women been acknowledged as a source of knowledge in leadership research (Alston & McClellan, 2011).

While more women are assuming positions of power within education, as principals and superintendents, African American women (who are typically principals) as educational leaders disproportionately find themselves placed in urban schools grappling with various challenges, including limited resources, uncertified teachers, and persistent student underachievement (Alston, 2000; Bass, 2012; Brown, 2005; Hopson et al., 2010). Even with formal or positional power, Black women leaders often encounter obstacles designed to impede their ability to sustain their leadership roles (Jackson-Dunn, 2018). Nonetheless, despite these mass challenges, Black women persist in meeting the demands of educational leadership more often as principals and superintendents (Alston, 2000; Jackson-Dunn, 2018).

Connecting back to previous sections in this chapter, in reading articles and dissertations, a common concept/idea has emerged. Race is a social construct which has no basis in science. However, trauma is the major commonality within these articles. Race related trauma is multi-level (Henderson et al., 2019). Evidence shows racial/ethnic and socio-economic patterning and childhood adversity in the US, yet data on the interaction of race/ethnicity and SES for exposure risk is limited, particularly with consideration of immigration history (Slopen et al., 2016). It is likely African Americans are burdened by a past that lingers on in their cultural psyche (DeGruy, 2017). Building upon the understanding that historical trauma and its contemporary manifestations can deeply affect individuals and communities, it is important to explore the role of spirituality in helping individuals cope with and heal from these experiences.

Relevant Theory and Frameworks for this Autoethnographic Project

Incorporating theoretical frameworks is vital for conducting critical autoethnography. Within this section I will describe the significance of various theories and frameworks such as Black motherhood/Black feminist, Critical Race Theory, Intersectionality, Counter-Storytelling, White Guilt, Glasser Theory, Courageous Conversations, and Robert Dilts' logical levels. These rich and diverse theories and frameworks serve as a roadmap for guiding this dissertation. While all of these inform this dissertation in some manner, not all of them were operationalized in the methodology as you will read in Chapter 3. Yet, they still offer valuable insights and contribute to shaping the foundation of this autoethnography.

Black Motherhood and Black Feminism

Throughout my career I have seen many Black women show up to the school building to discuss concerns they have about their child's treatment and education. I am Black, like the student and the mother, I see the mother's disdain for the situation, and I observe her love and

compassion for her child. I see the mother as a champion for her child, and I see her child as a Black child who is looking for an educator to be able to relate to his or her situation and without having a support system within education. I see and identify why the mother may look like a mad Black woman to others who do not understand her pain, or her child's struggle. However, just as I have observed the Black woman's pain in advocating for her child, I have also watched as angry White women show up to school buildings to complain about situations their children are in. I have noticed that although both Black and White mothers show up to support their child, both with elevated tones, only the Black mother gets labeled as the 'mad Black woman,' while the White woman's situation is referred to as the reason for the parent's visit to the building today. Pushing back against these stereotypes that shape how I am received, and before I transition to the literature on Black motherhood and feminism, I want to offer a story that highlights my commitment to care and love through parenthood. But simultaneously, this also illustrates what motivates me to confront situations that put my children in danger of experiencing racially charged trauma – situations where I might then be perceived as an angry Black woman.

I was picking up my then, 9-year-old girl, Caylee, from gymnastics. I was attending a class virtually so when I was picking her up I was not able to go inside. I waited in the car while participating in class. Caylee climbed into our White truck. She was in the back seat, and I was in the driver's seat. We made eye contact and I proceeded to drive. As I shifted the gear from park to drive, I looked over my shoulder and noticed my daughter looking at her hands as though something was wrong. I was muted in the class, so I asked, "*what's wrong?*" as I park the car. Caylee replied, "*nothing.*" So, I shifted the gear into drive. Once again, I looked back and saw

Caylee looking at her hands as though something was wrong or as if she was trying to understand something. I parked the car yet again and asked,

“What’s wrong.”

She again said, *“Nothing.”*

I placed my hand on the gear shift, and I looked at her in the rearview mirror, and I saw my baby looking at her hands yet again. I took my hands off the gear shift and turned all the way around and, now in a louder voice as I was concerned and confused, said, *“Caylee what’s wrong! Tell me! Please!”* Caylee said, reluctantly:

“Well, this girl in gymnastics says I am only good at gymnastics because my hands are big, and all Black people have big hands.”

My heart sank. There was this moment of me fighting back tears. As my chest got tight, I found it difficult to breathe and even harder to conceive why a child or anyone would tear my child, Caylee, down to justify why she was better at something than someone else. I was confused and hurt because I almost missed this moment. I almost missed the moment to protect my child and build her up with edifying words that would help her understand her beauty and strength. As a mother I was picking her up from gymnastics; as a Black feminist I was attending a doctoral class in efforts to set an example for my five Black daughters that they can do anything if they simply set their minds to it. Yet, here in this moment, I almost did not see that my daughter needed help to see the beauty and strength that she wielded.

I parked the car, unmuted, and told my professor I would have to leave as I had an issue in my daughter's gymnastics class that needed to be handled. I jumped out of the car with my

heart racing and went to her side of the car and sternly said, “*Let's go!*” Caylee looked at me and asked, “*Where are we going?*” I helped her out of the truck and wrapped my arms around her. I held my baby so tight I lifted her off the ground. In that moment I just wanted her to know she was loved. I told her:

“Baby, there is nothing wrong with your hands and yes you are strong, and your color is not the cause of it. Your color adds to your beauty, and we are going to make sure that little girl and her parents know it.”

Black mothers have been subjected to systemic racism and oppression that has made it more difficult for them to provide for their families and raise their children in a safe and supportive environment (Roberts, 1997). Black feminism, on the other hand, is a social and political movement that seeks to address the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression faced by Black women. Black feminism recognizes the unique experiences of Black women and seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable society that addresses the specific needs and challenges of Black women and other marginalized groups (Cooper, 2015).

Many Black individuals find themselves in the position of having to describe numerous instances of discrimination and even physical attacks that they or their loved ones have experienced. As a Black woman, I often face requests to provide specific examples of racist remarks or actions that have been directed towards myself or those close to me. Unfortunately, these requests are often met with skepticism and a refusal to believe that such incidents could occur. Black Feminist Theory is a theoretical framework that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s as a response to the exclusion of Black women from mainstream feminist movements and the Civil

Rights Movement (Cooper, 2015). The framework aims to address the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black women, as well as the intersections of race, gender, class, and other social identities (Intersectionality is addressed specifically later in this chapter). The theoretical framework of Black Feminist Theory is grounded in the experiences and perspectives of Black women. It recognizes that the experiences of Black women are shaped by multiple and intersecting oppressions, including racism, sexism, and classism. The theory emphasizes the importance of centering the experiences of Black women in analysis and activism and acknowledges the ways in which dominant societal narratives and power structures have historically silenced and marginalized Black women (Cooper, 2015). Black Feminist Theory involves a critical analysis of power relations and social structures. This theory emphasizes the importance of understanding the intersections of race, gender, and other social identities in shaping experiences of oppression and privilege. It encourages a focus on the experiences of marginalized groups and the voices of those who have historically been silenced. Black Feminist Theory has been applied in a variety of fields, including sociology, psychology, and political science (Cooper, 2015). This framework has been used to analyze and critique a wide range of social issues, including gender-based violence, economic inequality, and political representation. This theory encourages a focus on action and activism and emphasizes the importance of engaging in social change efforts that center the experiences and perspectives of Black women.

Throughout history, the perception of Black women in academia has been shaped by external forces, often resulting in misconceptions and stereotypes. However, Black feminist thought encourages us to reclaim our own narratives, rooted in our cultural heritage, and to assert our voices from within rather than as outsiders (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Black women, both in the past and present, have had to navigate the delicate balance between preserving their own

identities while empowering their families (Gregory, 2001). In the early 20th century, African American women in the United States crafted an identity that blended their public and private lives (McDonald, 1997). Although there is no singular or standard experience for Black women, the aim of Black feminist thought is to highlight the shared experiences of intersecting forms of oppression, enabling us to construct a new and empowering self-perception (Bass, 2012).

Common expressions of motherhood include nurture and care (Bass, 2012). Black motherhood refers to the experience of motherhood as lived by Black women. It includes the unique challenges and experiences that come with raising children in a society that is often hostile to Black people, especially Black women, and children. Black motherhood is shaped by historical and ongoing systemic racism, including factors such as limited access to healthcare, housing discrimination, and the over-policing and criminalization of Black communities. Black mothers may also face additional stressors and pressures related to cultural expectations, socioeconomic status, and the intersection of race and gender. Despite these challenges, Black mothers have a long history of resilience, strength, and love in the face of adversity. When I think of Black motherhood, I think of Coretta Scott King who was a prominent civil rights activist and a mother of four children (Krull & Freeman, 2015). She was married to Martin Luther King Jr., who was a leader in the American Civil Rights Movement. Throughout her life, Coretta Scott King was a tireless advocate for racial equality, peace, and social justice (Krull & Freeman, 2015).

As a Black mother, Coretta Scott King faced many challenges, including the constant threat of violence against her family due to their activism. She worked tirelessly to provide a safe and nurturing environment for her children while also fighting for justice and equality for all Black people (Krull & Freeman, 2015). Her advocacy often meant spending long periods of time

away from her children, which was a sacrifice that she made in order to pursue the larger goal of ending systemic racism. Coretta Scott King's legacy as a woman activist and Black mother continues to inspire and empower people today. Her commitment to social justice and her dedication to her family serve as a reminder of the strength and resilience of Black women and mothers in the face of adversity.

Within my own life I am the mother of seven Black children, five girls and two boys. I too know the struggle and experience of motherhood as I live it daily as a Black woman. I understand the unique challenges and experiences that come with raising children in a society that is often hostile to Black people, especially Black women, and children.

I recall taking Caylee to a local basketball game. She was seven at the time. I was sitting in the stands with her siblings as she was dominating the court, scoring, and beating all the others down the court. Number 5, the little girl who was guarding her, was White and struggled to keep up with her. At half time I found out the mother of number 5 was sitting right next to me as she summoned the little girl to come to her. When Number 5 got to her mother there was a conversation that went like this:

Mother: *"Do you have the little Black girl?"*

Number 5: *"Yes!"*

Mother: *"Well, you need to stay with her! Don't just let her keep scoring on you!"*

Number 5: *"Okay!"*

As number 5 started to run back out to the court, she was excited as her two blonde pigtails were bouncing up and down. I remember this distinctly, because I also remember looking at the faces of my children and seeing confusion, anger, and dismay. I remember their faces because it was clear that her skin color was the primary characteristic defining her in the eyes of this other

mother. I applaud mothers encouraging their children to overcome challenges, obviously, but at that very moment I felt as though I had been gut punched. She could have simply referenced her jersey number, but instead called out what makes her obviously different in this predominantly White community. I had no words.

I was confused because when I looked at my 7-year-old daughter Caylee I thought she was fair skinned, and beautiful. I had never actually used the terminology “Black girl” in reference to my, then 7-year-old. I was angry because when I heard the mother refer to my child as a “Black girl,” I felt shame, belittled, and less than. I was dismayed because when I looked at my daughter Caylee, I saw beauty, intelligence, athleticism, and the possibility to do great things, but in moments like this it becomes clear to me that her skin color is always in the room, attached to her, signaling her Otherness as she pursues her endeavors.

It was with that unsettling feeling that I approached the mother.

Me: *“Excuse me.”*

The mother of #5: *“Yes?”*

Me: *“Hi, I’m Cheeks and the mother of Caylee; number 8. I noticed when your daughter came over here you asked her if she had the little Black girl.”* The mother of #5 abruptly cut me off.

The mother of #5: *“Oh, I am sorry I should have said African American, but I did not think she would know what I was talking about.”*

I smiled because I was caught off guard with her immediate reaction of defensiveness, and I responded, *“Well, you’re right. She would not have understood if you have not utilized the verbiage African American at home.”* While still caught off guard from the defensiveness, I just wanted to help her understand how she would likely not refer to the other girls as “white girls,”

and would most likely use another characteristic, such as a jersey number. This task of educating other parents who have children the same age as my children is a constant part of Black motherhood.

Black motherhood and Black feminism are two interrelated concepts that highlight the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black women in society, particularly in the context of motherhood and parenting. Black motherhood refers to the experiences and challenges faced by Black women as mothers, including but not limited to issues such as maternal mortality, access to healthcare, education, employment, and racial discrimination (Roberts, 1997).

Historically, Black mothers have been subjected to systemic racism and oppression that has made it more difficult for them to provide for their families and raise their children in a safe and supportive environment (Roberts, 1997). Black feminism, on the other hand, is a social and political movement that seeks to address the intersection of race, gender, and class oppression faced by Black women. Black feminism recognizes the unique experiences of Black women and seeks to create a more inclusive and equitable society that addresses the specific needs and challenges of Black women and other marginalized groups (Cooper, 2015). Together, Black motherhood and Black feminism highlight the need for a more intersectional approach to addressing issues facing Black women, particularly in the context of motherhood and parenting. By recognizing and addressing the systemic barriers that Black women face, we can create a more just and equitable society for all.

Ammon (2022) defined womanist as voiceful, inquisitive, and socially active community members who are guided by a vision of inclusiveness and fairness (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009). Beauboeuf-Lafontant (2008) identifies four points that compose womanism: 1) value of individuality and relationships; 2) recognition of the women's role in the survival and excellence

of their communities; 3) validation of the wisdom gained through lived experiences, collective and individual, that produce counternarratives that challenge and contradict the current accounts of academic truth; and 4) embrace dignity of all human beings across social dimensions of race, gender, class, and sexuality. It is important not to essentialize. All Black women are not womanists. Womanism aims to examine, recognize, and interrogate the social realities of slavery, segregation, sexism and economic exploitation experienced by Black people in the U.S (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2009).

So far, my exploration has centered around reviewing literature and essential concepts that illuminate the challenges faced by a Black female counselor during her transformative journey. Now, I am eager to dig into various theories that will further enrich the understanding of this counselor's path towards becoming a DEIB leader in education. These theories will serve as valuable tools in conveying the complexities, intersectionalities and insights of my unique walk in this transformative process.

Critical Race Theory

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an intellectual framework that seeks to understand how racism operates within society and how it intersects with other forms of oppression such as sexism, homophobia, and classism. CRT originated in the legal field in the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, as a response to the limitations of traditional civil rights approaches to addressing racial inequality (Gillborn, 2015). According to CRT, racism is not just a matter of individual prejudice or discrimination but is deeply ingrained in social structures and institutions. CRT also emphasizes the experiences of marginalized groups and the ways in which their perspectives and voices have been excluded from mainstream discourse (Gillborn, 2015). This theory challenges the idea of a color-blind society and asserts that race is a social construct that

has been used to maintain power differentials. CRT has been applied in various fields, including law, education, and sociology, and has sparked controversy and debates over its usefulness and accuracy. It seeks to understand and challenge the ways in which race intersects with systems of power and oppression in society. At its core, CRT argues that racism is not just an individual phenomenon but is deeply ingrained in social structures and institutions (Gillborn, 2015). These structures and institutions work to uphold the dominance of certain groups over others, often at the expense of marginalized communities.

Critical race theory (CRT) has been influential in a wide range of fields beyond legal studies, including education, sociology, and political science. It has been used to analyze a wide range of social issues, such as the racial achievement gap in education, the mass incarceration of Black and Brown people, and the impact of immigration policies on communities of color (Gillborn, 2015). Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework that examines how race and racism intersect with social, political, and economic systems in society (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). CRT has been used to analyze a wide range of social issues, such as the racial achievement gap in education, the mass incarceration of Black and Brown people, and the impact of immigration policies on communities of color (Gillborn, 2015)..

The following are some of the key tenets of CRT: (1) the notion that racism is ordinary and not aberrational; (2) the idea of an interest convergence; (3) the social construction of race; (4) the idea of storytelling and counter-storytelling; and (5) the notion that whites have been beneficiaries of civil rights legislation (Hartlep, 2009). Each tenet provides a unique perspective on how racism operates and is perpetuated in various ways:

Racism as Ordinary, Not Aberrational: CRT poses the notion that racism is not just an isolated or occasional occurrence; instead, it is a pervasive and ordinary aspect of society.

It is deeply ingrained in the social, political, and economic structures and operates in both explicit and subtle ways (Gillborn, 2015).

Interest Convergence: This tenet suggests that progress towards racial justice tends to happen when the interests of marginalized racial groups align with the interests of those in power or dominant groups (Bell, 1980). In other words, positive changes are more likely to occur when they benefit the dominant group's interests as well.

Social Construction of Race: CRT emphasizes that race is a social construct rather than a biologically determined characteristic. It highlights how racial categories and identities are created, defined, and given meaning by society, and how they can change over time (Gillborn, 2015).

Storytelling and Counter-Storytelling: This component underscores the importance of narratives and personal experiences in understanding and challenging racism. Storytelling allows individuals from marginalized groups to share their unique perspectives and counter the dominant narratives that often perpetuate racial stereotypes and prejudices (Gillborn, 2015).

Whites as Recipients of Civil Rights Legislation: CRT examines how civil rights legislation and policies meant to address racial discrimination have also benefited White individuals and groups. It questions whether these measures have truly dismantled systemic racism or merely provided advantages to some white individuals within the existing structures (Gillborn, 2015).

These five tenets collectively provide a critical lens through which scholars, educators, leaders, and activists analyze the intersectionalities of race, power, and social justice. By understanding

these components, CRT seeks to expose and challenge the underlying assumptions and structures that sustain racial inequalities and advocate for transformative change.

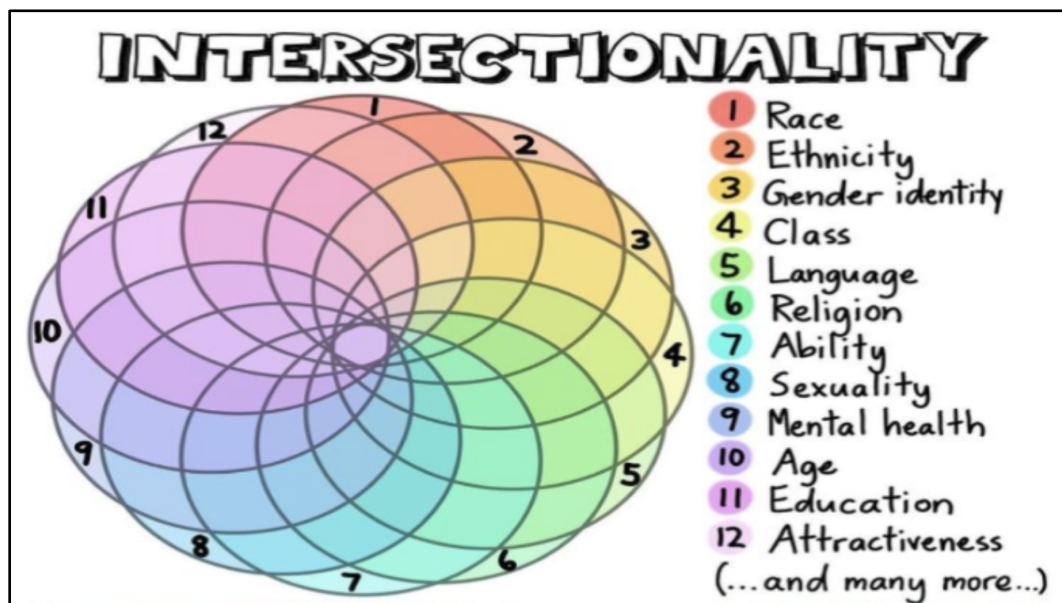
Building on the examination of race and racism in society Critical Race Theory argues that Whiteness is not merely a racial category but also a social and political construct that bestows power and privilege upon individuals deemed White (Gillborn, 2015). CRT also challenges the idea that being "colorblind" is not an effective way to combat racism, arguing that it ignores the ways in which race shapes our social, political, and economic systems. CRT seeks to understand how race and racism operate in society and to challenge the ways in which they perpetuate social inequality. Critical Race Theory intertwines with intersectionality, acknowledging that race is not the sole factor shaping experiences of oppression and privilege, but rather recognizes the complex interactions between various social identities such as gender, class, and sexuality, to comprehensively examine systemic inequalities (Crenshaw, 1991).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality was initially coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1991), a law professor, social theorist, and American advocate. Crenshaw took notice of Black feminists and how they began to voice their concerns about the predominantly White and middle-class nature of the mainstream feminist movement, as they struggled to relate to the issues addressed within that context. Black women, who often had to balance work and family responsibilities without the luxury of being full-time homemakers, felt that the concerns raised by White feminists did not fully reflect their own experiences (Crenshaw, 2022). Confronting both racism and sexism within the feminist movement, Black women advocated for a feminist practice that centered on their lived realities.

The concept of intersectionality (see Figure 2.2 below) recognizes that individuals have multiple identities- some privileged and others stigmatized- that shape their trajectories and influence how they make sense of the world around them (Nash, 2008). Intersectionality suggests that individuals who pose more than one marginalized or stigmatized identity must grapple with the effects of being multiply oppressed. Multiple oppressions in a particular social structure or context may determine which identities individuals considered most important. It also may influence which social identities are foregrounded or silenced (Wearing, 2011). The social identities of Black women are complicated by various intersections which include but are not limited to race, gender, socioeconomic class, migration status, and sexuality.

Figure 2.2. *Intersectionality*



Note: Adapted from "*Intersectionality*" by Duckworth (2020). Retrieved from Flickr. CC BY-NC-ND 2.0. This figure utilizes a spirograph to illustrate the many ways social identities might intersect.

Counter-storytelling

Affiliated with CRT, counter-storytelling is what Solórzano and Yosso (2002) refers to the act of challenging dominant narratives and perspectives by sharing personal experiences and perspectives of historically marginalized individuals and communities. It involves the use of personal narratives, often shared orally, to confront and resist the dominant narratives that have been used to marginalize, silence, or erase the experiences of historically oppressed groups. Counter-storytelling seeks to provide alternative perspectives and truths that have been excluded or overlooked by dominant cultural narratives. Counter-storytelling can take many forms, such as personal testimonies, autobiographical accounts, poetry, music, and other creative expressions. The purpose of counter-storytelling is not only to resist and challenge dominant narratives but also to provide a platform for individuals and communities to share their experiences and perspectives, to heal, to educate, and to empower themselves and others. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 3 when I offer a more complete overview of critical autoethnography.

White Guilt and Resistance

DeGruy (2017) points out that American history is inextricably bound to racist ideology. From the codifying of slavery to the belief in Manifest Destiny, to the treatment of illegal immigrants and the branding of them as criminals, rapists, or potential terrorists, many of America's actions continue to conflict with its creed that *all men are created equal*. In the articles reviewed for this study, there is the idea that slavery has left some White Americans with a feeling of guilt. Tatum (1992) makes the claim Whites feel the “discomfort of guilt, shame, and sometimes anger at the recognition of their advantages because of being White and the acknowledgment of the role of Whites in the maintenance of a racist system” (p. 12).

However, Swim & Miller (1999) argue that Whites need not spend as much psychological effort or economic resources recovering from others' prejudice and protecting themselves from encounters with prejudice. The idea of Whites experiencing prejudice is absurd to most White Americans because in school the history taught is in the best interest and favor of White Americans; whereas African Americans deal with prejudices daily, whether it is in the classroom or in the community.

The ongoing resistance from white individuals to critically engage in understanding systemic racism has a reverberating effect on our young people, particularly when anti-Black rhetoric goes viral. Negative perceptions about peers may prompt youth to withdraw from social interactions or act in hostile ways, thereby negatively impacting their peer relationships by putting them at risk for social rejection or isolation, which can further lead to or exacerbate school disengagement and decreases in academic achievement (Buhs, Ladd, & Herald, 2006). As an example, a few years back a student newspaper in a Kansas community published an article that went viral. This article included an interview with a White student from the senior class who was quoted as saying:

“Racism is not a big deal in America. Black people only make it a big deal because they are still upset about slavery, but that was in 1860 and slavery helped America. People should get over it so we can move on.”

I recall visiting with my principal about my disappointment in the article. On my way back to my office I was stopped by a Black female student who looked at me with a face full of tears and said, *“Mrs. Cheeks I am scared to ride the bus home.”* I could see she was taking short breaths and her eyes were unable to focus on me. She looked as though she might pass out from concern or possibly, she was hyperventilating. She asked, *“Mrs. Cheeks what am I going to do? I*

can't ride home on that bus. A group of White boys are calling me Nigger saying they are going to jump me. It is all because of the article." I asked, *"Did any teachers hear this?"* The feeling of hopelessness and fear had somehow consumed her; she wouldn't make eye contact and looked complete deflated and defeated as she responded with, *"No"*

I took her into my office to try and help her make other arrangements home. As the bell rang, I stayed 45 minutes late to ensure the student had safe transportation, only to be late to pick up my own children from school, which was debilitating as I thought to myself:

"Now my children are the Black children walking home in a world full of people who think like the senior who made a statement saying Black people need to get over slavery. Or the White boys calling their Black female peer a Nigger, or anyone else who may see my children walking home and only see them as Black and think of them as less than human."

These were the thoughts that flooded my mind as I sat with the young lady waiting on a safe ride home. We sat in silence as we were both subjected to the racial trauma of the published high school newspaper, and its ripple effect of these forms of white resistance to critically engaging in conversations about race.

At the release of the article there were three Black educators and one Latina teacher on a staff of 92 at this school. At the end of the year there was only one Black educator who remained in the school. The other two Black educators, along with the young Black lady who was too scared to ride the bus home, moved out of the district. There was never any therapy or closure for the students and faculty of color. The hurtful words have been internalized, and an unspoken standard was set. The standard that is all too familiar to Black educators and Black students. The standard being the pain of Black people not being seen or heard.

McGee & Stovall (2015) and Murty & Vyas (2017) acknowledge that African Americans and other historically marginalized students endure often subtle but constant forms of discrimination and bias. Marginalized students endure a plethora of racial assaults, which contribute to mental fatigue and psychological distress. These experiences are unlike those of White Americans and White students. For example, students are taught about the Civil War and the meaning of the Confederate flag. A study by Murty & Vyas (2017) found that reactions to the Confederate flag and related symbols on the part of African Americans, are manifestations of the repressing feelings and beliefs associated with practices of racism by White people that are acquired through multi-generational traumatic experiences and socialization, PTSD, and exposure to constant race based micro-offenses or racial microaggressions.

White Americans have many unearned privileges that people of color do not have (McIntosh, 2019). Whites can feel confident that when they turn on the television or look on the front-page news, they will see an extensive representation of the White race. White people in the United States can be fairly assured that they will not be followed or harassed when they enter a store (Swim & Miller, 1999). The notion of unearned privilege reminds me of this story.

Courageous Conversations

According to Singleton (2021), courageous conversations have a three-part component or structure for conversations about race to occur. In addition, Singleton defined and established a protocol to engage in interracial dialogue about race. Within the three-part structure of courageous conversations are *passion, practice, and persistence*. Specifically, Singleton states courageous conversations seek to engage those who will not talk, sustain the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted, and deepens the conversation to the point where authentic

understanding and meaningful actions occur. Having courageous conversations serves as a strategy for deinstitutionalizing racism and improving student achievement.

Singleton (2021) emphasizes the importance of creating a safe and respectful environment where individuals can engage in honest and open dialogue about race, challenging their own biases and assumptions. The framework of Courageous Conversations presents the need for educators to recognize and confront their discomfort and fear surrounding conversations about race, as well as the significance of acknowledging the historical and systemic factors that contribute to racial disparities. This framework provides a roadmap for navigating these conversations by outlining four key commitments: 1) staying engaged, 2) experiencing discomfort, 3) speaking your truth, and 4) expecting and accepting non-closure. Courageous Conversations emphasizes the need to actively listen, validate others' experiences, and approach conversations with a growth mindset (Singleton, 2021). I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter 3 as it relates to my methodology.

This autoethnography seeks to engage you as a reader who cannot talk, sustain the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted, and deepen the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions can occur. Additionally, this autoethnography asks you, the reader, as well as me, the storyteller, to stay engaged, speak our truth, experience discomfort, and accept some topics may not have closure.

The Glasser Theory

The Glasser Theory, also known as the Choice Theory, is a psychological theory developed by Glasser (1998) that emphasizes the importance of individual choice and personal responsibility in behavior and mental health. Choice Theory proposes that individuals have five basic needs: survival, love and belonging, power, freedom, and fun. According to the theory,

people are constantly making choices to meet these needs, and mental health problems arise when individuals make ineffective or maladaptive choices (Glasser, 1998).

The theoretical framework of the Glasser Theory is based on the principles of reality therapy, which is a form of psychotherapy that focuses on the present moment and helping clients make effective choices to meet their needs. The theory also draws on elements of humanistic psychology, which emphasizes the importance of self-awareness, self-acceptance, and personal growth. The Glasser Theory involves a focus on the therapeutic relationship between the therapist and the client (Glasser, 2000). The therapist works to establish a relationship based on trust, respect, and empathy, and collaborates with the client to identify their needs and make effective choices to meet those needs. The therapy process emphasizes action and experimentation, with the goal of helping clients make positive changes in their lives. The Glasser Theory has been applied in a variety of settings, including education, addiction treatment, and mental health counseling (Glasser, 2000). The theory emphasizes the importance of individual choice and personal responsibility and encourages clients to take an active role in their own treatment and personal growth.

Utilizing this theory in education looks like the counselor establishing a relationship with his or her students based on trust, respect, and empathy. The counselor collaborates with the student to identify their needs and make effective choices to meet those needs. Self-awareness, self-acceptance, and personal growth are key in this student counselor relationship built on trust, respect, and empathy.

Robert Dilt's Logical Levels

Dilt's Levels of Learning model provides a framework for understanding the different levels at which personal change can occur and can be a useful tool for individuals seeking to

achieve greater self-awareness and personal growth, as well as for coaches and therapists working with clients to facilitate change. Using this diagram and logic can begin the conversation of social and personal identity.

As seen in Figure 2.3, Dilt's Logical Levels, at the base of the pyramid is the Environment. Every experience occurs in a temporal and spatial context, so the environmental level contains external conditions likely to affect a person (Chick, 2021). This includes basic physical surroundings, tools, materials, supplies, and even opportunities within the environment. This level refers to the external environment or context in which an individual operates. Changes at this level involve modifying the physical, social, or cultural environment in order to create a more supportive or conducive context for learning or growth. In the workplace, an employee may use adjectives to describe what their work environment looks like, sounds like, or feels like. From this, they may be able to identify a vibe or atmosphere that affects their experience.

On the next level up is Behavior, encompassing the individual's actions, words, gestures, movements, breathing, and perceived reactions to others. This level involves changing specific behaviors or habits in order to achieve a desired outcome. Changes at this level may involve acquiring new skills, breaking old habits, or adopting new patterns of behavior. Collectively, behavior constitutes particular patterns of work, interaction, or communication at the individual and organizational levels (Chick, 2021).

Figure 2.3. *Robert Dilts' logical levels*



Note: Figure 2.3 displays Dilts' logical levels. This framework was designed to help an individual better understand themselves and their environment based on six logical levels (Sandu, 2016, p. 35).

On the next level, Capabilities are how behaviors are generated and directed within the environment. In terms of this framework for the individual or leader, skills are typically associated with learning, decision-making, and creativity. This level involves developing new capabilities or competencies, such as improving problem-solving skills or learning new strategies for achieving goals.

This framework also asks what are the Values and Beliefs that underpin each capability or skill? Dilts argued values and beliefs were comprised of two complementary aspects: the ego (survival, recognition, ambition) and the soul (purpose, contribution, mission). This is seen

above in Figure 2.3. This level involves examining and modifying underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions that shape an individual's worldview and behavior. Changes at this level can lead to a profound shift in perspective and a more authentic expression of one's true self. These fundamental traits motivate the person to act based on what they believe to be true based on previous experiences. Meaning people can only utilize existing capabilities and skills if there are corresponding beliefs that allow them to do so.

The fifth level, Identity, supports an individual sense of identity. Identity asks the question how the individual sees themselves so, “Who am I?” This level involves transforming one's self-concept or identity, such as developing a stronger sense of self-worth or shifting from a victim mentality to one of personal responsibility.

Spirituality is not always included in the logical levels and may be thought of as a step beyond the other levels. Spirituality is about what else, beyond the individual, and is related to being part of a bigger system, whether that be family, community or beyond. Some people describe this as the ‘wisdom’ level, and others exclude it altogether, or link it to identity, as being part of how you see yourself (Chick, 2021). Changes at this level involve cultivating a greater sense of purpose and meaning in life.

Spirituality in Leadership

While some of the theories mentioned above incorporate spirituality, further integrating spirituality into prevailing leadership frameworks can broaden leaders' outlooks and equip them with extra inspiration and coping mechanisms to navigate their personal leadership challenges (Noghiu, 2020). The theoretical framework proposed by Rima (2013a) for Spiritual Capital Theory (SCT) is comprehensive and far-reaching, advocating for changes at multiple levels, both ideological and systemic, and envisioning transformation at both individual and institutional

levels. SCT consists of five theoretical propositions that together form a dynamic, multidimensional, and multidirectional model. These propositions encompass metaphysical raw materials, spiritual capital formation, spiritual capital investment, and returns on investment from spiritual capital. Each proposition includes a series of sub-elements that delve into the complexities of spiritual capital.

The metaphysical raw materials proposition comprises embedded personal values (EPV) and deep personal spirituality (DPS). The spiritual capital formation proposition involves elements like prevailing personal experience leading to a bias for action, recognition of the interconnected nature of the world, acknowledgment of social and economic injustice, personal responsibility toward others, standing in solidarity with others, and motivation for personal action driven by concern for the marginalized. The spiritual capital investment proposition encompasses actions such as becoming relationally connected to the marginalized, committing to social and economic justice activities, leveraging various forms of capital for social and economic good, and making long-term commitments to these practices. Lastly, Rima (2013a) envisions the return on investment of spiritual capital through deep personal contentment, transcendent personal purpose, transforming the lives of others, and creating sustainable societal change.

This theoretical framework not only considers individual development but also extends to organizational and societal transformation. Rima (2013b) models how individual spiritual capital can translate into organizational spiritual capital, leading to organizational culture change. This process involves individuals at the periphery of an organization introducing transformational ideas, which are eventually recognized and adopted by leadership, resulting in organizational

transformation prioritizing collaboration, contribution, co-creation, collective learning, community building, and sustainable development.

However, while SCT provides a valuable foundation for understanding spiritual capital, Noghiu (2015) points out that there are conceptual tensions and unresolved issues within the theory. Noghiu's assessment of spiritual capital literature suggests the need for further theory building efforts to enhance SCT and address remaining gaps and challenges. Additionally, Noghiu categorizes conceptualizations of spiritual capital into three lenses: individualist, structuralist, and idealist, highlighting the complexity of the concept and its diverse interpretations.

Considering SCT's potential to bridge the gap between personal and structural transformation, emphasizing the importance of taking spirituality-oriented leadership development beyond the personal realm and into the structural domain becomes a must. SCT argues that a holistic leadership education approach should not only focus on self-leadership and inner competencies but also equip prospective leaders with the knowledge and tools to effect meaningful transformations in their communities, organizations, and societies. SCT offers valuable insights and mechanisms for achieving this transformative leadership, where personal and collective spirituality play pivotal roles in reshaping prevailing personalities and structures. As evident in SCT, the incorporation of spirituality into the leadership framework elevates leadership to a more holistic level.

In several of the theories presented within this dissertation, readers may observe that spirituality is an integral component. Examples include motherhood, Black feminism, and personal identity, among others. The integration of spirituality into a theory enriches it, enabling a more comprehensive and holistic understanding. Additionally, the American Psychological

Association, American Counseling Association, Council for Accreditation of Counseling and related Educational Programs, National Association of Social Workers, Counselor on Social Work Education, American Association of Marriage and Family therapy, Commission on Accreditation for Marriage and Family Therapy Education have increasingly recognized spiritual and religious issues as foundational to the human experience, and as an important client variable to be assessed in therapy/counseling (Johnson, 2013). Among various cultural considerations, the capability to address spiritual and religious concerns is now seen as an integral component. Notably, specific competencies tailored for addressing these issues in counseling have been meticulously formulated and established by the Association for Spiritual, Ethical, and Religious Values in Counseling (ASERVIC), subsequently gaining recognition and incorporation into the standards set forth by the American Counseling Association (ACA) (Johnson, 2013).

According to Johnson (2013), ASERVIC (2009) lists 14 competencies across six categories for addressing spiritual and religious issues in counseling. The six categories are: (1) culture and worldview, (2) counselor self-awareness, (3) human and spiritual development, (4) communication, (5) assessment, and (6) diagnosis and treatment. Although the language of the competencies is focused on professional counselors, the message is aimed at all clinical mental health professionals. The complete ASERVIC standards can be accessed at www.aservic.org.

The following demonstrate the requirements of therapists and/or counselors.

- Recognize the centrality of spirituality and religion in many clients' lives as well as understand various spiritual systems, major world religions, agnosticism, and atheism.
- Have a high level of self-awareness of their own spiritual attitudes, beliefs, and values and how their attitudes, beliefs, and values may impact the therapeutic process.
- Apply theoretical models of spiritual and religious development.

- Identify spiritual and religious themes and communicate with clients about spiritual and religious issues with acceptance and in ways that match clients' worldviews.
- Consider spiritual and religious issues when conducting client assessments.
- Consider and utilize clients' spiritual and religious views when diagnosing and treating clients' issues in ways that match clients' preferences (Johnson, 2013, p. 7).

The Preamble of Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling state the Competencies for Addressing Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling are guidelines that complement, not supersede, the values and standards espoused in the ACA Code of Ethics. Consistent with the ACA Code of Ethics (2005), the purpose of the ASERVIC Competencies is to “recognize diversity and embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts” (p. 3). These Competencies are intended to be used in conjunction with counseling approaches that are evidence-based and that align with best practices in counseling.

The ASERVIC standards align and intersect with the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies, as both sets of competencies are purposefully structured to enhance the fulfillment of students hailing from varied and diverse backgrounds. Their shared objective is to deliver a comprehensive and inclusive approach to counseling, thereby better addressing the multifaceted needs of a diverse student population.

Personal Identity

As I am recalling childhood memories. I can remember lying on a waterbed with my mother. I had not started attending the education system yet. I remember lying on that waterbed and my mother saying in an almost rhythmic sound:

“ R.. A..L..I..T..A, Ralita! Now you!”

Me: “R.. A..L..I..T..A, Ralita! Mommy, where did you get my name from?”

My mom smiles and says, “Your daddy’s name is Roland, and you are my little Roland so I named you Ralita because that is as close as I could get to his name. So, you are my little Roland, and you are beautiful inside and out because God made you that way.”

From a young age, I possessed a profound sense of family, love, and belonging. Prior to entering the education system, my personality flourished without any awareness of the color of my skin as something that set me apart or made me different from other children. As I grew older, this foundational sense of family, love, and belonging would become intertwined with my evolving understanding of spirituality.

Self-image, self-esteem, self-concept are terms associated with personal identity. Personal identity refers to the unique combination of characteristics, traits, beliefs, values, experiences, and relationships that define an individual and distinguish them from others (Wearing, 2011). It encompasses various aspects, including one's self-image, self-concept, and sense of individuality. Personal identity is shaped by both internal factors, such as personal experiences, thoughts, and emotions, as well as external factors, including social interactions, cultural influences, and societal expectations (Wearing, 2011). Like Wearing (2011), Hannum (2007) attributed personal identity to include traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills. Noting that aspects of your identity that seem insignificant to you could become huge benefits or obstacles when you are working in certain situations or with groups.

Personal identity evolves over time as individuals develop and mature, and it plays a crucial role in shaping one's sense of self, their behavior, and their interactions with others. Identities are contested and negotiated in everyday life; they are formed out of recognition and the struggle for identity (Wearing, 2011).

My personal identity can be summarized as follows: I am a sexy brown woman who values education and motherhood. I have a passion for school counseling and educating others. I perceive myself as an educated individual who has actively pursued both personal growth and a professional career. I am outgoing and religious. I am a dedicated mother of seven children, and the majority, if not all, of my choices and actions revolve around securing a better lifestyle for them.

Whereas personal identity is formed out of internal factors, social identity comprises the parts of a person's identity that come from belonging to groups, including age, ethnicity, race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, nationality, and socioeconomic status (Hannum, 2007). My personal identity is evolving as I continue to experience life. Experience helps shape personal identity. It is for this reason personal identity is ever present in dealing with students and families. It should be noted that my personal identity shifted and continued to shift as my role changed from school counselor to DEIB leader. In the forthcoming text I will emphasize the key areas of focus for this critical autoethnography, specifically examining the concepts of personal identity in connection to traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills (Hannum, 2007).

Social Identity: How Do I Show Up in Social Settings?

Wearing (2011) argues social identity is both relational in that identity is formed through and by social relations and contextual in that our sense or understanding of self and other identity is shaped in the social context and the vision of inequality and power (p. ix). Social identity refers to our way of thinking about ourselves and others based on social groupings. Hannum (2007) proposes social identity principles and argues identity has multiple components. It is human nature to want to fit in as well as to be unique. Some parts of identity are visible, while others are not. Some aspects of identity are spoken about openly while others are not. Aspects of

a person's identity can be gained, lost, or changed over time. Context determines which parts of a person's identity are most important, helpful, or harmful for influence as a leader (p.11).

Within society, I am acknowledged and recognized as a Black individual who has actively pursued education. Additionally, I am known for having a large family, and I am also acknowledged as an educator who passionately advocates for students. To my students, I am seen as the key to improving their academic performance and as someone with quick access to their grade point averages (GPA). Parents often approach me seeking information about scholarships, while among my colleagues, I am recognized as a Black counselor who brings a different (good or bad) perspective to the profession.

Within my social identity and in the presence of certain social circles, my behavior contrasts significantly with that of my personal identity. It is a common occurrence to find myself as the only person of color in the room during social gatherings. In such situations, my typically outgoing nature diminishes, and I often assume a more reserved and quieter demeanor, rarely actively participating in the ongoing conversations. The social identity I had as a school counselor is different from that of the social identity I have as a DEIB leader. This shift in identity brings up the concept of code switching.

From the ASCA Model to the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

In the early stages of this critical autoethnographic endeavor, I focused on using the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) model (2019) as it intersects with my lived experiences as a Black female counselor. However, over time I shifted that focus to the Multicultural and Social Justice Competencies (discussed in the next section); however, the ASCA model has still informed this autoethnographic project from its early stages. Here I will

provide a broad overview of the ASCA model and then the Social Justice Counseling Competencies.

The ASCA model (2019) stands as a comprehensive framework, designed to shape school counseling. At its core, it emphasizes the significance of promoting students' academic achievement, personal growth, and social-emotional development. The model summarizes a range of evidence-based practices and strategies that enable school counselors to effectively address the diverse needs of students and create an inclusive and supportive school environment.

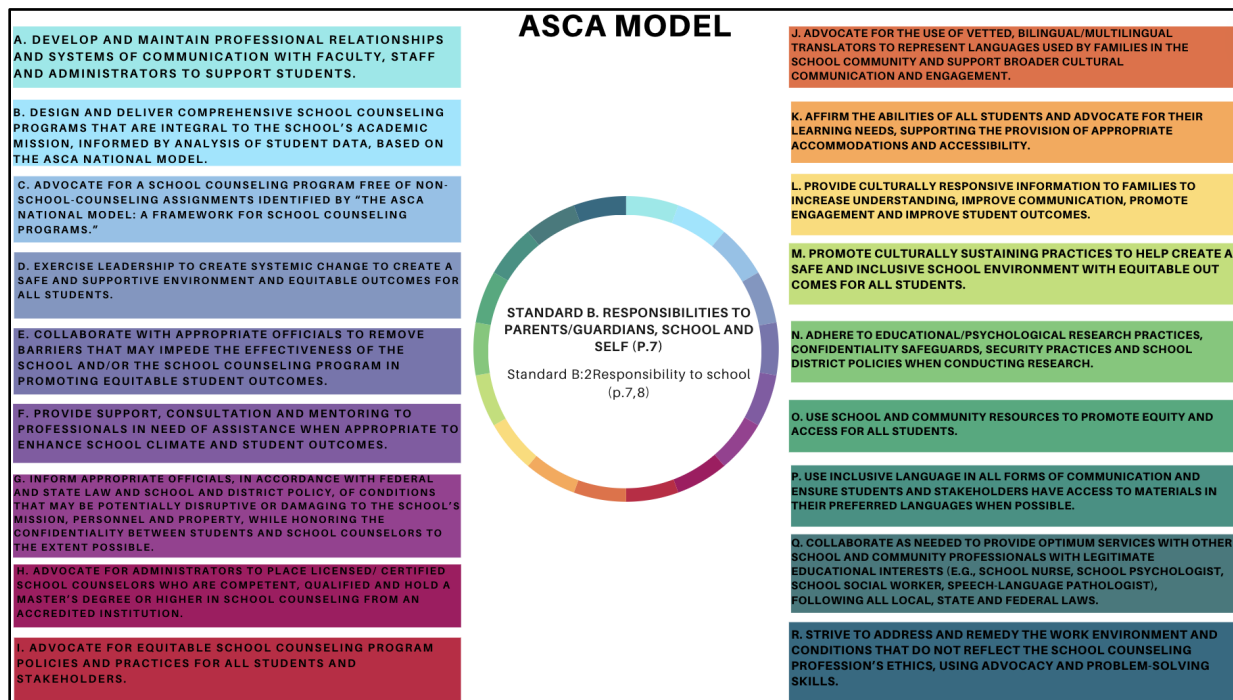
The foundation of the ASCA model (2019) establishes the fundamental beliefs, philosophy, and mission of the school counseling program. It centers on promoting equity, access, and success for all students and aligns with the broader goals of the educational institution. The ASCA model outlines a systematic approach through which school counselors should provide direct and indirect services to students. It includes individual and group counseling, classroom guidance, consultation with stakeholders, and coordination of essential resources. This model includes the organization and administration of the school counseling program. It encompasses data-driven decision-making, program assessment, and continuous improvement to ensure that services meet the evolving needs of the student population. Accountability component in the ASCA model involves measuring the outcomes and impact of the counseling program. School counselors assess the effectiveness of interventions, gather data to inform their practices, and utilize evidence-based strategies to demonstrate the program's positive influence on students' academic and personal growth.

Black female counselors play a vital role in addressing the unique needs and experiences of Black girls and adolescents. Their understanding of the intersecting identities and challenges faced by Black students allows them to provide culturally sensitive support and guidance. Black

female counselors serve as role models and mentors, offering a source of inspiration and empowerment for Black girls who may face systemic barriers and stereotypes within predominantly White schools.

The school experiences of Black adolescent students in predominantly White schools give rise to crucial questions about how to address issues and determine the responsible parties, considering the impact of racial and historical trauma. According to the American Psychological Association (APA) Council on Resilience (2008), educators have a significant role to play in the socioemotional development of adolescents. This can be achieved through fostering a collective culture of strong, high-quality, and stable neighborhood schools, as well as implementing programs that promote social empathy. The APA also highlights that African American youth who possess well-developed emotional competence can overcome negative societal messages by mobilizing resources, acquiring new insights, and developing their talents. Given that school counselors are instrumental in supporting students' socioemotional, academic, and career development (American School Counselor Association, 2019), they are uniquely positioned to address these issues. Specifically, Black female school counselors, as educators, have a special ability to engage in spirit-healing for Black girls and or Black students who experience their identity being overlooked or silenced in predominantly White classrooms and schools (Hines & Wilmot, 2018), or provide what can be termed "active care" (Masten & Palmer, 2019).

Figure 2.4. ASCA Model



Note: Figure 2.4 is a visual I adapted from the ASCA Ethical Standards. Section B of the ASCA framework is part of a broader effort to demonstrate collaboration, advocacy, leadership, and consultation as a Black female counselor.

The section above centers around these key areas, addressing the diverse needs of students and facilitating positive interactions within their educational environment. This specific section has been selected because it emphasizes the crucial role that collaboration, advocacy, leadership, and consultation play in a Black female counselor role. The professional themes of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and consultation as outlined by ASCA in Standard B are focal points for this dissertation.

Leadership

Black female school counselors can serve as role models and mentors for Black female students. Representation is a form of leadership, and it is important because it can help students feel seen and heard, and it can inspire them to pursue their goals. Black female school counselors

can offer support and guidance that is culturally responsive and relevant to the experiences of Black students. Research has consistently demonstrated the positive impact of school staff who understand the racialized experiences faced by marginalized students (Bryant et al., 2005; Hines & Wilmot, 2018). Given the importance of addressing these experiences, it is essential to explore the role of Black female counselors in finding solutions and leading initiatives.

Counselor leadership encompasses various aspects, including the establishment of programs targeting the needs of culturally diverse students. Through racial socialization practices (APA, 2008), counselors can promote resilience, while facilitating school-wide exposure to culturally relevant learning activities that reduce academic stress (Dollarhide, Gibson, & Moss, 2013; Hashem, 2009). Understanding that the school climate significantly influences student success, counselors should actively participate in its evaluation from the perspectives of all students, paying particular attention to aspects of multiculturalism (Hashem, 2009). Counselor leadership plays a crucial role in uncovering inequities that contribute to student alienation within educational spaces (Pham et al., 2022).

To address the alienation and oppression experienced by Black students, school counselors can facilitate student groups that promote collective healing, processing experiences, and combating feelings of isolation (Day-Vines et al., 2003). Creating spaces where Black students can freely express themselves and resist objectification as "the Other" is crucial (Collins, 2000). Additionally, schools could demonstrate a committed and intentional focus on supporting and developing programs that enhance the overall well-being of Black students (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). Providing a refuge where Black students can collectively unpack, share, and make sense of their intersectional experiences within and beyond the school context is essential (Carter Andrews et al., 2019). It is imperative that school districts and administrators

recognize counselors' leadership potential as agents of change (West-Olatunji et al., 2010), utilizing their expertise in developing and facilitating programs that address the specific needs of Black students.

The absence of culturally responsive curricula adversely affects academic achievement, leading to discussions of the "achievement gap" concerning Black students. Burkard, Martinez, and Holtz (2009) emphasized the importance of a systemic approach by school counselors to promote academic equity and provide empowering educational opportunities for all students. Black & Garvis, 2018 echoed this sentiment, suggesting that school counseling programs should enhance college and career development for African American students through advisement on appropriate coursework and fostering a college-going culture that benefits students and their families. Addressing the concerns raised by Black high school students regarding insufficient preparation for careers and higher education can begin at the middle school level, where counselors can challenge harmful academic tracking practices that disproportionately exclude Black students from rigorous courses while providing access to personal enrichment opportunities (Burkard et al., 2009).

Finally, in schools where students experience high levels of personal trauma, counselors can lead in establishing a culture of care and healing by promoting mindfulness practices among students (Masten & Palmer, 2019). Implementing techniques such as attentive breathing and mindful body-centering exercises as de-stressors (American School Counselor Association, 2019) can contribute to student well-being. It is important to note that mental health issues among Black students often go unaddressed, especially in under-resourced urban schools that prioritize immediate pressing issues. This lack of attention to mental health adversely affects

student achievement levels, as demonstrated by the inverse relationship between mental health problems and academic achievement (Agnafors, Barmark, & Sydsjö, 2021).

Advocacy

Black female school counselors can advocate for Black female students and their families. They can help ensure that students have access to the resources they need to succeed academically, socially, and emotionally. They can also work to address systemic barriers that may disproportionately affect Black female students. School counselors have the opportunity to assume the role of social justice advocates when educational institutions fail to adequately support students in crucial areas such as mental health, academic achievement, and trauma (American School Counselor Association, 2019). ASCA's standards emphasize the importance of school counselors identifying students' academic and socioemotional needs and implementing prevention and intervention activities to remove barriers to student success.

West-Olatunji et al. (2010) recognize the unique awareness that Black women, serving as school counselors, possess regarding the marginalized experiences of Black students. They recommend directly challenging administrators who promote policies and practices that are non-supportive of all students, ensuring that student needs are addressed, and concerns are voiced (p. 198). Similarly, school counselors should advocate for increased diversity in cultural content to reflect the student population and enhance the educational experience for all students (Henfield, Moore, & Wood, 2008)

Existing research indicates that societal oppression significantly impacts Black women of all ages in America. Haynes et al. (2020) proposes that, similar to Black women, Black girls learn to conform their actions to the femininity standards prescribed in the dominant narrative of White womanhood (p. 385). Sue et al. (2007) further asserts that microaggressions,

microassaults, or microinvalidations have a detrimental effect on Black people across different age groups. They recommend proactive social justice counseling that supports the process of making meaning and interpreting the hidden messages embedded within microaggressions. Consequently, it is evident that school counselors who have themselves been targeted by microaggressive acts are ideally positioned to serve as advocates and agents of change. Agents of change are individuals who take part in leading change within their organization such as an education system.

As agents of change, school counselors must be cognizant of their students' realities, considering the socio-political and economic marginalization they may experience (Chung, Bemak, & Talleyrand, 2007). These realities often stem from systemic oppression faced by marginalized groups, which extends into educational spaces and contributes to traumatic school experiences and learning disparities. Chung et al. (2007) argue that advocacy should involve demanding school-wide or system-wide policies that promote academic success for all students, without exception. They further emphasize that school counselors can and should challenge school policies that undermine students' cultural practices, identities, and emotional well-being, while advocating for policies that demonstrate sensitivity to the needs of diverse groups. In this regard, Black female school counselors are naturally equipped to understand the challenges faced by students whose race and gender are discredited, and they can effectively advocate for equity and flexibility in school policies and practices (Holcomb-McCoy & Moore-Thomas, 2001). Additionally, they can enhance their advocacy efforts by sharing their own experiences of marginalization with school administration (Dollarhide et al., 2013).

Collaboration

Collaboration is equally crucial in addressing the school experiences of Black adolescent students. By working together, counselors, educators, administrators, parents, and community members can pool their expertise, resources, and perspectives to create a more inclusive and supportive environment. Collaboration allows for a holistic approach that addresses not only the academic needs but also the socioemotional well-being of Black students. By fostering partnerships and open lines of communication, collaboration ensures that strategies and interventions are tailored to the specific needs of Black students, fostering a sense of belonging and promoting their overall success. Evans-Winters and Esposito's (2010) research focusing on Black adolescents revealed that individuals who face various stressors resulting from race, gender, and class marginalization, demonstrate the highest resilience when they receive comprehensive support from their families, communities, and schools concurrently (p. 13).

Acknowledging the transformative potential of school counselors, as emphasized by Hashem, (2022) and Chung, Bemak, and Talleyrand (2007), alongside the recognition by ASCA (2019) that school counselors can act as agents of change, it is recommended that these professionals engage in collaborative efforts with teachers, administrators, community agencies, and other stakeholders. Such collaboration facilitates systemic change and enables the development of targeted programs aimed at supporting students' academic, socioemotional, and post-high school needs. Owen, Moretti, and Alfaro (2011) similarly identified the significance of counselor collaboration with other school staff, as it allows for transformative educational practices tailored to specific groups, such as African American children. Through dialogue and collaboration, school counselors play a vital role in promoting multicultural awareness, career

development, and improved achievement among marginalized groups (Hashem, 2022; Chung et al., 2007).

Collaborative outcomes can prove particularly beneficial for school counseling programs facing the challenge of large student-to-counselor ratios. While ASCA (2022) recommends a student-to-counselor ratio of 250:1, it is common for many school counselors to serve between 300 and 400 students, thereby posing difficulties in adequately supporting diverse student populations (Burkard et al., 2009). To address this issue and enhance support for targeted groups, Chung et al. (2007) propose the development of relevant activities for classroom or group counseling sessions, as well as the establishment of stronger collaborations with community resources. Examples of collaborative relationships include partnering with the local health department to promote healthy lifestyles among youth, working alongside local mental health agencies to provide support for students requiring long-term therapy, and utilizing educational service programs such as Evergrove Education Service Center to better meet the needs of students.

Consultation

Consultation provides an opportunity for counselors to share their expertise, raise awareness about the unique challenges faced by Black students, and advocate for culturally responsive practices. By collaborating with stakeholders, counselors can influence policies, curriculum development, and school climate to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for Black students. Through consultation, counselors can bridge the gap between theory and practice, ensuring that the specific needs of Black girls are considered and addressed in educational decision-making processes.

Collaborative relationships within educational contexts are primarily established through consultation activities initiated by school counselors. As Henderson and Gladding (1998) assert, counselors, functioning as consultants, serve as facilitators of the problem-solving process in the collaboration model (p. 227). According to ASCA (2019), Standard B-SS 5, counselors should: “Consult to support student achievement and success.” Consultation entails various key aspects including: (a) gathering information on student needs from families, teachers, administrators, and other stakeholders; (b) sharing strategies that promote student achievement with families, teachers, administrators, school staff, and community organizations; (c) engaging in consultations with school counselors and other counseling professionals to exchange best practices; and (d) disseminating school counseling expertise through the facilitation of workshops for families, administrators, teachers, or other relevant stakeholders (p. 5). Another crucial facet of consultation involves meeting with concerned individuals, including African Americans who are school staff members, community members, and leaders of civic organizations, to assess the impact of interventions and provide assistance in program design and implementation (Day-Vines et al., 2003).

Black female school counselors play a vital role in redefining the parameters used to measure progress in these domains. They first enlighten school staff and other stakeholders about the deeply rooted racism and oppressive practices that disproportionately affect Black girls within educational spaces (Collins, 2000; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). Ultimately, school counselors who engage in student-centered consultation and prioritize the needs of Black students must actively participate in discussions, diagnoses, innovation, program development, and evaluations concerning the structures that both involve and impact Black students (Rosenthal & Rosnow, 2009).

The idea of school counselors taking on leadership roles is not a recent development. There is an ongoing need for school counselors to be proactive leaders in the educational system. The ASCA National Model introduced by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2019) underscores the importance of leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and systemic change. According to this model, school counselors are urged to assume leadership roles within their schools, pursue a comprehensive approach to enhancing students' academic, social/emotional, and career development, and take responsibility for dismantling systemic obstacles to academic success.

With growing demands for school counselors to assume leadership roles within educational institutions, it is imperative to recognize the importance of integrating multiculturalism and social justice into their leadership practices (Williams & Greenleaf, 2012). This expectation is based on the recently established Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (AMCD, 2015), which introduce fresh criteria for school counselors, likely reshaping the landscape of school counselor leadership. These criteria expect school counselors to possess the skills to address issues related to power, privilege, and oppression affecting students, exhibit competence in addressing intersectionalities as educational leaders, and formulate leadership strategies that are inherently attuned to the specific context. These emerging expectations serve as the cornerstone for framing school leadership within the framework of multiculturalism and social justice.

I was originally planning to investigate the three research questions in my dissertation by considering the four professional themes outlined by the American School Counselor Association (ASCA) - leadership, advocacy, collaboration, and consultation. I anticipated that I could use these themes to assist me in the autoethnographic narrative of what stories have I

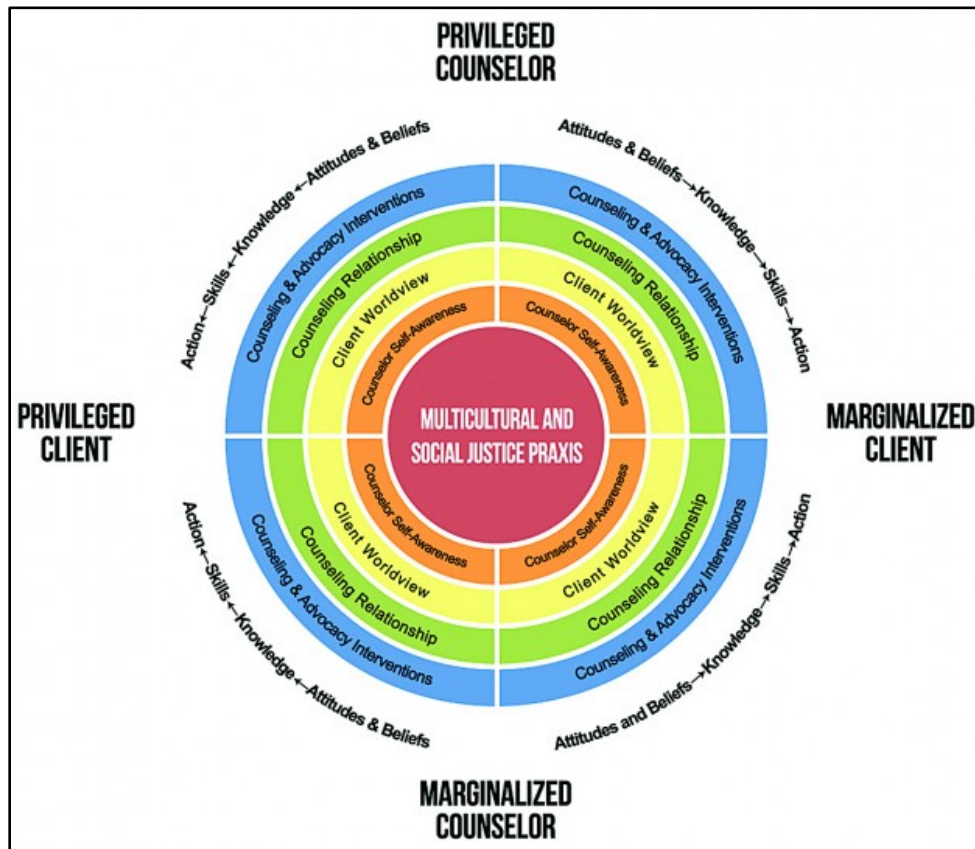
experienced as it relates to advocating for students and families of color and what stories I carry as it relates to consulting with students and families. However, after visiting with my dissertation committee it was determined that the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (see Figure 2.5) would better serve as a methodological framework for my dissertation. This study also evolved from an emphasis on the ASCA model to an emphasis on the MSJCC.

I actively incorporate Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies into my practice as a counselor. These competencies serve as foundational principles that guide my interactions with students from diverse backgrounds. According to Tervalon and Murray-García (1998), cultural humility is an approach to understanding and interacting with individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds with an attitude of openness, self-reflection, and willingness to learn. It involves recognizing and challenging one's own cultural biases and power dynamics, valuing the experiences and perspectives of others, and engaging in ongoing learning and dialogue to foster respectful and equitable relationships. By embracing cultural humility, I strive to understand each student's unique experiences, values, and perspectives, recognizing the impact of systemic oppression and privilege on their lives.

By introducing the concept of quadrants, the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) reflect the expectation that we should view counselor and client cultural values, beliefs, and worldviews through the perspective of intersectionality (Ratts et al., 2016). Intersectionality demonstrates how various aspects such as race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability status, and religion, among others, intersect (or braid) and mold people's experiences. Additionally, these competencies equip school counselors with the ability to grasp the intricate dynamics of power and privilege within the counselor-client relationship, particularly in the context of schools. This dynamic is also influenced by the status school counselors hold as adults

and their position within the school system. French and Raven (1959) were among the first to highlight that counselors consistently wield power over clients due to their expertise and social roles. This power asymmetry is emphasized in the school settings where authority is predominantly held by adult staff members.

Figure 2.5. *Multicultural and Social Justice*



Note: The Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (MSJCC) outline a framework for counselors to effectively address diversity and social justice issues in their practice. These competencies emphasize the importance of cultural humility, awareness, and advocacy, guiding counselors in fostering inclusivity, equity, and empowerment within therapeutic settings (American School Counselor Association, 2019).

As stated before, intersectionality recognizes that individuals can simultaneously belong to both privileged and marginalized groups, contingent on their various identities. According to

(Ratts et al., 2016), this dual membership in privileged and marginalized groups manifests within the counselor-client relationship across the following quadrants (p. 5):

Quadrant I: Privileged counselor–marginalized client. In this scenario, a counselor holds social power and privilege over their client based on their social group identities (e.g., a White counselor counseling or working with a student of color).

Quadrant II: Privileged counselor–privileged client. Here, both the client and counselor possess social power and privilege due to shared group identities (e.g., a male counselor counseling or working with a male student).

Quadrant III: Marginalized counselor–privileged client. In this relationship, the client holds social power and privilege over the counselor (e.g., a gay counselor counseling or working with a heterosexual student).

Quadrant IV: Marginalized counselor–marginalized client. Both the counselor and client belong to oppressed groups in this quadrant (e.g., a female counselor counseling or working with a female student).

The endorsement of these competencies underlines the imperative to seamlessly integrate multicultural and social justice competencies into all facets of the counseling field. These domains outlined in the framework are intentionally designed to follow a developmental trajectory, focusing on gradual advancements in multicultural and social justice proficiency. These domains encompass Counselor Self-Awareness, Student Worldview, the Counseling Relationship, and Counseling and Advocacy Interventions.

Counselor Self-Awareness

This foundational domain is pivotal for recognizing my own cultural values, beliefs, and biases. This self-awareness aids in acknowledging my personal worldview and identifying any

potential biases that might hinder my ability to assist students effectively. Coster and Schwebel (1997) identified self-awareness and self-monitoring as the most important counselor characteristics, asserting that these processes serve “the essential purpose of maintaining our bearings and avoiding self-deception” (p. 11). Without understanding the impact of one's attitudes, beliefs, and values when working with clients, counselors not only risk providing equitable care but can also experience personal and professional distress, disengagement, compassion fatigue, burnout, and poor judgment (Litam, Ausloos, & Harrichand, 2021).

Given that spiritual beliefs are part of cultural systems, counselors without self-awareness will likely not develop the necessary empathy, attitudes, and insights to work with clients whose religious spiritual belief differ from their own (Balboni, Puchalski, & Peteet, 2014). According to Cashwell & Young (2011), the professional counselor continuously evaluates the influence of his or her own spiritual and or religious beliefs and values on the client's and the counseling process, as well as, actively exploring his or her own attributes, beliefs and values about spirituality and or religion.

Student Worldview

The importance of comprehending a student's cultural values, beliefs, and biases cannot be overstated. By understanding these elements, I can gain insights into students' unique worldviews and their journey of identity development. When counselors have worldviews or beliefs that differ significantly from those of their clients and don't make an effort to understand why these differences exist, they may unintentionally develop negative stereotypes or biases about their students (Lyddon & Adamson, 1992). In such cases, students from diverse cultural backgrounds, such as Blacks, are particularly at risk of being negatively perceived. Counselors need to be aware of their own cultural biases and actively seek to understand and respect the

diverse perspectives of their students. Failure to do so can result in misjudgments, misunderstandings, and less effective counseling relationships.

Cultural competence or an understanding of students' world views are essential for providing effective and equitable counseling services to students from various cultural backgrounds. I have defined world view as an individual's perception of their connection to nature, institutions, other individuals, and objects. A person's world view shapes their psychological orientation in life and plays a crucial role in shaping their thoughts, behaviors, decision-making processes, and interpretations of events. Often, our cultural upbringing and life experiences are significant factors that either establish or influence our world views (Lyddon & Adamson, 1992).

Counseling Relationship

This domain digs into the intricate interplay between shared and unshared identities, privileged and marginalized statuses, values, beliefs, biases, and culture within the counseling dynamic. Being attuned to these factors is crucial in selecting appropriate evidence-based treatment strategies. Counselors inevitably bring their professional, personal, and cultural values into their interactions with students (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014). Counselors should not aim to be entirely devoid of values in their counseling practice. Instead, they should make a conscious effort to incorporate their values and beliefs into their ethical practice, as outlined by Evans-Winters and Esposito (2010).

It is equally important for counselors to exercise caution and not force their values and beliefs onto their students. Striking the right balance between integrating personal values into their practice and respecting the autonomy and beliefs of their clients can be a difficult endeavor.

In essence, counselors should be mindful of their values but prioritize the well-being and individuality of their clients during the counseling process (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014).

Counseling And Advocacy Interventions

Self-awareness is paramount to my approach in fostering meaningful therapeutic relationships with students. This foundational awareness, coupled with a profound understanding of the diverse worldviews students bring to the table, serves as a cornerstone for the development of effective counseling and advocacy interventions. It allows me to navigate the intricacies of the therapeutic alliance with precision, ensuring that the interventions I design are not only comprehensive but also tailored to authentically address the unique needs of each student. By actively embodying self-awareness and embracing the various worldviews present within the student population, I position myself to create an inclusive and supportive counseling environment. This approach is rooted in the acknowledgment that these individual perspectives significantly influence the dynamics of the therapeutic relationship. Consequently, my commitment to recognizing and respecting these influences enhances my capacity to address the multifaceted needs of both students and their families. My proactive engagement with self-awareness and the acknowledgment of diverse worldviews empowers me to deliver counseling and advocacy interventions that go beyond the surface, truly resonating with and meeting the complex needs of the students and families entrusted to my care.

In Chapter 3, the methodology section, I will further explore specific components of the ASCA model as well as the MSJCC which provided a central strand for this dissertation, and the development of this autoethnography. Overall, the MSJCC serve as the guiding principles for this unique work. By integrating these elements into my research, I aim to illuminate the

transformative potential of the MSJCC model in addressing the needs and experiences of students, particularly within the context of my role as a Black female counselor.

Conclusion

The literature review sheds light on important concepts such as White guilt, trauma, cultural trauma, and ACEs, emphasizing how slavery's enduring impact has been transmitted through generations. DeGruy (2017) emphasizes the significance of recognizing ethnic differences as a crucial step in addressing the ongoing national struggles faced by African Americans. Research by Jackson et al. (2018) reveals evidence of generational trauma's link to environmental adversity and resilience in African Americans. While African Americans have demonstrated remarkable resilience through adaptation and survival, this evolution has also led to maladaptive behaviors stemming from the traumatic past. This literature review emphasizes the importance of acknowledging history as it happened. The impact of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome on African Americans is discussed, along with the need to build trust and address racial disparities. As a Black female counselor navigating a predominantly White educational system, the review underscores the challenges faced and the importance of a DEIB leadership approach in promoting inclusivity and empowerment. The incorporation of theoretical frameworks such as critical autoethnography and Black feminist perspectives in chapter 3's methodology will offer deeper insights into the author's transformative journey towards becoming a DEIB leader.

To emphasize the need for this autoethnographic counter-storytelling, I conclude here with a story. It was my first year as a counselor in a district in Kansas and I had juniors! As the junior counselor it was my job to register at least 55 students for the PSAT. I was told by the department head that this process could be a difficult one. I had three weeks to get this done and

I attempted to follow the protocol she had written and followed. The protocol was simply for the counselor to form a signup sheet and put the signup information on the morning announcements along with the deadline. However, I am a hands-on person so I would stand in the hallways with my sign-up sheet, and I would joke and converse with the students as I had them sign up for the PSAT. Two weeks had passed, and to my department heads' disbelief I had 60 students signed up!

It was the final week to sign up for the PSAT and the head of the department was in the hallway (which was not her normal behavior), so I felt as though she was there to watch me - micromanagement of my actions was normal for her. I was talking to a group of students telling them about the PSAT and college and the two Black students in the group signed up right then. The bell rang and I went to hang the list back up outside my office and then I sat down at my desk. About a minute later she walked over to the PSAT list and started skimming the list.

I said, *"Hey everything okay?"*

She replied, *"Oh yes!"*

As she closed my door a little bit to ensure more privacy she said in a lower tone,

"Umm...Ralita... you need to make sure we have all the students who have more prominent parents sign up for the PSAT. I typically call those kids in and remind them and sometimes their parents to make sure they do not miss this opportunity."

She smiled and walked back out of my office as if nothing was wrong. I sat at my desk deflated. I had no words. I felt as though I had done something wrong, a feeling of shame began to overwhelm me. So, I replayed every step in my mind, trying to figure out what she meant by her statement, *"make sure we have all the students who have more prominent parents sign up"* and

why she felt it necessary for me to do more for some parents and students but not all. Why was it necessary for me to do more for the White students than what I would do for the Black students?

So here I am now, speaking my truth. Through these ongoing writing processes and interactions with the literature, I am working to bring the voice of a Black female school counselor, and mother, into the fields of counseling and leadership so that we may collectively gain perspective and deepen our understanding of the world and our educational systems.

Chapter 3 - Charting the Path: Articulating Critical

Autoethnography

Braiding Metaphor: A Multi-Dimensional Approach to Weaving a Rich Dissertation

The process of crafting a comprehensive dissertation involves artfully interweaving diverse elements into a cohesive narrative that illuminates new perspectives and contributes to scholarly knowledge. To achieve this, I employ the metaphor of braiding, working to blend frameworks, concepts, and theories into a cohesive collection of narratives. This metaphor serves as an intricate and meaningful approach to weave together the realms of spirituality, Black feminism, Black motherhood, trauma, school counseling, personal and social identity, and the journey towards becoming a leader in DEIB. To this point, crafting my dissertation is akin to braiding, a meticulous process of intertwining three essential strands in the first two chapters. Here, we add this third strand, and later in this chapter I offer a broader conceptual framework for the braiding metaphor behind this chapter.

The third strand, this chapter, adds layers of scholarly depth as I articulate how I executed this dissertation from proposal through final product. Overall, here I explain my processes of critical self-reflection and autoethnographic inquiry as I navigate and explore the intersections of personal narrative and scholarly inquiry, identity, power dynamics, and social justice within the counseling profession.

As a reminder, this work is driven by inquiry into these three research questions:

1. What were my reactions to my students' lived experiences as a school counselor helping them work through their identities, beliefs, and values related to student diversity?

2. What were my own lived experiences and internal reflections as I transitioned from school counselor to (DEIB) leader as it pertains to my identity, beliefs, and values?
3. What are my lived experiences working with predominantly White teachers and leaders engaging in DEIB work?

Autoethnography, CAP Ethnography, and Writing as Method

As a Black female counselor embarking on this critical autoethnographic journey, I am excited to utilize Creative Analytical Practices (CAP) ethnography as a guiding framework (Pierre & Adams, 2015). CAP offers a transformative approach that empowers me to deeply intertwine the writing process with my lived experiences and the narratives of my students. By embracing CAP ethnographies, I can authentically explore the complexities of my identity and those within my student community, giving voice to our diverse perspectives and challenging traditional research paradigms.

CAP demonstrates that the writing process and the writing product are deeply interconnected and equally significant. The product cannot be separated from its producer, the mode of production, or the method of knowing. CAP ethnographies are not experimental; they stand as valid and valuable representations of the social (Pierre & Adams, 2015).

CAP ethnography also holds me to a standard of vulnerability which pushes me to write in a fearless manner diving into the depths of my stories, acknowledging the significance of my emotions and reflections. CAP ethnography promotes an empowering space to unpack the intersections of my Blackness, my femininity, my role as a counselor, and my transition into a DEIB leader. Through this process, I can uncover the unique challenges, stories, and transitions that have shaped my professional journey, as well as those of my students, parents, educators, and colleagues.

CAP provides a platform for my voice to be heard beyond academic and institutional boundaries. By embracing creative and artistic elements in my writing, I can captivate readers and invite them to engage emotionally and intellectually with my narratives. As I interact with others, I must respect what innovative qualitative research is and the structure of it. Pierre and Adams (2015) advocate for holding CAP ethnography to high and demanding standards, emphasizing that mere novelty is not enough. To ensure quality, they employ four essential criteria when reviewing projects:

1. Substantive contribution: Does this piece contribute significantly to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded social scientific perspective, even if it is woven into the narrative? Is the piece a credible account of a cultural, social, individual, or communal sense of reality?
2. Aesthetic merit: Rather than lowering standards, another criterion is added. Does this piece excel aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? Is the text artistically shaped, satisfying, complex, and engaging?
3. Reflexivity and accountability: Is there sufficient self-awareness and self-exposure for the reader to make informed judgments about the point of view? Does the author hold themselves accountable to the standards of knowing and representing the people they have studied?
4. Impact: Does this piece resonate with me emotionally or intellectually? Does it spark new questions or inspire me to take action? Does it encourage me to explore new research practices? (Pierre & Adams, 2015).

Through CAP ethnography, I can uncover valuable insights and meaningful implications that extend far beyond my personal growth. By amplifying the voices of my students and reflecting on the intersections of their identities, I can encourage other Black female counselors, leaders, and educators. CAP offers the opportunity to transform my critical autoethnography into a powerful instrument fostering a deeper understanding of the complexities of counseling experiences, feminism, motherhood, and leadership.

CAP ethnography is a transformative and empowering methodology that will guide my critical autoethnography as a Black female counselor and my transition into a DEIB leader. By embracing this approach, I can authentically explore my experiences and those of my students, contextualize our narratives within broader social contexts, and challenge traditional research paradigms. Through the power of storytelling, and artistic expression these narratives are enriched by the research questions and theoretical frameworks with which I can amplify marginalized voices and advocate for individuals who share in these stories and experiences (Pierre & Adams, 2015). CAP allows me to create a research narrative that is not only academically rigorous but also emotionally resonant and socially impactful, making my critical autoethnography a powerful catalyst to inspire conversations and promote change where needed.

Autoethnography is a qualitative research method that combines elements of autobiography and ethnography to explore and analyze the researcher's personal experiences within a specific cultural context (Bhattacharya, 2017). In autoethnography, the researcher becomes the primary subject of study, examining their own thoughts, feelings, and interactions within a particular social setting. This approach enables researchers to dig into the complexities and nuances of their own lived experiences, shedding light on the broader social, cultural, and historical dynamics at play. By employing self-reflection, introspection, and narrative

storytelling, autoethnography seeks to uncover and convey the unique perspectives and insights that arise from the researcher's personal engagement with the research topic.

As a methodology, autoethnography emphasizes subjectivity, self-reflexivity, and the contextualization of personal narratives within larger social structures, making it a valuable tool for understanding the intricate interplay between individual experiences and wider cultural contexts. Autoethnography offers a powerful lens through which researchers can intimately explore their personal experiences within a specific cultural framework, but the concept of critical autoethnography pushes the boundaries further by encouraging researchers to critically examine power structures, challenge dominant narratives, and advocate for social justice within their self-reflective narratives. Autoethnography is a research method that involves using personal experiences to explore and understand cultural phenomena. It combines elements of autobiography and ethnography, where the researcher uses their own personal experiences and observations as a lens through which to study cultural practices, beliefs, and values (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). In autoethnography, the researcher is both the subject and the object of the study. They use their own experiences and observations to understand and interpret cultural practices and social phenomena (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

It is for this reason a type of autoethnography is needed for this research, as autoethnography allows insight into my intersectionalities which are prevalent in counseling as a Black female counselor. An autoethnographic approach allows for a more personal and subjective understanding of culture and is particularly useful for studying this topic which is difficult to access through traditional research methods as literature on Black female counselors and Black females in leadership is limited. Autoethnographers often use a narrative style of writing, using personal stories to illustrate broader cultural themes and phenomena (Stinson,

2009). This approach allows me to offer a more engaging and accessible style of writing that can appeal to a wider audience. Autoethnography is particularly useful for studying issues related to identity, culture, and social justice, as it allows for a more nuanced understanding of how these issues impact individuals and communities (Wall, 2006). This is why it is critical for me to utilize autoethnography.

However, it is important to note that autoethnography has its limitations. Because it is based on personal experience and observation, it can be difficult to generalize findings to larger populations. Additionally, it is important for me as an autoethnographer to be aware of my own biases and positionality and to critically reflect on my own experiences and interpretations (Wall, 2006). Whereas autoethnography involves personal experiences as data and may prove helpful in a dissertation such as this one, critical autoethnography goes a step further by critically examining power dynamics and social injustices within those experiences and seeking to create awareness and transformative change. Critical autoethnography and counter-storytelling will prove vital for the purpose of exploring my lived experiences as a Black female school counselor while transitioning to a DEIB leadership role and how I navigate that transition and continue to support students, teachers, and leaders who experience racial conflicts and or tense learning environments. Counter-storytelling stems from critical race theory (CRT).

This is More than Autoethnography: Critical Autoethnography

As we merge the methodology of autoethnography with core tenets of CRT, such as (but not limited to) counter-storytelling, what starts to come together is a more specific version of autoethnography: critical autoethnography. Critical autoethnography like autoethnography is a qualitative research method (Bhattacharya, 2017). However, critical autoethnography is a research methodology that combines elements of autoethnography and critical theory to explore

the intersection of personal experience and social issues (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). It is a form of self-reflection that allows individuals to explore their own experiences, emotions, and perspectives in relation to the larger societal context (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). In critical autoethnography, the researcher becomes both the subject and the object of the study, and their personal experiences are used to understand broader social issues. This approach emphasizes the importance of subjectivity, reflexivity, and critical thinking, and aims to challenge dominant discourses and power relations (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021).

The critical aspect of autoethnography involves analyzing and deconstructing cultural norms, power dynamics, and systemic inequalities. By reflecting on their own experiences and examining the social, historical, and cultural contexts that shape them, researchers can identify the ways in which power operates in society and its effects on marginalized individuals and communities (Ellis et al., 2011). Critical autoethnography offers a way for understanding the complex relationships between individuals and society, and for promoting social justice and equity. It allows researchers to engage with their own experiences and emotions, while also contributing to broader conversations about power, privilege, and oppression.

Boylorn and Orbe (2016) define critical autoethnography as a method of research that seeks to challenge and disrupt dominant narratives and power structures. Boylorn and Orbe (2016) suggest that critical autoethnography involves a three-stage process. The first stage is personal experience, where the researcher reflects on their own lived experiences and how they have been shaped by societal norms and structures of power. The second stage is cultural analysis, where the researcher examines the larger social and cultural context that shapes their experiences and how they intersect with systems of power and oppression. The third stage is

critical self-reflection, where the researcher reflects on their own biases, assumptions, and positionality within the research process.

Critical autoethnography is also a method of research that allows researchers to engage with their own experiences in meaningful and transformative ways. By using personal experiences to explore larger social issues and power dynamics, researchers can make important contributions to our understanding of social justice, inequality, and the human experience (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021). Boylorn and Orbe view critical autoethnography as a means for amplifying marginalized voices and disrupting systems of power and oppression in research and society at large.

Critical autoethnography has been criticized by some as a type of research that lacks rigor and has been derogatorily referred to as “soft research” or “me-search.” Critics claim that it is not theoretical, cannot be generalized, and is too self-centered. This criticism seems to stem from traditional views of what constitutes legitimate scientific research and knowledge production. According to Ellis (2009), critiques of critical autoethnography often come from scholars who have different goals, objectives, and perspectives, and may find something objectionable or irritating in this method of research. Some critics may feel threatened by the emergence of this alternative research method, and therefore feel the need to challenge it to uphold the dominant position of their own preferred research methods (Ellis et al. 2011). This criticism may also reflect broader tensions and debates within education around the value and legitimacy of different research approaches, and the ways in which knowledge is produced and spread. The growing popularity of autoethnography may be seen as a challenge to traditional views of what constitutes valid research, and this may be driving some of the critical attention and pushback that the method has received (Ellis et al., 2011).

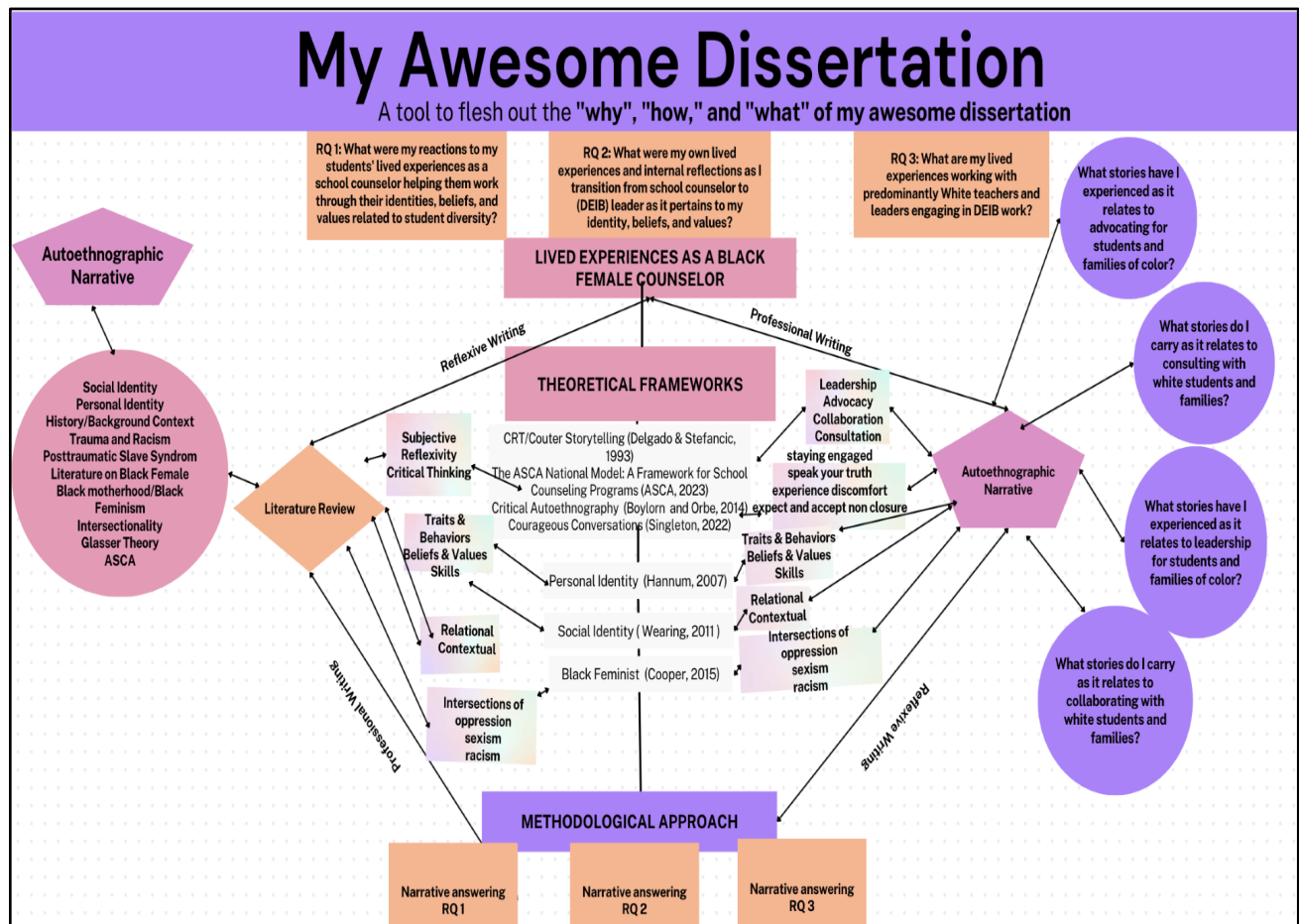
However, Holman Jones (2016) disputes this assumption by stating that the term "critical" in "critical autoethnography" serves as a reminder that theory is not a fixed and autonomous set of ideas, but a continuous process of linking concrete and abstract, thought and action, aesthetics and criticism. Performance studies scholar Della Pollock (2016 as cited in Holman Jones, 2016) describes this process as "living bodies of thought" that are constantly evolving. Despite the criticisms of autoethnography, critical autoethnography has benefits that should not be overlooked. By legitimizing first-person accounts of discrimination and difference, critical autoethnography can contribute to the critique of colonialism, racism, sexism, nationalism, regionalism, xenophobia, and ethnocentrism (Boylorn & Orbe, 2021).

Considering these criticisms, I have deliberately opted for critical autoethnography as my chosen methodology. This approach allows me to share my personal experiences and present a counter-story, focusing on the journey of a Black female school counselor in a leadership position within predominantly White environments.

My Conceptual Framework: Braiding Critical Autoethnography

Initially, I offer my conceptual framework in Figure 3.1. This is my original framework which evolved into a braiding metaphor to guide this autoethnography. In Figure 3.2, I then outline each key section my methodology and offer an explanation of my process of autoethnographic writing in a manner that blends multiple theories, writing as method, and my lived experiences as they relate to the research purpose and questions.

Figure 3.1. *My Awesome Dissertation: A tool to flesh out the “why,” “how,” and “what of my awesome dissertation*



Note: Here I offer a conceptual framework that guides this autoethnography.

I will proceed by breaking down each significant section and providing an explanation of my autoethnographic writing approach, which combines various theories, literature review, autoethnographic narratives, and draws from my lived experiences in direct relation to the research's purpose and questions. But first, here I elaborate on the use of braiding as a methodological metaphor for my narrative building.

Metaphors can make complex concepts more accessible to readers. The braiding metaphor provides a visual and conceptual framework that can help readers better grasp the intricate interplay of identity, experience, and transformation explored in the dissertation. By using a braiding metaphor, the dissertation contributes to the discourse on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. It emphasizes the need to recognize and honor the diverse strands of identity and experience within myself and my journey.

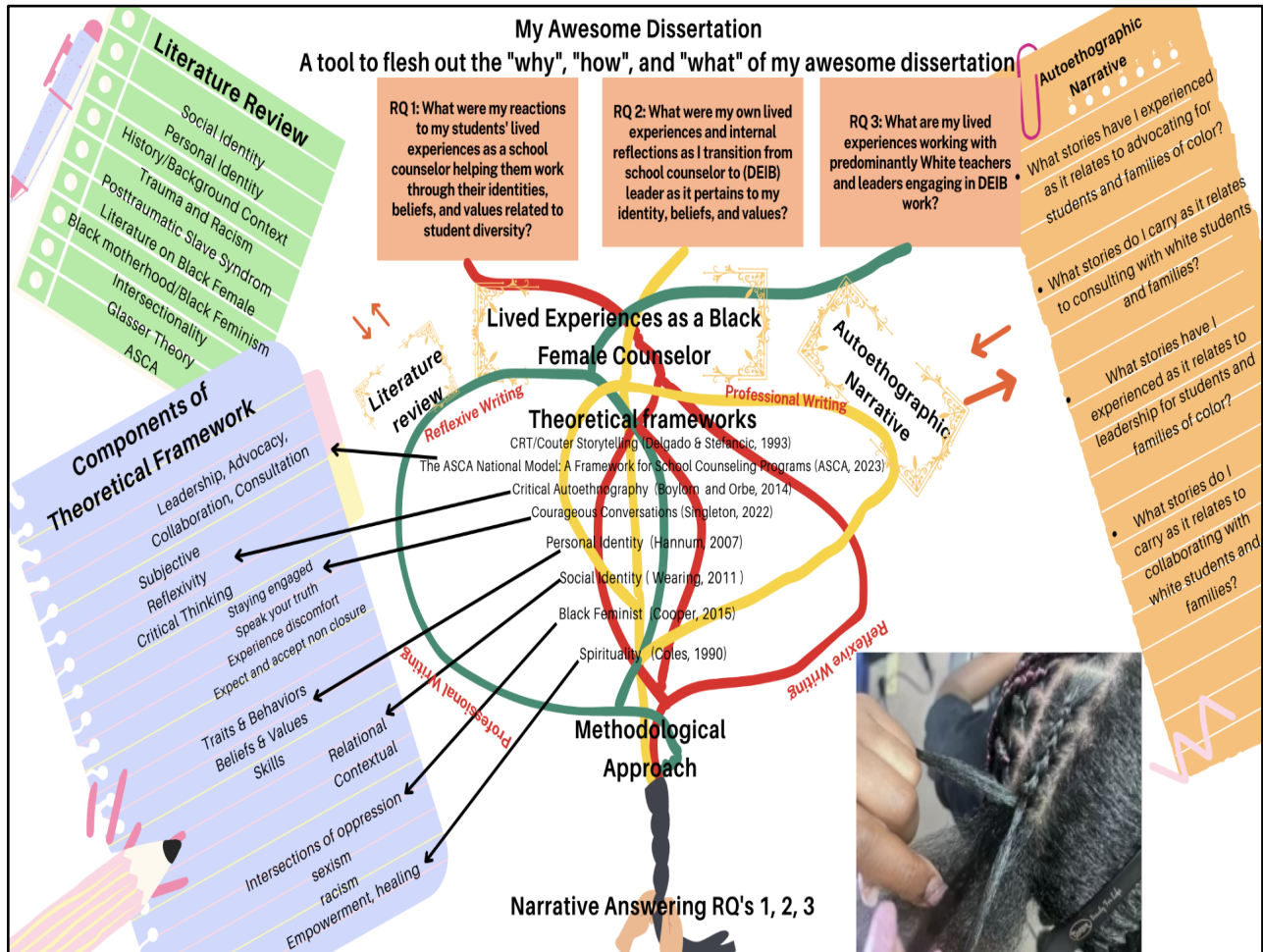
Starting with the foundational research questions, I work outward to weave lived experiences, theoretical frameworks, autoethnographic narratives, and literature review to form a cohesive and textured whole. This methodological braid culminates in the narrative approach, mirroring the final twist of a braid, and ultimately offers insightful answers to the questions that initially set me on this path. Overall, the foundation of my braid finds its roots in my research questions and the first couple of chapters. This forms the sturdy base upon which I build. Just as hair braiding intertwines strands, I now begin to weave more of my lived experiences as a Black female counselor into the mix, as well as my experiences transitioning to DEIB leadership. These experiences act as threads that blend with my theoretical frameworks, much like strands of hair intertwining harmoniously.

As I progress, I pull in additional strands. These strands represent ongoing examination of my own lived experiences and autoethnographic narratives (to be explained later in this

chapter), as well as ongoing interaction with the literature review to provide some scholarly depth and context. Their integration adds depth, texture, and complexity to the braid, creating a tapestry that is fuller and richer. In this intricate process, the dissertation changes into an embodiment of interwoven elements, reflective of the intricate act of braiding. With each strand interlaced, a methodological approach emerges, and the meticulously crafted braid formed by combining lived experiences, theoretical frameworks, autoethnographic narratives, as well as relevant literature, mirrors the comprehensive methodology that underpins my dissertation.

This methodological approach acts as the finishing touch, what Kim (2015) might call narrative smoothing, much like the final twist of a braid. Through this approach, I find the answers to my research questions, just as the culmination of the braid signifies completion. The braiding metaphor also allows for the exploration and representation of the complexity of identity and experience. Braiding has cultural and historical significance in many communities such as the Black community, and can symbolize unity, strength, and resilience. By using this metaphor, the dissertation can tap into these cultural and historical resonances, bring different elements together to create a unified whole. In the context of this dissertation, braiding can symbolize my journey of self-discovery, personal growth, and transition into a DEIB leadership role so I may offer it to the literature for other scholars and practitioners to build from; or rather, start developing their own unique narrative braids.

Figure 3.2. *My Awesome Dissertation: Braiding as a Framework*



Critical Race Theory and Counter-storytelling

While this autoethnography is informed by core tenets of Critical Race Theory (as described in Chapter 2), I will be leaning in particular to the notion of Counter-storytelling. Counter-storytelling is a critical methodology developed by Solórzano and Yosso (2002) in the context of critical race theory. It involves the telling of stories that challenge dominant narratives about race and power, particularly those that perpetuate racism, sexism, and other forms of oppression. Counter-storytelling is based on the idea that dominant narratives about race and power are often based on false assumptions and biases that ignore the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling aims to disrupt these narratives by centering on the experiences and perspectives of those who have been historically oppressed. In practice, counter-storytelling involves individuals or groups sharing their personal narratives and experiences of racism, discrimination, and oppression (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). These stories are often told in response to dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and promote inequality. By telling these stories, counter storytellers aim to challenge these dominant narratives, provide alternative perspectives, and bring attention to the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities (Merriweather Hunn, Guy, & Mangliitz, 2006). Counter-storytelling can take many forms, including oral histories, personal narratives, poetry, and other forms of creative expression. It can also be used in a variety of contexts, including education, social justice activism, and community organizing. Counter-storytelling can challenge dominant narratives and promote social justice. By centering the experiences and perspectives of marginalized communities, it can help to raise awareness about the ways in which power and oppression operate in society and promote a more just and

equitable world (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Counter-storytelling is important in autoethnography because it gives a voice to the marginalized voices.

Embracing Vulnerability: Courageous Conversations on the Journey

In crafting this critical autoethnography, I intend to integrate and honor Singleton's 2021 four-part agreement of staying engaged, speaking my truth, experiencing discomfort, and expecting and accepting non-closure. As I honor these principles, I invite readers to do the same. These principles will serve as the foundation for how I approach and structure my narrative.

Throughout my writing, I commit to staying actively engaged with the subject matter and with my readers. I strive to create a compelling and thought-provoking narrative that encourages readers to immerse themselves in the experiences and emotions I share. By maintaining a sense of curiosity and openness, I invite readers to join me in reflecting on the themes of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging and consider their own role in promoting positive change.

As a Black female counselor turned DEIB leader, my goal is to authentically speak my truth. I share my personal experiences, challenges, understandings and vulnerabilities. By being transparent about my journey, I hope to validate the experiences of others who may have faced similar struggles. Through this honesty, I aim to create a relatable and honest narrative that resonates with readers, fostering a sense of connection and empathy.

Conversations about race, identity, and social justice can be uncomfortable, but I am committed to embracing that discomfort in my writing. I attempt to unravel the complexities of my experiences and the systemic issues I have encountered. By sharing these truths, I seek to challenge preconceived notions, disrupt harmful narratives, and inspire readers to reflect on their own biases and privileges.

I recognize that some topics and experiences may not have neat resolutions or clear-cut answers. Throughout this critical autoethnography, I allow space for ambiguity, acknowledging that certain issues may remain unresolved. This non-closure is a reflection of the ongoing nature of DEIB work. It invites readers to continue grappling with these complexities beyond the text, inspiring them to take action and seek further understanding.

By adhering to this four-part agreement, my critical autoethnography is a platform for authentic and transformative storytelling. It encourages readers to engage in self-reflection, confront uncomfortable truths, and join in the ongoing conversation about diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Ultimately, I hope my narrative sparks meaningful dialogues and contributes to a collective journey towards a more equitable and just society. As I share my experiences and insights as a Black female counselor and DEIB leader, I encourage readers to do the same. I hope to inspire bravery in others to open up, share their perspectives, and contribute to meaningful discussions about diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Moving forward with my writing, these protocols of courageous conversations serve as my guiding principles. I aim to authentically share my lived experiences and perspectives, not to dictate a universal truth, but to start meaningful conversations that challenge societal norms and foster greater understanding and empathy. I invite readers to join me on this journey, stay engaged in the dialogue, and collectively work towards a more equitable and inclusive practice.

Code Switching

In Gumperz's 1982 definition, code-switching is described as the practice of switching between two or more languages or dialects, often influenced by social, cultural, or contextual factors. It serves various purposes, including expressing identity, building connections, and adapting to the communication style of the speaker or those present. Additionally, code-

switching is a linguistic and sociolinguistic occurrence where a speaker switches between different languages or dialects within a conversation. It can also involve shifting between distinct linguistic patterns or behaviors while using the same language (Nilep, 2006).

Myers-Scotton (1993) proposes that each language is associated with distinct social roles, known as rights-and-obligations (RO) sets. When individuals select a specific language to communicate, they are indicating their comprehension of the prevailing situation and, notably, the role they perceive as suitable for them in that particular context. However, the use of multiple languages by individuals may indicate their readiness to participate in a negotiation regarding the pertinent social roles, implying a possible adjustment or adaptation in their roles based on the languages they utilize.

During my autoethnographic journey, I focused my writing prompts (refer to appendix A) on core aspects of social identity, integrating the concept of the right to engage in code-switching. This approach, influenced by Wearing's research (2011), allowed me to illuminate the intricate connections between social identity and relational and contextual factors. Through this comprehensive method, I was able to conduct a more thorough examination of the underlying dynamics within the lives of students, families, and my own.

Braiding Multiple Frameworks: Autoethnographic Process and Writing Prompts

As indicated in the autoethnographic process (Figure 3.2), a sequence of four rounds of writing prompts was devised to address each research question comprehensively. These prompts, totaling thirty-four in number, are meticulously documented in appendix A. They constituted the foundational framework for my autoethnographic journey, serving as the initial strands the writing prompts provided structure and direction towards braiding a deeper understanding of the research landscape. Incorporating insights from Kim (2015) and Pierre and Adams (2015) with

writing as method and site of inquiry, the evolution of my writing prompts underwent a process akin to narrative smoothing, resembling the final twist of a braid. Over this journey, the writing prompts underwent iterative refinement, adapting in response to emergent insights and evolving perspectives. The culmination of this process is reflected in the subsequent chapter, where the refined synthesis of findings is presented.

The Ethical Standard in this Walk of Qualitative Research

In my critical autoethnography, ethical considerations take precedence. As I navigate the intersectionality of my personal and social identity, I am keenly aware of the responsibility I bear in representing not only myself but also a broader community encompassing counselors, women, mothers, educators, leaders, and my students. This sentiment resonates with Lapadat (2017), who underscores that we exist within interconnected communities comprised of family members, friends, colleagues, and others with whom we interact daily. Hence, autoethnographic narratives of our experiences extend beyond individual accounts; they implicate the relational connections in our lives. Guided by relational ethical standards, I approach this research journey with sensitivity and respect, acknowledging the potential impact of my words and narratives on others. My commitment to ethical conduct compels me to delicately balance sharing my truth while safeguarding the privacy and dignity of those involved in my narratives.

As I engage in critical autoethnography, I grapple with the complexities of power dynamics, identity, and cultural sensitivity. In telling one's own stories publicly without the protection of anonymity, an autoethnographic researcher risks stigma, negative judgments by university colleagues, and undesired career consequences (Lapadat, 2017). Being a once Black female counselor now DEIB leader, I understand the importance of understanding how researcher vulnerability plays a part in writing such as this. Recognizing my own biases and

positionality in this research process I aim to present a nuanced and authentic representation of the lived experiences acknowledging the diversity and richness of voices that shape this narrative.

Ethics in critical autoethnography also means embracing reflexivity and transparency. I do believe that through CAP ethnography and ethical standards I uphold this critical autoethnography through the necessary rigor of qualitative research. I approach this project with attention to relational ethics, and I utilize pseudonyms to further protect their identities, as well as disguising genders.

Self-awareness allows me to acknowledge any potential biases and limitations in my storytelling and encourages me to remain open to feedback and critique. Through my ethical commitment, I aspire to contribute to the broader conversation on diversity, equity, inclusion, belonging, identity, trauma and so much more while being mindful of the responsibility that comes with sharing these stories as a Black female counselor transitioned to DEIB leader.

Conclusion

It is my hope in the following chapters to continue to explore my lived experiences as a Black female school counselor while transitioning to a DEIB leadership role and how I navigate that transition and continue to support students, teachers, and leaders who experience racial conflicts and or tense learning environments. To do this I will consider what stories have I experienced as it relates to advocating for students and families of color? What stories do I carry as it relates to consulting with white students and families? What stories have I experienced as it relates to leadership for students and families of color? What stories do I carry as it relates to collaborating with white students and families?

Chapter 4 - Forming New Braids from Counseling to DEIB

Leadership

Part 1: Early Beginnings as a Student and Young Professional in Predominantly White Environments

Chapter 4 is a blend of what would be in traditional dissertation chapters four and five where the stories are synthesized with the literature alongside discussion and implications for practice, meaning they are all embedded throughout the chapter to align with particular parts of the story.

Previously, I discussed the idea of weaving different concepts together to form a single braid. Now, I want to expand on this concept by introducing the notion of not only braiding but completing an entire head of hair. In Figure 4.1 below, there is an image of my child's hair. As a mother, I undertake the task of styling my daughter's hair every two weeks, a process that can range from as little as 45 minutes to as long as nine hours, depending on the intricacy of the braiding style. My mom did the same for me, as did her mother. For the hairstyle depicted in Figure 4.1, it typically requires an hour and a half to complete. This aspect of motherhood encompasses not only the physical act of styling but also encompasses moments of bonding, preparing for events, sharing stories, and getting ready for church, among other cherished experiences.

Figure 4.1. *Braiding Not Complete*



If I simply do one or even two braids, her head appears incomplete. Even if I envisioned a specific hairstyle, failing to complete one braid before starting a new one obscures the beauty that can emerge from the intricacy of braids. Here I start a new braid, beginning with three strands: *My own upbringing in a predominately White environment*, *Being a Young Professional*, *My Educational Enrichment Journey*, and *My Experience as a Counselor*; I begin with an overview of each followed by a series of narratives.

Figure 4.2. *A New Braid*



My own upbringing in a predominately White environment: This strand represents the core of my personal history and upbringing. Growing up in a predominantly White environment profoundly shaped my early perceptions, values, and cultural experiences. It serves as the base layer, intertwining with subsequent strands to form a comprehensive narrative of my journey.

Being a young Professional: The second strand signifies my journey as a young professional navigating the complexities of my career. This includes my educational and early professional experiences, the challenges I faced, and the growth I achieved. This strand represents my evolving identity and the integration of skills and knowledge acquired during this phase.

Educational Enrichment Journey: This strand symbolizes my commitment to continuous academic growth and development. It encompasses my pursuit of knowledge, academic achievements, and the ongoing process of learning. This strand also reflects my dedication to academic excellence and captures the essence of intellectual advancement within these learning moments.

My experiences as a counselor: While these experiences evolved and are different from being a young professional, this strand weaves in the unique experiences, insights, and challenges I encountered in my role as a counselor. It encompasses my professional growth, lessons learned, and the impact of my work on individuals and communities. This strand contributes a layer of expertise and a deeper understanding of human experience.

As I braid these strands, the result is a meticulously woven dissertation that pulls together scholarly conversations across theoretical and practitioner spaces. This composition weaves through trials, contemplations, and resolutions, contributing not only to the courageous conversations on race but expanding its threads into a rich tapestry of multifaceted narratives and profound insights. The act of braiding transforms individual strands into a unified narrative, symbolizing the interconnected journey of my experiences, academic growth, and commitment to fostering courageous dialogues on various facets of societal discourse.

My Own Upbringing in Predominately White Environments

Growing up in Fort Worth, Texas, shaped my early experiences in ways that were both formative and challenging. As a resident of this community, I found myself immersed in a predominantly White environment, where diversity was often an exception rather than the norm. The rich cultural tapestry that makes up America seemed distant from my everyday reality. Attending school in the White Settlement district (actual name of the district) further underscored this lack of representation, as I consistently found myself as the sole Black or person of color in my classes. This reality not only highlighted the stark contrast between my background and those of my peers but also underscored the critical need for greater diversity and inclusivity in education.

Navigating the educational landscape in White Settlement often felt isolating, as my experiences were markedly different from those of my classmates. The absence of representation in the curriculum and teaching staff made it challenging to see myself reflected in the educational materials and role models presented to us. This lack of diversity not only affected my sense of belonging but also raised important questions about the inclusivity of educational systems. My journey through these formative years fueled my passion for advocating for equitable representation and fostering environments where every student, regardless of their background, can see themselves positively represented in their education.

Despite the hurdles of being raised in Fort Worth and attending a school district like White Settlement, I encountered pockets of diversity where people of color not only thrived but were also prominently represented. The church I attended from the age of five to 18 served as a consistent guide, showcasing Black excellence in various aspects. Witnessing successful Black marriages, educated Black members, and accomplished Black professionals within my church community provided me with a perspective that differed from the media portrayal and the sanitized educational environment prevalent in predominantly White settings. These instances served as crucial counterpoints, offering a more nuanced and authentic representation of the diversity and success within the Black community. This is also the foundation of my spiritual layers of my personal identity.

Spirituality As a Part of Personal Identity

"Spring up O Well"

Author: Unknown

I've got a river of life flowing out of me
Makes the lame to walk and the blind to see,
Opens prison doors, sets the captives free.
I've got a river of life flowing out of me.
Spring up, O well, within my soul.
Spring up, O well, and make me whole
Spring up, O well, and give to me
That life abundantly.

The song "*Spring up O Well*" expresses a longing for a life that is not only abundant but transformative—a life that overflows with positivity, healing, and liberation. It reflects a spiritual and emotional journey towards inner richness and the aspiration for a holistic and fulfilling existence. This song frequently resonated with me during church services. Seated on the pews, I vividly remember enthusiastically rising to my feet, illustrating a sense of a life-affirming river springing up within my soul every time we sang the verse "*Spring up, O well.*"

I attended church before I knew what church was. The church I remember the most is one I attended with my mom and four siblings. When I visit Fort Worth Texas, I still attend this church, Christian Outreach Center, a non-denominational church, where the pastors were Johnny and Rose King. Before he passed, Pastor King would often speak directly to the youth saying, "*You are made of good stuff.*" I remember feeling like he was talking directly to me when he said these words.

Pastor King would also sing a song by Crystal Lewis (1996) called *Beauty for Ashes*. The lyrics are as follows:

He gives beauty for ashes
Strength for fear
Gladness for mourning
Peace for despair
When sorrow seems to surround you
When suffering hangs heavy over your head
Know that tomorrow brings
Wholeness and healing
God knows your need
Just believe what He said
He gives beauty for ashes
Strength for fear Gladness for mourning
Peace for despair
When what you've done keeps you from moving on
When fear wants to make itself at home in your heart
Know that forgiveness brings
Wholeness and healing
God knows your need
Just believe what He said

He gives beauty for ashes
Strength for fear Gladness for mourning
Peace for despair
I once was lost but God has found me
Though I was bound I've been set free
I've been made righteous in His sight
A display of His splendor all can see
He gives beauty for ashes
Strength for fear Gladness for mourning
Peace for despair

This song communicates a message of encouragement, emphasizing the belief that God can bring about positive transformation, healing, and freedom in the lives of individuals who trust in his promises and grace. This song and the words of Pastor King saying, “*You are made of good stuff,*” would be the foundation of spirituality in my life.

My own encounters with spirituality have significantly shaped my understanding of personal identity. As I've engaged with individuals from diverse backgrounds and belief systems in my role as a counselor, I've come to appreciate the intricate relationship between spirituality and personal identity. Through these encounters, I've recognized that spirituality is a profound dimension of one's identity, often influencing one's values, beliefs, and behaviors (Cohen, 2020). These experiences have taught me that personal identity is multifaceted and dynamic. It encompasses not only one's cultural and racial identity but also their spiritual and religious intersectionality. An individuals' spiritual beliefs can be a central aspect of their identity, providing a sense of purpose, meaning, and moral compass in their lives (Cohen, 2020).

Spirituality has been an integral part of my life since well before my formal education began. My upbringing was deeply rooted in the church, and I found myself in its welcoming embrace every Sunday, if not more frequently. Beyond the traditional Sunday services, our family was engaged in various church-related activities, whether it was prayer meetings, choir practice, or play rehearsals. These gatherings brought my siblings, my mother, and me together in a shared commitment to our faith and spiritual growth.

Being raised in this environment not only instilled in me a strong sense of spiritual connection but also fostered a deep appreciation for the value of community and shared experiences. It was within these church walls that I first encountered the power of collective belief and values serving as instruments for spiritual expression and personal growth. This early exposure to spirituality played a foundational role in shaping my understanding of faith, values, and the profound impact that these elements can have on an individual's life.

As I embarked on my educational journey, I carried with me the rich braiding of experiences and values that my spiritual upbringing had interconnected into my personal identity. These formative years of spiritual engagement continue to influence the way I perceive the world, approach challenges, and connect with others in both my personal and professional life. My encounters with spirituality have underscored the importance of respecting and understanding the diverse spiritual perspectives of individuals. It has illuminated the significance of cultural humility and sensitivity, as individuals' spiritual identities are deeply intertwined with their cultural backgrounds (Cohen, 2020).

My experiences with spirituality have deepened my comprehension of personal identity, emphasizing its nature and the role that spirituality plays in shaping who we are (Cohen, 2020).

These encounters have enriched my ability as a counselor to appreciate the diverse dimensions of personal identity and offer more holistic and culturally competent support to those I serve.

My own encounters with spirituality have exerted a profound influence on my approach to interacting with my students as they navigate the complex process of forming their personal identities. These encounters have informed me of the intricate relationship between spirituality and personal identity and have provided me with valuable insights into the challenges and rewards of this journey. Coles (1990) emphasizes the significance of understanding and respecting the spiritual dimensions of a person's identity, particularly during the formative years of adolescence. It is during this period that young individuals are exploring their beliefs, values, and personal identities.

Through my own experiences, I've learned that embracing and validating the spiritual dimensions of individuals' identities fosters a more inclusive and nurturing environment for their self-exploration and self-definition. These spiritual dimensions encompass core values, existential contemplations, and their sense of place in the world (Johnson, 2013). Understanding student-defined spiritual or religious beliefs and practices can be a significant avenue for connecting with students and very useful (Johnson, 2013).

My encounters with spirituality have also underscored the importance of cultural humility (Coles, 1990). Acknowledging and respecting the diverse spiritual perspectives and backgrounds of my students is crucial. It has taught me that each student's journey of self-discovery is unique, influenced by their cultural and spiritual context, and should be met with empathy and open-mindedness. In essence, my personal encounters with spirituality have contributed to my ability to guide and support students in the delicate process of forming their personal identities (Coles, 1990). By recognizing the spiritual dimension of their adolescence journey and embracing the

principles of cultural humility, I made efforts to create an environment where they felt valued, understood, and empowered in their pursuit of self-discovery.

Adolescence is the phase of life between childhood and adulthood, from ages 10 to 19. It is a unique stage of human development and an important time for laying the foundations of good health (Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). I was born into a world that lacked representation. My parents, who are both of African descent, raised me in a predominantly White neighborhood. From the very beginning, I found myself in a situation where I was the only Black child in my school and often the only Black face in my entire community. As I grew older, this lack of representation began to have a profound impact on my sense of identity and belonging.

Personal Encounters with (lack of) Representation: History Class

This recollection describes a moment I grasped the significance of representation. It was during a history class in a Texas middle school when we were learning about prominent historical figures. As the teacher went through a list of names, I couldn't help but notice that none of them looked like me. There was no one who resembled my heritage or shared my cultural background. It was at that moment that I felt an overwhelming sense of invisibility and isolation. I began to question whether people who looked like me had ever contributed anything meaningful to history.

This experience made me acutely aware of the power of representation. The issue I faced was my inability to express the profound sense of isolation and displacement I felt within me. It appears I was there to passively absorb the stories of the past, but none of the significant figures or heroes resembled me; they looked like my classmates. This made me feel like I didn't belong. The few historical figures who did share my racial background were often portrayed in the context of hardships or, worse, death. The overwhelming feeling that settled upon me was one of

inadequacy. As someone who was deeply underrepresented, I struggled to find an outlet for these overwhelming emotions because all my teachers and even my school counselor resembled the historical figures depicted in our textbooks – those who had achieved positive recognition. None of them looked like me, and I felt they couldn't possibly comprehend the depth of my feelings of inadequacy and underrepresentation. This was in stark contrast to what I was able to see in church – heroes and professionals who looked like me, talked like me, sang like me, and more. In school, with no one to confide in, I turned inward. I chose silence and diligently completed my assignments, a form of assimilation; or maybe, adaptation and survival. It seemed like the most practical course of action to maintain peace and avoid drawing attention to myself. However, this assimilation only compounded the emptiness and loneliness that had taken root within me.

I developed this approach through personal experiences in which my identity, beliefs, and values appeared to be disregarded or inconsequential. These experiences left me with a strong desire to advocate for improved conditions for students. This also happened in English class, as well.

Sophomore English

It was a regular day in my 10th-grade English class, and we were engrossed in our study of John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The classroom buzzed with discussions about the characters, their dreams, and the harsh realities of the Great Depression. Little did I know that the day would take a jarring turn that would challenge not only my worldview but the entire classroom's dynamics.

As we were reading a particularly distressing section of the book, the teacher was called out of the room and told the class to keep reading (it was the 90s; teachers left their classes

unattended quite often). A White student named Tom, who had always been outspoken but not in a confrontational way, suddenly piped up. His statement cut through the silence like a knife.

"I don't understand why people make such a big deal about the N-word,"

Tom blurted out; his voice filled with an unsettling indifference. The teacher came back into the room and asked, *"Alright so where are we at?"* Tom exclaimed, his voice filled with an unsettling nonchalance, *"If I were around when Dr. Martin Luther King was, I would have thrown a brick at him. He was just causing trouble."*

I felt a collective gasp ripple through the classroom. Tom's words hung in the air like a dark cloud. My heart pounded, and I could feel the weight of his statement on my shoulders. I, as a Black student, was in the uncomfortable position of hearing such a disturbing perspective. The teacher, Mrs. Johnson, who had always encouraged open dialogue and critical thinking, took a deep breath before responding. She reminded us of the historical context and the struggles faced by African Americans during that time. She stressed the importance of empathy, understanding, and the need to approach sensitive topics with care.

Tom's words had laid bare a stark contrast between his perspective and mine. To me, the word Nigger was a symbol of centuries of oppression and racism, while to him, it seemed like just a word. The thought of someone advocating violence against Dr. Martin Luther King, a hero of the Civil Rights Movement, was incomprehensible to me.

The danger of events such as this, lies in the risk that such exposure to derogatory terms which represent a minority of students may lead students to associate their racial identity with derogatory language, reinforcing harmful stereotypes. Consequently, this may foster a skewed

student view where being Black is synonymous with being marginalized, degraded, and perceived as inferior. This situation shaped my views of educational systems.

I now believe educational institutions must carefully evaluate the wider ramifications of their curricular selections to prevent any unintended reinforcement of racial prejudices or the isolation of students based on their race. This situation personally left me with enduring feelings of concern and has significantly influenced my perspective to this day. In an increasingly diverse and interconnected world, fostering an inclusive educational environment is not just a matter of social responsibility but also a means to empower students to challenge stereotypes and engage in critical discussions and courageous conversations about race, identity, and social justice.

In a related experience, my school system counted a book that degraded a race of people as a classic while I saw such literature demoralizing. This reflection illuminated the importance of advocating for inclusivity, confronting prejudice, and striving for equity within the educational system. This experience not only deepened my commitment to creating a more welcoming and just learning environment but also fortified my determination to empower students from all backgrounds to navigate a world that often underestimates their worth. It is a reminder that our individual perspectives hold the power to effect change, and by challenging institutional norms that perpetuate bias or exclusion, we can contribute to a more equitable educational landscape for generations to come.

It wasn't until I reached college where I met my husband, who hailed from Tennessee with strong, proud family roots, that my eyes were truly opened to literature written by African Americans. Through his guidance and shared moments of reading, I began to grasp some of the life lessons my mother had attempted to instill in me. She used to say, *"Learn all you can but know that some lessons can't be found in history books."* These words were her way of teaching

me to follow the rules and gain knowledge, but also to recognize that there were essential lessons about our heritage, strength, and power that would never be found in the sanitized history of the predominantly white education system and literature. My then-boyfriend, now husband, had a unique ability to call out situations and systems for what they were: unjust and geared toward White students. My mother, on the other hand, did what mothers do best – she sought to protect, encourage, and educate me all at once. It was never an easy task, but when approached in this manner, truths gradually unveiled themselves, and a more comprehensive picture emerged, one painted with a deeper understanding of the world around me.

Both methods, the wisdom shared by my husband and the nurturing guidance from my mother, were essential for me to grasp a crucial realization. Yes, I had been educated in a predominantly White system where I was underrepresented, but being underrepresented did not mean I had to remain so. It didn't mean that future African American students going through a predominantly White education system had to accept underrepresentation as their fate. It meant that I had an opportunity to exceed the limitations that the world might try to impose on me. I came to understand that there were trailblazers and heroes who looked just like me, who ventured forth and accomplished remarkable feats. I realized that I, too, could go down in history as a trailblazer, an individual, or a role model who paved the way for other young African Americans. If nothing else, I could be present as a resource and ally to young Black students, ensuring they had the support and guidance they needed to break through barriers and achieve their full potential.

I started seeking out books, movies, and role models who shared my background: My own personal renaissance. I was fortunate to come across literature and media that featured

strong Black characters and influential Black figures from history. It was through these representations that I began to gain a sense of pride and a connection to my heritage.

As I continued my academic journey and eventually pursued a career in counseling, I couldn't help but draw parallels to my personal experiences. I realized that the lack of representation in my early years had not only affected my self-esteem and identity but also my understanding of the world and my place in it. It was then that I understood the importance of ensuring that Black students and adolescents have access to counselors and mentors who look like them and can relate to their experiences.

Just as I found strength and a sense of identity through representation, I believe that Black students during their adolescence can benefit immensely from counselors and mentors who understand their unique struggles and can provide them with the guidance and support they need. My personal story serves as a testament to the profound impact of representation on one's development, and it motivates me to contribute to the broader discussion on how we can better support Black students during this crucial phase of their lives.

My journey from childhood lacking representation to a career in counseling has highlighted the importance of this topic. My experiences have shown me that representation is not merely a matter of numbers or statistics but a deeply personal and transformative force in the lives of Black students during adolescence.

Sexist or Feminist?

True representation is crucial, encompassing not only the need for diverse voices but also an understanding of feminist and sexist ideologies. Sexism can refer to discrimination, prejudice, or stereotyping based on a person's sex or gender. Sexism in nature can occur against any gender,

but it is often associated with discrimination against women. As it involves treating individuals differently based on their gender, typically favoring one gender over the other.

Feminism is a socio-political movement and ideology that advocates for the equality of the sexes. It seeks to address and rectify the historical and ongoing inequalities and injustices faced by women (Bass, 2012). Feminism in nature aims to promote equal rights, opportunities, and treatment for women. Feminism can take various forms, including advocacy for legal changes, challenging societal norms and stereotypes, and promoting awareness about gender-based issues.

As a Black female, my position in the debate between sexist versus feminist became evident during my fourth year at Kansas Wesleyan. In a political science course, my professor boldly declared his sexist stance on the first day, creating a significant impact on me. He stated, *“My name is Dr. Bruce, and I will be your Poli Sci teacher. A few things you need to know about me is I am married I am a professor, and I am sexist.”* It was awkward. I had no words and instantly I thought, *“I hate Poli. Sci.”*

The weight of having a sexist White male teacher intensified as my grades began to plummet throughout the year, eventually reaching an F. Married to my husband, Brandon, who was in his first year of teaching, I confided in him about my struggles, as midterms were just a few short weeks away, expressing my dislike for the class and my intention to fail because of the professor's sexist admission.

Brandon a now Black male educator, challenged this perspective, urging me to consider the implications of failing a class simply because I didn't like the professor. He encouraged me to confront the teacher and share my feelings. The conversation went something like this.

Me: *“So I am pretty sure I am going to fail Poli Sci.”*

Brandon: *"What? How are you failing the class? What is going on??"*

Me: *"Well, there's nothing I can do because the teacher told me that he's sexist, so I don't like him and I'm just gonna fail the class."*

Brandon: *"Ralita, that does not make any sense. Just because you don't like a teacher does not mean that you should fail his class. If anything, you work harder so you can show him just how smart you are. Did you ever go and talk to this teacher about what he said and how he made you feel?"*

Me: *"No."*

Brandon: *"Well, I think you should go and talk to him. Tomorrow."*

Following his advice, I met with the professor the next day, questioning his sexist statement and its impact on our interactions. Surprisingly, he identified himself as to relating to sexist ideology, clarifying that his beliefs included reservations about women being drafted into war, opening doors for themselves, and favoring a certain level of catering to women. Dr. Bruce³ valued women enough to not to force them into combat, and wanted to urge men to be chivalrous so women could feel valued for the qualities they bring to society. After hearing his views on why he thought he was sexist, I responded with, *"Shoot I'm sexist too!"* I want those things for women as well, as I was raised with similar ideologies about finding balance between empowerment for women, but also emphasizing a chivalrous form of respect at the same time.

However, central to this narrative lies a crucial element: my decision to engage in a conversation with him, emphasizing the importance of reciprocal dialogue to foster mutual understanding and self-awareness. While my remark may have been somewhat light-hearted, it's

essential to clarify that I do not condone sexism. Rather, by delving into a deeper understanding of my professor, I came to recognize his genuine regard for women, which we mutually acknowledged during our interaction. This revelation opened a dialogue – an early courageous conversation in my growth as a young adult. I acknowledged my own alignment with some of his views, leading to laughter and a shared understanding. Consequently, my perception of the teacher transformed. It seemed we found common ground, and I no longer felt he was against me. Instead, it became apparent that he wanted me to excel and push myself academically. Ultimately, I passed the class with an A, thanks to a conversation that uncovered not only common ground but also an understanding of our personal beliefs, values, and diverse identities.

In the aftermath of this encounter, I embraced a feminist perspective. I want women to see themselves not only as powerful individuals capable of breaking through societal norms but also as contributors to a collective narrative of equality and empowerment. Embracing feminism means recognizing the intrinsic value of every woman's voice, experiences, and choices. It entails encouraging women to navigate their unique paths, free from the constraints of traditional gender roles and expectations.

However, it is crucial to note that embracing a feminist perspective does not diminish the appreciation and respect for the power that women wield. In fact, feminism advocates for the recognition and celebration of women's strength, achievements, and contributions to society. It emphasizes that reverence and respect are not mutually exclusive from the principles of equality and empowerment. Feminism encourages a redefinition of societal norms, allowing women to be revered not for conforming to traditional roles but for their individuality, talents, and capabilities. It seeks to break down restrictive stereotypes that limit women's potential and highlights the importance of valuing women for their intellect, skills, and diverse qualities.

This experience highlighted the importance of engaging in conversations that bridge gaps, fostering understanding, and challenging preconceptions. As a feminist, I became an advocate for equality, recognizing the significance of dialogue in fostering mutual understanding and breaking down barriers. Not only common ground was found, but an understanding of each other's personals, beliefs, values - and diverse identities.

My Growth as a Young Professional

Embarking on my college educational journey as a young Black female professional carries profound significance, as it symbolizes breaking through barriers and challenging traditional expectations. Historically, opportunities for Black women in higher education and professional fields have been limited, but my pursuit challenges those constraints. It underscores the importance of representation and serves as an inspiration for aspiring individuals who may not often see people who look like them in these roles. The importance of my path lies not only in my individual success but also in the broader impact it can have on reshaping perceptions and dismantling stereotypes. As I navigated my college educational career and subsequently embarked on my professional journey as a school counselor, my story stands as a testament to the transformative power of education and the potential for positive change when diverse voices are actively represented in professional spaces.

Junior Year of College

It was the beginning of my third year of undergrad, and I found myself pondering:

"Am I doing all I can for the Kingdom of God? Am I doing what would be pleasing in God's eyes?"

With these questions swirling in my mind, I decided to visit my academic advisor and professor. I remember sitting down in his office and asking, *“What would it take to graduate with a major in religion?”* He inquired about my aspirations, asking what I wanted to do with a degree in Religion. I replied,

“I feel as though I am called into the ministry, and I would like to be used in whatever way God sees fit, possibly as an evangelist or a preacher.”

My advising professor then posed a question, asking did I know the difference between a pastor and a preacher? I answered affirmatively, explaining that a pastor shepherds and leads a church, while a preacher delivers the Gospel, the Good News. He nodded in agreement, saying, *“That’s exactly right.”*

There was a strong desire within me to do what I believed was pleasing in God's eyes, keeping Him first in everything I do. Even though I was pursuing a bachelor's in criminal justice, I wanted to ensure that religion wasn't just a minor but a major factor in my life. Instead of opting for a criminal justice major and a religion minor, I expressed to my professor that I needed to add religion as a major. This decision set me on the challenging task of taking 18 to 19.5 hours every semester from junior year to senior year to graduate on time, which in my eyes was four years total in undergraduate classes.

This undertaking was audacious, especially considering I had just given birth to my second child. However, I successfully completed the 19.5 and 18-hour semesters, graduating within the stipulated four years with two bachelor's degrees—one in Criminal Justice and one in Religion. I graduated from Kansas Wesleyan University with a bachelor's in criminal justice and

a bachelor's in religion. At this point in my educational journey, I was married to Brandon and had given birth twice, while completing two bachelor's degrees, no minor, just two bachelor's degrees. To God be the glory.

Self-Awareness Early in my Career

Early in my career as a counselor, I encountered situations where I could recall feeling just as the student in front of me felt because I too have felt the pain the Black student spoke of while in my office. You may recall in Chapter 2 under the Literature on Black Female Counselors where I was speaking of a Black female student who came to my office. She appeared mad and irritated. This young lady confided in me, stating, “*They called me a nigger.*” In that moment I did not say all that I wanted to say but I possessed the self-awareness to understand in that moment, the gravity of the situation and the importance of providing a safe and supportive space for this young lady to express her feelings. I recognized that her experience of being called a nigger was not just an isolated incident; it represented a broader issue of racial discrimination and prejudice. Instead of reacting impulsively, I took a deep breath and offered a compassionate response. I told her that I was truly sorry she had to endure such hurtful words and that her feelings were valid. I assured her that I was here to listen, support, and help her navigate through this painful experience.

In that moment, my self-awareness guided me to prioritize her emotional well-being. However, all I was able to do was allow her the space to share her feelings and experiences without judgment. I was not able to support her by displaying my anger and disdain for the situation, but a safe space within my office is what I could provide. This situation reminded me of the significance of my role as a counselor in addressing the emotional impact of racial

discrimination and helping individuals and Black students such as I once was to heal from such traumatic incidents.

As we continued our conversation, I encouraged her to explore her emotions further, discuss her experiences, and consider strategies for coping with the emotional aftermath. Together, we embarked on a journey of healing, resilience, and self-empowerment. Here demonstrates the need for self-awareness in my role as a counselor.

Acknowledging my own biases is a part of self-awareness (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). I understood that, just like everyone else, I carried biases that could impact my interactions with students. Through introspection and ongoing professional development, I've worked diligently to identify and confront these biases. Since, I too, have experienced being called a nigger by my peers and the society within which I live, I understood the pain, and I was inclined to believe this student without following protocol and following up with the coach that the young lady said might have heard the comment. However, being aware of my own potential biases, I knew the protocol of starting with the teacher on site must be started. This process of identifying and confronting biases has been uncomfortable at times, such as in this situation where I wanted to immediately side with the young lady and contact her mother and walk the two of them through the steps to make sure the offending students had repercussions that fit the allegation; but having the self-awareness of my own personal biases allowed me to be more open and attuned to the diverse needs of my students. My hope is that by being aware of my own biases I modeled perseverance in the midst of adversity.

Second Year of Pursing School Counseling

During my pursuit of a master's degree, I encountered a professor in the school counseling program who did not promote the idea of trusting my instincts, listening to my body,

or embracing self-awareness in terms of my identity, beliefs, and values. Instead, this particular professor advocated for the opposite approach, urging me to prioritize and push past the self-awareness I was experiencing.

In February of 2012, in the midst of a Kansas winter, a light dusting of snow blanketed the grass while the streets remained clear. The sun cast a brilliant but deceiving glow, for the air retained a biting cold due to the snow remaining on the ground. The date etched vividly in my memory was February 22, 2012, a day that marked an important decision.

I had a scheduled counseling course at 5 pm that day, yet as the clock struck noon, I found myself wrestling with a decision. Despite my initial intention to attend class, a growing sense of discomfort and unease permeated. In the back of my mind, I knew that class would begin at 5 pm, and that meant I needed to make a swift determination, as my commute to campus was a substantial hour and fifteen minutes. Beyond my academic responsibilities, I was and still am a mother and a wife, entailing a series of tasks to ensure the well-being of my family such as dinner and getting children settled in after school. By 1 pm, my condition had not improved, and I reluctantly decided to reach out to my professor.

I was 38 weeks pregnant. As I called my professor to tell her of my uncertain attendance due to my state of unwellness and uncertainty, I received a response I had not anticipated. She reminded me of my pregnancy and the inevitable days of discomfort it entailed, noting that as a mother, numerous responsibilities weighed upon me. Her counsel was clear: there would be countless instances when I wouldn't feel up to attending class, and it was crucial to differentiate between genuine illness and a desire to skip class. She emphasized that the education I would receive in person, engaging in class discussions, vastly differed from what could be gained via online alternatives and Skype (a virtual option of attending class). I expressed my gratitude and

assured her that I would thoughtfully consider her words before making my final decision, as several hours remained before the critical choice to attend or not.

In this moment, I found myself in the position of the student, a marginalized client with perspectives and beliefs that diverged from those of my school counselor. I held a unique worldview shaped by my own experiences, attitudes, views, and beliefs, which led to a sense of unsettlement and unease. With these conflicting perspectives lingering, I made the reluctant choice to remain at home. My decision was driven by the increasing difficulty of movement and walking, which I attributed to the weather outside. After the conversation with my professor for school counseling, I convinced myself that the weather conditions were the source of my discomfort.

Class began and I connected remotely via Skype for what would be a lengthy two-and-a-half-hour lecture. Throughout the session, I encountered such discomfort from sitting that I had to relocate within the room three times in search of a more bearable position. The discomfort became increasingly challenging to endure, and by the end of the class, I found myself logging off Skype promptly as I could no longer sit comfortably. Afterwards I walked around the house trying to find comfort. My husband called to check on me and I told him, *“I am fine, the weather has me feeling a bit funny, but all is well. Break a leg in your show tonight!”*

I refrained from sharing my genuine views, beliefs, and personal identity with my husband during this period because my school counseling professor had interjected her own perspectives and attitudes into my situation. Unfortunately, she failed to acknowledge the complexity of my identity, which extended beyond that of a student. I encompassed roles as a wife, a mother, a mother-to-be, and more. Here is where quadrant II appeared. Privileged counselor–privileged client/student. When both I and my professor shared similar social group

identities and possessed privilege, she did not acknowledge our shared privilege. Regrettably, instead of empathizing with me as a woman and a mother and trying to view the situation through a lens she had once shared as a mother and a wife, she simply viewed me as a student who seemed unwilling to attend class. This oversight left me feeling unheard and misunderstood and in labor.

I would find out at 10:30, later that night, that I had been in labor throughout the entire day. The intense discomfort I had experienced was, in fact, the onset of labor. When my husband returned home and saw my condition, he asked, *"How long have you been feeling this way? Why didn't you mention it when I called?"* To this, my response was small, as I could only muster: *"I wasn't sure. I thought I needed to be tougher, and I was just tired because of the weather."*

It was in the moment of the birth of my child that I then began to question the privilege of my counselor and her counselor self-awareness. As highlighted by Ratts & Greenleaf (2017), privileged and marginalized counselors possess a heightened awareness of the intricate interplay between client and counselor worldviews, assumptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, biases, social identities, social group statuses, and the experiences of power, privilege, and oppression. The birth of my child illuminated the profound implications of these dynamics in our counseling relationship. It underscored the importance of counselors being attuned to these factors in providing equitable and empathetic support to their clients. Carrying my personal experience with my professor remained a constant influence as I counseled students and families. I recognized the significance of self-awareness and the ability to empathize with my students through my own life experiences. These personal encounters enabled me to provide a deeper understanding of values, beliefs, and individual and social identity. Establishing a connection

with my students was, and still is, essential, as it allows me to see life from their perspective, just as I once relied on my professor to understand my situation as both a mother and a female.

Black Female Counselor

As a counselor, I came to understand that student success is not solely determined by their demonstration of having learned the content (O'Keeffe, 2013). It also hinges on how connected they feel to their educators and their level of comfort within the classroom and school environment. These factors contribute to an enhanced sense of belonging, which, in turn, can lead to improved learning outcomes (Rask & Bailey, 2002; Wilton, Apfelbaum, & Good, 2019).

Early in my counseling career, fresh out of the master's program, I was eager to connect with a fellow school counselor and one person in particular, Jules, seemed to catch my attention. Jules seemed someone who could share the uncertainties and triumphs of navigating the counseling world for the first time. Jules was my colleague, another new counselor. Excitement bubbled within me as I envisioned us forging our paths together, supporting one another through the challenges that lay ahead.

While our interactions initially remained pleasant, over time I began to notice subtle and intentional underhanded tactics that cast a shadow on our relationship. Despite our shared status as newcomers, attempting to establish a connection felt like strands temporarily running parallel, never truly intertwining to create the tight bond I had envisioned. I extended invitations for collaborative projects and each time I would find she either worked on the project alone or she extended an invitation to another colleague and the two of them completed the project alone. In my attempt to form a bond with Jules I made a point to have a direct conversation with her. I asked Jules, *"Hey, is it my imagination or are you purposely trying not to work with me?"* Jules responded, *"Ralita we worked on our Masters at the same time. You and I have a connection, but*

I need to work with other faculty so I can get my name out there and be seen as the go to person who gets things done.”

I was dismayed as I realized Jules lacked an understanding of the challenges inherent in working within a predominantly White school, where I, as a person of color, stood as the sole representative of diversity. The isolation I felt was worsened by her refusal to collaborate, emphasizing the contrast in our experiences. The unsettling sense of not fitting in or belonging began to take hold, casting a shadow over what was supposed to be an exciting start to my career as a school counselor. While my primary focus was on supporting the students, a yearning grew within me for an environment where I could authentically connect and feel a sense of belonging.

It became apparent that despite our common ground, our approaches to counseling and personal styles were as distinct as our backgrounds. What I envisioned as a dynamic duo navigating the counseling landscape together turned into a solo journey. My attempts to bridge the gap were met with polite smiles and surface-level conversations that never quite delved into the shared vulnerabilities I longed to explore.

This realization led me to the conclusion that success is not limited to one's display of acquired knowledge (Collier & Morgan, 2008). It extends to how connected individuals feel to those around them and their comfort within their respective work environments. These elements also foster an increased sense of belonging, which can result in improved learning outcomes (Rask & Bailey, 2002; Wilton et al., 2019). This concept, relevant to students, holds true for teachers, educators, faculty, coworkers, and adults as well. My identity as a Black woman became more closely intertwined with my professional mission, causing my beliefs and values to evolve in alignment with the principles of equality and empowerment.

The counseling relationship is intricately braided with self-awareness as it requires me as the counselor to be acutely conscious of my own cultural identities, and biases, ensuring that my approach toward and with students is a neutral perspective. Simultaneously, it is woven with the student's world view, necessitating my ability to understand and respect the unique cultural perspectives and experiences of the students I serve, creating a foundation for meaningful interactions. This intricate braid extends to counseling and advocacy, where my heightened self-awareness and appreciation of the student's world view guide the decision-making process to determine whether individual counseling, advocacy, or a combination of both strategies is suitable for addressing the student's needs within a broader socioecological context. This interconnected triad shapes the dynamics of the counseling relationship, enabling me to navigate issues rooted in culture, beliefs, values, and systemic influences, ultimately contributing to a more equitable and inclusive educational environment.

Educational Enrichment Journey

Embarking on my educational enrichment journey has been an illuminating and transformative experience, shaping my perspective and fueling my passion for lifelong learning. From the early days of primary education to the challenging braids of higher academia, each strand has been a building braid in my intellectual growth. This journey is not merely a pursuit of degrees or accolades but a conscious effort to broaden my horizons, cultivate critical thinking, and delve into the depths of knowledge that transcend the boundaries of any specific field.

The twists and turns of my educational path have exposed me to diverse subjects, perspectives, and methodologies. Engaging in coursework, collaborating with peers, and into research projects have become integral components of this work. Each class attended, every assignment completed, and every academic challenge faced has contributed to the weaving of my

educational enrichment. The beauty lies not just in the acquisition of facts but in the holistic development of my analytical skills, creativity, and a profound understanding of the world around me.

As I reflect on my educational journey, it's not only about the formal classroom settings but also the invaluable lessons learned outside the confines of traditional education. Networking with mentors, participating in extracurricular activities, and seeking opportunities for hands-on experiences have enriched my understanding of real-world applications. This educational braid is a dynamic and ongoing process, absorbing knowledge, and evolving into a lifelong learner committed to making meaningful contributions to the world. Here I offer a synthesis of how my stories above interplay with relevant literature, and how these early experiences translated into my foundational understandings.

Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

As a school counselor, my reactions to my students' lived experiences related to their identities, beliefs, and values in the context of student diversity are influenced by the dynamics of privilege and marginalization outlined in the four quadrants of Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies.

Quadrant I: Privileged counselor–marginalized client/student: In situations where I, as a counselor, hold social power and privilege over a marginalized student, my reactions are characterized by a heightened awareness of my own privilege (Ratts et al., 2016). I recognize the importance of using my privileged position to support and empower the student rather than perpetuating systemic inequalities or telling them how they should feel or encouraging them to minimize the way they feel situations should play out. I actively work to create a safe and inclusive space for the student to explore their identity, beliefs, and values.

Quadrant II: Privileged counselor–privileged client/student: When both the student and I share similar social group identities and possess privilege, my reactions involve acknowledging our shared privileges (Ratts et al., 2016). It is important to use this common ground to foster a strong counseling relationship and collaboratively address any issues related to identity and diversity. I strive to ensure that our shared experiences do not lead to complacency but rather facilitate open and honest discussions about privilege and equity.

Quadrant III: Marginalized counselor–privileged client/student: In cases where the student holds social power and privilege over me as a marginalized counselor, my reactions are marked by respect for their experiences and perspectives (Ratts et al., 2016). I actively listen to their concerns and utilize their insights to guide our counseling sessions. While acknowledging their privilege, I aim to empower them to become allies in promoting diversity and social justice.

Quadrant IV: Marginalized counselor–marginalized client: When both the student and I belong to marginalized groups, my reactions revolve around creating a space where we can share our experiences, challenges, and strengths (Ratts et al., 2016). I validate their feelings and experiences, fostering a sense of solidarity. Together, we work to navigate the complexities of identity and diversity while promoting resilience and self-empowerment.

The competencies emphasizing multicultural and social justice awareness guide my practice in my daily interactions with students. They highlight the need to be self-aware of my cultural values, beliefs, and biases, which is foundational to providing equitable counseling. I actively explore my own attributes, beliefs, and values to avoid self-deception. Understanding a student's worldview, including their cultural values, beliefs, and biases, is of paramount importance. It allows me to respect and appreciate diverse perspectives and avoid negative

stereotypes or biases. This cultural competence is essential in offering effective and equitable counseling services.

Within the counseling relationship, I aim to strike a balance between integrating my values and respecting the autonomy and beliefs of my students. This involves being mindful of the influence of personal and cultural values on interactions while prioritizing the well-being and individuality of the students. In designing counseling and advocacy interventions, I leverage my self-awareness and understanding of student worldviews and current situations. By recognizing the profound influence of these aspects on the therapeutic relationship, I am better equipped to address the diverse needs of the students and families I serve. The goal is to empower students in their identity and diversity journeys while promoting social justice and equity.

As a school counselor, assisting students in navigating their identities, beliefs, and values in the context of student diversity holds significant importance. Diversity, in this context, encompasses the wide spectrum of cultural backgrounds, life experiences, social identities, and individual perspectives that make each student unique. This is particularly meaningful to me because I, too, once needed guidance and support in these very areas as a student. A specific responsibility accompanies the role of school counseling, one that entails empowering students to become their own advocates, to trust their instincts, and to be attuned to their bodies. This becomes particularly essential when navigating diverse situations, discerning what feels right, and what does not. The concept of self-trust is of paramount importance in counseling, particularly when working with students. Self-trust naturally evolves into self-awareness, comprising essential components such as identity, belief, and values.

The foundation of Multicultural and Social Justice competence lies within the counselor. Prior to engaging with any student, it is imperative that the school counselor possesses a

comprehensive understanding of their own cultural and social group identities (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Counselors should and must exhibit self-awareness concerning their own values, beliefs, biases, and their positions of privilege or marginalization in relation to the student (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). This heightened self-awareness serves as a protective shield, shielding students from inadvertent harm. The process of confronting and addressing one's prejudices and biases enables counselors to engage with students without harboring any preconceived notions or hidden agendas (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017).

As a Black female counselor, my journey of self-awareness in the field of counseling has been both enlightening and challenging. Navigating this path has not only allowed me to grow as an individual but has also empowered me to make a meaningful impact with students who often feel marginalized as I have felt not only as a Black student but as a Black female school counselor.

Self-Awareness

Braiding in my journey as a Black female counselor, I have woven narratives which revolve around the theme of self-awareness, personal identity, social identity and spirituality and their pivotal role in the lives of students and families of color. These stories are not just narratives but vivid reflections of my evolution as an individual, influenced by my identity, beliefs, and values, and guided by the subtle, yet powerful hand of spirituality.

As a counselor, I've observed firsthand the distinct hurdles that students and families of color encounter on a daily basis. Understanding this disparity and its profound effects on their lives has profoundly influenced my career path. Individuals possess the capacity to reflect on themselves and their experiences, both past and present (Sepetyi, 2017). This statement indicates that individuals have the capacity for self-awareness and introspection. It suggests that people

can reflect on themselves as unique entities, recognizing their current state as well as recalling their past experiences. Sepetyi (2017) highlights the cognitive ability of individuals to be conscious not only of the present moment but also of their personal history, showcasing a level of self-awareness and reflective thinking. Self-awareness is a journey that seeks to unravel the layers of privilege and marginalization that are intertwined with the educational experience.

To have a consciousness of some past experience is, many have thought, just to have an occurrent memory of experiencing it (Sepetyi, 2017). This statement suggests that, having consciousness of a past experience is equivalent to having a current and active memory of the experience. In other words, the ability to be aware of and recognize a past event is often considered synonymous with having an ongoing and present memory of the occurrence. Personal identity encompasses various dimensions, such as traits, behaviors, beliefs, values and skills (Hannum, 2007). Throughout my counseling career, my identity, beliefs, and values evolved significantly. Exploring and understanding personal identity is essential for individuals to develop a strong sense of self and navigate their roles within society effectively (Wearing, 2011). The realization that, as a Black female counselor, I hold a unique vantage point has sharpened my focus on fostering inclusivity and empowering marginalized voices. My identity has not only been a source of strength but also a wellspring of empathy and understanding, which have been instrumental in my work.

Spirituality, a guiding force in my life, has added a deeper dimension to my identity. It has endowed me with principles of compassion, unity, and justice. Spirituality is a profound dimension of one's identity, often influencing one's values, beliefs, and behaviors (Cohen, 2020). It has enabled me to view my role as a counselor not just as a profession but as a sacred

endeavor. Spirituality has, in many ways, been the thread that connects the various aspects of my identity, beliefs, and values into a coherent and purposeful whole.

As I reflect on my journey, I also contemplate the collaborative efforts I have engaged in to shape a shared student worldview. Understanding when counselors have worldviews or beliefs that differ significantly from those of their students and don't make an effort to understand why these differences exist, they may unintentionally develop negative stereotypes or biases about their students (Lyddon & Adamson, 1992). The endeavor to bridge gaps and foster understanding among diverse students has been at the core of my work. It is not merely about counseling individuals but about nurturing an environment where diversity is celebrated, and every student feels a sense of belonging. Being a black female school counselor is a testament to the transformative power of self-awareness, the evolving of personal identity, and the guiding light of spirituality. It is an intertwine that underscores the significance of a counselor's role in dismantling barriers, amplifying voices, and championing diversity and identity. It is a journey of both personal and professional growth, anchored in the quest for a more equitable and inclusive educational landscape.

Student World View

Considering the student world view from the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies I can recall pivotal moments where my student worldview clashed with institutional norms, and how those clashes shaped my educational journey. School counselors who are endowed with a heightened sense of cultural self-awareness easily adapt when it comes to perceiving the world through their students' cultural perspectives. These school counselors have the capacity to view issues in alignment with the way their clients experience them within their own cultural context, owing to their genuine comfort in their own cultural identity (Ratts &

Greenleaf, 2017). This ability to see the world through a student's cultural lens is paramount for attaining a more profound comprehension and genuine appreciation of the student's values, beliefs, and cultural background (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). Possessing skillsets and competencies that align with the student's worldview equips school counselors with the means to discern the intricate subtleties of their student's culture and the environment in which they exist.

Navigating the diverse identities, beliefs, and values of students as a Black female school counselor has been both enlightening and challenging. My approach has been rooted in promoting inclusivity, empathy, and respect for all students, regardless of their backgrounds while fostering an environment of understanding and support for their diverse student worldviews.

Counseling and Advocacy

Considering the counseling and advocacy interventions from the Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies - as a Black female school counselor, how did I navigate students' diverse identities, beliefs, and values, and how did counseling and advocacy interventions influence my approach? When counselors possess an understanding of how the school counseling relationship is shaped by the interplay between counselor self-awareness and student worldview, they are better equipped to make informed decisions about their approach with students. To guide their decision-making, school counselors often determine whether individual counseling, advocacy, or a combination of both strategies is most suitable (Ratts & Greenleaf, 2017). According to (Ratts et al., 2016), this model places students' issues within a comprehensive contextual framework that spans various levels, encompassing the intrapersonal factors and relationships, institutions, community norms, public policies, and global influences. These socioecological systems apply both direct and indirect influences on student issues,

making this model a valuable tool for counselors to navigate the complexity of their students' concerns. As a Black female school counselor, navigating students' diverse identities, beliefs, and values has been both a rewarding and challenging journey.

Experiences as a Counselor

As a Black female school counselor, navigating students' diverse identities, beliefs, and values has been both a rewarding and challenging journey. In my role as a counselor, I've encountered numerous stories that underscore the critical importance of self-awareness, cultural awareness, student world view, spirituality, and counseling and advocacy when working with students and families of color. Through open communication and building trust, I discovered that students' challenges can be rooted in cultural differences that are not initially addressed. I will exemplify these profound and impactful counseling approaches by sharing personal anecdotes of students. These experiences highlight the essentiality for counselors to cultivate cultural awareness, acknowledging the diverse backgrounds and distinct needs of students and families of color. It is through these stories that I have come to understand the profound influence that self-awareness, student world view and counseling advocacy can have on fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment.

Billy's Story: A Student's Worldview

As a Black female school counselor, I have continuously strived to navigate the diverse identities, beliefs, and values of my students with empathy and dedication. I can recall a profound moment that impacted my approach to counseling. This recollection involved a young African American student, Billy, who faced a deeply unjust situation. Billy was living in a challenging environment with circumstances that I was far too familiar with. Billy experienced

an event that would highlight the need for a designated space for Black students to unpack, share, examine, and make sense of their intersectional experiences.

Billy found himself in a distressing situation where, on multiple occasions, teachers reprimanded him for resting his head in class, even going so far as to threaten sending him to the principal's office. However, on a particular day, he observed a White student entering class and comfortably resting their head throughout the entire class period without any repercussions. After the class ended, Billy approached the teacher, and asked why the White student was able to put his head down but Billy was constantly asked not to and threatened with being sent to the principal's office. The teacher responded, *"He seldom does that, so I assumed he was having a tough day today."* Billy came to my office to share his feelings and experiences. He expressed a mixture of emotions, including anger and dismay. Billy stated,

"When teachers do things like this it makes me think they are racist... or they do not like me... or maybe both."

Billy went on to say, *"I work 30 hours a week to help pay bills at home and it would help me to put my head down. Aaron (the White student) was bragging in another class that he was out drinking with the team last night at a party and the teacher gives him more time to lay his head down. I just don't understand."*

This incident served as a stark reminder of the pressing requirement for an educational system that is both equitable and impartial, devoid of racial biases and discrepancies. It emphasized my role as a school counselor to champion fair treatment and extend assistance to

students who may encounter systemic inequities rooted in their racial background. This encounter further fuels my dedication to combating cultural racism, promoting inclusivity, and empowering students to confront life's challenges with resilience and a belief in a more equitable world.

Maya's Story: Counseling Advocacy

Maya was a bright and talented young lady who came from a culturally diverse background. Her family had recently moved to our predominantly White community, and she was the only student of color in her grade. Maya often felt isolated and struggled to connect with her peers. She also faced some cultural clashes at home, as her parents held traditional values that clashed with the environment at her new school.

Maya expressed a strong desire to style her hair in a pressed and straightened manner similar to her White peers. However, her mother insisted on Maya wearing box braids or keeping her hair in its natural afro state. Maya repeatedly visited my office, sharing her discomfort with people touching her hair without permission. She believed that her classmates' curiosity about her braids was the reason for this unwanted attention. Maya hoped that if she straightened her hair, the touching would cease. Regrettably, her mother opposed this idea, explaining that she lacked the time to straighten Maya's hair as frequently as it would require, making the braided style a more manageable choice. Maya found this situation deeply disheartening.

Recognizing Maya's need for support, I employed counseling and advocacy interventions to help her navigate these challenges. I started by building a trusting relationship with Maya, creating a safe space where she felt comfortable sharing her thoughts and feelings. Through our conversations, I gained insight into the intersection of her cultural identity, beliefs, and values, and how they were influencing her sense of belonging and well-being. To address her feelings of

isolation and singled out at school, I facilitated a multicultural club where students from diverse backgrounds could come together to celebrate their unique cultures while also finding common ground. This provided Maya with a sense of community and belonging she had been missing. We also organized culture days and discussions on cultural, diversity and inclusion to raise awareness among students and staff.

I worked closely with Maya's parents, engaging in culturally sensitive conversations about their values and expectations. Through these discussions, we found ways to bridge the generation gap and foster understanding between Maya and her family. Through a combination of counseling and advocacy, we were able to empower Maya to embrace her diverse identity with pride and navigate the challenges she faced. Over time, she not only found her place within the school community but also played a role in promoting inclusivity and cultural understanding among her peers.

This experience reinforced the importance of counseling and advocacy interventions in my approach as a school counselor. By recognizing and respecting students' diverse identities, beliefs, and values, and by actively advocating for their needs, we can create an inclusive and supportive educational environment where every student can thrive.

My social identity significantly impacted my personal journey and internal contemplations during my time as a student in the education system. Wearing (2011) contends that social identity is a multifaceted concept, characterized by its relational nature, wherein identity is molded through interactions within social relationships, and its contextual dimension, whereby our perception of self and others' identities is molded by the social environment, including power dynamics and inequalities (p. ix).

In reflecting on my youth and drawing parallels to Maya's experiences, I'm reminded of a time when I too grappled with questions of identity and belonging in my youth. Growing up as a young Black girl in a predominantly White neighborhood, I often found myself navigating the complexities of my identity. It was a place where I stood out, much like Maya in her school. My classmates, often unaware of the impact of their words and actions, would sometimes ask intrusive questions about my hair, lips and skin color. Just as Maya had expressed, people touching my hair without permission was a common occurrence. It felt as though my differences were constantly under scrutiny.

I vividly recall the internal struggle I faced regarding my hair. Like Maya, I wanted to fit in, and at times, I thought about straightening my hair to align with the standards of beauty of the world around me. It seemed like the easier path to acceptance. However, my mother, much like Maya's, emphasized the importance of embracing my natural beauty and the significance of cultural heritage. She would passionately implore me, attempting to make me see that because I was actively involved in year-round sports, my hair would inevitably become sweaty, and even if we straightened it, the continuous perspiration would cause it to revert to its natural, knotted state. In her view, pressing my hair was not a viable option as the excessive heat would lead to hair breakage and ultimately result in a less desirable outcome than when we started.

These moments of tension between my desire to fit in and my cultural identity were disheartening, much like what Maya experienced. Yet, as I reflect on those years, I realize that they played a pivotal role in shaping who I am today. My experiences as a young girl navigating the complexities of race and identity have fueled my passion for counseling and advocacy, especially for students like Maya. Social identity encompasses the manner in which we perceive ourselves and others based on various social groupings. Hannum (2007) extends this notion,

proposing that social identity comprises multiple components. As human beings, we are naturally inclined to seek both belongingness and uniqueness within our social contexts.

Now, as a counselor, I can relate to Maya's journey on a personal level. I understand the emotional toll that such experiences can take, but I also know the strength that can be drawn from them. My aim is to provide support and guidance, drawing from my own youth, to help students like Maya navigate their unique paths toward self-acceptance and empowerment in a world where their identity matters.

Spirituality Within Social Identity

My personal experiences and spirituality significantly influenced my journey as a student. This transformation led me to explore the deep interplay between spirituality and social identity within the educational sphere. As a Black female counselor, I navigated encounters with students and families of color, highlighting the importance of social identities and relational dynamics in their everyday experiences (Wearing, 2011).

Social identity holds a significant sway in shaping how individuals view themselves and others within society. As outlined in social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979), people tend to classify themselves and others into specific social groups rooted in shared traits like race, ethnicity, gender, or nationality. It is important to recognize that social identity is multifaceted, with both relational and contextual dimensions (Wearing, 2011). This categorization process fosters a feeling of association with particular groups, while simultaneously generating a sense of distinction from those who belong to different groups. This interplay of social identity can be further influenced by code-switching, where individuals adapt their language use to align with specific group norms and expectations, reflecting the multifaceted nature of identity and

communication. Understanding the concept of code-switching provides valuable insights into how individuals navigate their social identities.

Jamaal's Story

This journey as a Black female counselor has been a profound exploration of the intricate dynamics surrounding social identities and relational concepts within the lives of students and families of color. One story that illustrates these dynamics involves a young student named Jamaal and his family.

Jamaal was a bright and talented teenager who, like me, came from a Black background, and he attended a predominantly White school where he often felt like the odd one out. Jamaal and I would have insightful conversations about his experiences. Jamaal often referenced his peers expected him to excel in sports because of his race, assuming that being Black equated to athleticism. However, he noticed their surprise when they discovered he was a straight-A student, as if it were uncommon for Black individuals to be academically accomplished which closely resonated with my own youthful experience.

One day, Jamaal shared how he struggled to reconcile his cultural identity with the pressure to conform to the norms of his school peers. He spoke about how he sometimes felt like he had to downplay his identity to fit in. Upon hearing this the idea and notion of code switching resonated with me as I too had done this in my own youth, so we discussed the concept of code-switching (Gumperz, 1982). The idea of switching between languages and behaviors or changing how you talk within the same language was a term he hadn't encountered before. It was an eye-opening moment for him to realize that many people of color face similar challenges in navigating different cultural spaces.

In later conversations with Jamaal's parents, Jamaal and I learned they too faced their own set of unique challenges. They expressed concerns about their son's cultural identity being reduced in an environment that did not fully embrace their heritage. I worked closely with them to develop strategies for preserving Jamaal's cultural roots while also helping him thrive in his educational journey. Some of the suggestions I proposed included engaging with a local church community and finding a barbershop that resonated with the family's values and culture. These recommendations were offered with the intention of providing support for preserving their cultural heritage.

The counseling sessions with Jamaal and conversations with his family highlighted the interplay between social identities and relational concepts. We explored the importance of creating safe spaces where Jamal could express himself without fear of judgment. We discussed how his self-esteem was deeply intertwined within his cultural identity and how empowering him to embrace both aspects of himself was crucial for his overall well-being.

Over time, Jamaal began to feel more confident in his skin, and he started to take pride in his cultural heritage. His family also felt increasingly empowered in advocating for their son's needs within the school community. Through this experience, I saw firsthand how acknowledging the significance of social identities and fostering positive relationships with students and families of color could lead to transformative growth and resilience. The braiding of being a Black female counselor continues to be a powerful exploration of the complexities surrounding social identities and relational concepts, reaffirming the importance of providing support and guidance to help students and families of color navigate these intricate dynamics in their daily lives (Wearing, 2011).

Braiding Identity: Navigating the Interplay of Personal Identity

In this dissertation, I have braided the connections between students, their families, and myself, which has been a deeply insightful process. My experiences have often revealed a profound understanding of the pain and challenges these individuals face, primarily because I, too, have encountered similar obstacles in my own life. The intricate interplay of issues such as race, personal beliefs shaped by my religion, and the professional standards and ethical guidelines I adhere to as a counselor significantly influences how I approach various spaces and situations. These beliefs and concepts shape my social identity.

This shared braiding process with students and families of color has unveiled our commonalities – traits, beliefs, and values that bind us together. We all hold a deep reverence for the importance of our children's well-being and mutual respect. However, the separation lies in how I must navigate these roles. My personal identity is seen in my perception of my role in my students' lives. As a counselor, I must adhere to specific standards and protocols, and as a person of color, I bring my unique experiences and perspectives into the equation. Being a woman adds another strand of complexity to these interactions of braiding. It is in the skill set I bring to these situations that the intricate weaving of my personal identity, professional responsibilities, and cultural context truly comes to life. It is through this weaving that I've learned the delicate art of providing support and guidance while also acknowledging and respecting the rich intertwining of personal and cultural identities that shape us all. In essence, these experiences have highlighted the multifaceted nature of my role as a Black female counselor, and the importance of recognizing and navigating the shared traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills that define our journeys, and this braiding process.

Maria's Story

In my role as a counselor, I've had the privilege of connecting with students and families of color on a deeply personal level. It is been a journey of profound self-discovery as I've come to understand how personal identity and spirituality manifest through shared traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills. I can recall a student, Maria. She was a young Latinx with a radiant smile, but often seemed troubled. As we conversed during our counseling sessions, I noticed an intrinsic connection between her personal identity and spirituality. It was a connection grounded in resilience and an unwavering belief in the power of family bonds. This connection is one that resonated with my own.

Maria shared her family's story with me. They had immigrated to the United States, facing numerous challenges along the way. Her family's unwavering faith and a deep-rooted sense of cultural identity were evident in every story she told. The values of unity, hard work, and the importance of education infused her narrative. In our discussions, I realized how Maria's personal identity was intrinsically braided with her spirituality. Her resilience in the face of adversity was a testament to her belief that a higher power (God) guided her family's journey. Through her stories and experiences, I could see the shared traits and values within her family, which were deeply rooted in their spiritual beliefs much like mine and my family's. I could discern the unmistakable shared traits and values that ran through the very core of her family, and these qualities were profoundly intertwined with their unwavering spiritual convictions. The strong bonds that united them were evident in the way they conducted themselves, embodying principles and virtues that had been passed down through generations, all grounded in their unshakeable faith and spiritual philosophy. This elaborate braiding of shared beliefs and characteristics not only defined their family identity but also served as a guiding light,

influencing their actions and decisions, and enriching their lives with a deep sense of purpose and unity. Research has consistently shown that a high percentage of Americans believe in God, pray, are church members, and attend religious services (Froese & Uecker, 2022). Spirituality is a common denominator I often share with my students.

As I continued to work with Maria and her family, I witnessed their profound sense of community and the importance of extended family bonds. This collective support system, rooted in their spirituality, was a remarkable source of strength and a defining characteristic of their identity. It was through experiences like these that I came to appreciate the way personal identity and spirituality interweave in the lives of students and families of color. I understood that if I did not adequately address spiritual and religious issues in counseling, I would miss a central aspect of student functioning and fail to utilize a primary resource in students' lives. As noted by Robertson et al. (2009), the failure to adequately address spiritual and religious issues in therapy overlooks a central aspect of client functioning and neglects to leverage a primary resource in clients' lives. The strength and resilience that I encountered were not solely products of personal fortitude but were deeply entwined with their spiritual beliefs and cultural values.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

This journey of school counseling has profoundly impacted my own beliefs and values as a counselor. I've learned to recognize and honor the diverse ways in which personal identity and spirituality show up in the lives of those I work with. These shared traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills have enriched my practice as a counselor and deepened my connection with the students and families I have had the privilege to serve.

I have worked with a family navigating the college application process and registering for the PSAT as discussed in Chapter 3. In this instance, I recognized the unique challenges faced by

families of color in the higher education process. I took extra steps to provide tailored support and resources, ensuring equitable access to information and opportunities.

Additionally, I've witnessed the profound impact of incorporating culturally sensitive school counseling approaches. By acknowledging and validating the diverse experiences of students and their families, I've seen a notable improvement in their overall well-being and academic success. This realization has fueled my commitment to promoting DEIB not only within the school counseling realm but also as a broader mission in my professional journey. As I transition into a DEIB leader, the experiences and insights gained through implementing culturally sensitive practices will undoubtedly shape my approach to fostering inclusivity and equity in all aspects of leadership.

Here are some recommendations for practice:

- Consider demonstrating self-awareness within your interactions with students as a school counselor.
- Advocate for inclusive policies and programs for both faculty and students in your role as a school counselor.
- Continuously and consistently seek meaningful educational enrichment as a school counselor.
- Foster culturally responsive practices in your work as a school counselor.
- Take into consideration students' spirituality as a school counselor.

Part 2: Navigating Diversity: My Transition to a DEIB Leader

Embarking on my journey from a seasoned counselor to a DEIB leader has been a transformative odyssey, weaving together the strands of experience, empathy, and cultural awareness. The stories etched in my counselor's repertoire have become the foundation upon

which I now stand as a more impactful agent of change in the realm of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging.

In Figure 4.3, you can observe the culmination of my efforts in creating a series of distinct and captivating braids, each possessing its own unique beauty. These braids were meticulously crafted with the ultimate goal of completion in mind. To cease at this point would offer a glimpse of the intricate artistry but fail to convey the full splendor that can be achieved through the continuous process of braiding. This braid that I embark on for this chapter encompasses, *The Spirituality Needed in Transitioning into a DEIB leader, Metamorphosis of Purpose*, and *Attending the Courageous Conversation Conference*. Just as the image presented depicts the beauty of braiding, there is beauty in the seamless and unified tapestry of this collective work.

Figure 4.3. *Keep Braiding for A Richer Dissertation*



The Spirituality Needed in Transitioning from Counselor to DEIB Leader

Reflecting on my journey from a school counselor to a DEIB leader has been a transformative process that has deeply shaped by my lived experiences, internal contemplations, and my personal identity, beliefs, and values. This transition marked a significant turning point

in my professional life and, simultaneously, my personal growth. One aspect that played a pivotal role in this journey is spirituality.

As I navigated this transition, my spirituality served as an anchor, grounding me in my purpose and commitment to fostering a more equitable and inclusive environment. As I transition into the role of a DEIB leader, my commitment to my former and future students remains unwavering. My journey now focuses on advancing equitable practices, not only within the educational realm but also throughout communities across Kansas. I aspire to witness the curriculum and initiatives I have developed and implemented take root in various states and communities, creating a positive impact far beyond my immediate sphere of influence. This aspiration aligns with my spiritual values, which have always been weaved with my interaction with others.

Spirituality, in my life, has always been closely tied to the principles of empathy, empowerment, and a sense of interconnectedness with others. Spirituality empowers individuals to face their personal and leadership challenges with new perspectives (Noghiu, 2020). This spiritual perspective reinforced my belief that we are all part of a larger whole, and everyone's well-being and dignity should be respected and upheld. In my internal contemplations, I found that my spirituality encouraged me to view this transition not as a career move but as an opportunity or calling. It wasn't merely about taking on a new role; it was a profound sense of duty to contribute to creating a world where every individual, irrespective of their background, felt a sense of belonging and equity. My lived experiences as a Black woman further underscored the significance of this transition. As I looked back on my time as a school counselor, I realized that my personal journey and experiences were closely aligned with the mission of promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. These experiences deepened my empathy as I faced and

overcame challenges related to my racial and cultural identity as a student, a woman, a mother, a person of color, and a counselor. Adding spirituality to existing leadership may expand leaders' perspectives and provide them with additional inspiration along with coping tools to shoulder their personal leadership burden (Noghiu, 2020).

Spirituality guided me to recognize that fostering diversity and equity was not only a professional obligation but a moral and ethical imperative. My beliefs were reinforced by the idea that every individual, regardless of their background, was deserving of respect, fair treatment, and equal opportunities. My values evolved to place a higher importance on social justice, inclusivity, and standing up against discrimination and bias.

As I transitioned into the role of a DEIB leader, my spirituality served as a moral compass. It fueled my determination to advocate for systemic change, challenge inequalities, and foster a more inclusive environment. This transformation was about weaving my spirituality into the fabric of my professional journey, making it an integral part of my commitment to creating positive change. Spirituality motivates leaders toward qualities such as integrity, wholeness, openness, self-responsibility, and self-transcendence (Johnson, 2013). It has guided me to view this transition as a calling, reinforcing the importance of empathy, encouragement for others, compassion, and interconnectedness. spirituality can benefit leaders and the practice of leadership tremendously and in multiple ways (Noghiu, 2020). My lived experiences and internal contemplations, as well as my identity, beliefs, and values, have all been shaped by my spiritual perspective, leading me to passionately advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the professional realm. Spirituality helps provide leaders, leadership educators, and students of leadership with a sense of direction and purpose emphasizing ideals such as social responsibility, harmony, unity, justice, equality, and a global worldview (Noghiu, 2020). My journey has been a

fusion of my personal spiritual values and my professional mission, propelling me to champion a world that thrives on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, while instilling these vital principles in the next generation of leaders and leadership educators.

Metamorphosis of Purpose: A Verse Journey into DEIB Leadership

My Transition to a DEIB Leader

In the pause of uncertainty, I pondered aloud,
"If my heart speaks true, will you hear its sound?
Can my pain be a bridge, a connection we find,
As I unravel tales of the battles behind?
In the words I share, will you grasp my strife,
Acknowledging the echoes of a challenging life?
Acceptance, a key in this dance we sway,
Can you understand the me of today?
Past scars and lessons, they didn't break me,
Instead, they shaped the voice that longs to be.
In this journey of growth, we both play a part,
Learn together, heal together, mend the heart.
Acceptance is a melody we both can sing,
Navigating the complexities life may bring.
In the shadows of the past, I found my voice,
A resilient spirit, choosing to rejoice."

At the crossroads of Black feminism and the profound journey of Black motherhood, my evolution as a Black female counselor into a DEIB leader has been marked by a distinctive blend of challenges, achievements, and ever-evolving perspectives. Applying the wisdom and insight

gained from life's reflections, I've grown personally and professionally, incorporating these lessons into my leadership style. Black feminist thought, woven into the fabric of my experiences, emphasizes the rearticulation of cultural elements and themes, shedding light on the interconnected oppressions faced by Black women. Here is a moment that underscored the complexities of Black motherhood. My daughter Baylee came home one day and told me that her 3rd grade teacher, Mrs. Train, in front of the class, said, *"Oh, Baylee I love your hair is all of that your hair?"* I said, *"Oh, okay well did she do something wrong?"* Baylee replied, *"Yes. I did not like that she said that because then other kids started to ask what did she mean by, is all that your hair? Do you wear fake hair? It just didn't make me feel very good and I don't like it when people touch my hair because I do not know if they wash her hands."*

It was at that moment I felt like I had been driving on cruise control, and I ran into a brick wall. I couldn't move, I couldn't reason and rationalize why her teacher, Mrs. Train, would say such a thing. It was a surreal moment because my child is dealing with this in the third grade, but, I, as an adult, continue to experience this from colleagues and strangers. All I could muster up to say was,

"Call your daddy."

I spoke to my husband later that day and I asked him, *"Did Baylee talk to you about Mrs. Train?"* He replied, *"Yes. Are you going with me to meet with Mrs. Train?"* I looked at him and shook my head no. I said, *"Brandon I am tired of watching my daughters endure situations I, myself, find upsetting. Can you please just handle this one?"*

My multifaceted identity, as a Black woman navigating the complexities of student diversity and identity within the counseling realm, is intricately interwoven with the principles of Black feminism and the unique lens of Black motherhood. Black feminism has provided a platform for recognizing the invaluable contributions of Black women, fostering empowerment and self-definition (Cooper, 2015). It has illuminated the diverse experiences of Black women, acknowledging the impact of intersecting identities on their lives (Howard-Hamilton, 2003). Motherhood, as reaffirmed by Collins (2000), serves as a site for self-definition, self-reliance, and the belief in Black women's empowerment.

The essence of Black feminist thought, articulated by scholars like bell hooks and Audre Lorde, sheds light on shared experiences and challenges, empowering Black women to construct a revitalized and self-empowering self-concept (Bloom, 1996; hooks, 1981). Intersectionality, a key tenet, recognizes the multiple identities that shape individuals' trajectories and influence their perspectives (Nash, 2008). This transformative perspective guides my internal dialogue, influencing how I navigate the world and inspire others to do the same. Engaging in reflective introspection, I acknowledge the historical and contemporary challenges faced by Black women. In the educational journey, Black women follow a vital roadmap passed down by matriarchs, emphasizing the importance of labor, education, and community building (Collins, 2000; Joseph, 2012). As daughters are encouraged to pursue education, sons are guided toward blue-collar jobs, contributing to the family's financial support (Jones, Ramirez-Mendoza, & Jackson, 2020). My role as a school counselor is influenced by these distinct viewpoints and strengths, shaped by Black feminist principles and the lens of Black motherhood.

Aligned with Anna Julia Cooper's perspective, the commencement of self-empowerment becomes a pivotal element in Black Feminist Thought, guiding how Black women pursue career

paths and educational aspirations (Cooper ,1998 p. 56). In the ongoing commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion within educational systems, my voice echoes the resilience and wisdom derived from the intersection of Black feminist principles, Black motherhood, and inclusivity.

As I step into my new role as a DEIB leader, I carry with me a unique perspective rooted in my experiences as a Black feminist and a mother. These intertwined facets of my identity have profoundly shaped my understanding of inclusivity, equity, and the work that lies ahead. My journey as a mother and informed by Black feminist views shape my approach to DEIB leadership and how I aspire to foster inclusivity in this ever-evolving field.

I have always been acutely aware of the intersecting forces of race, gender, and class that impact my daily life, and it is from this standpoint that I embrace the Black feminist lens. Although there is no singular or standard experience for Black women, the aim of Black feminist thought is to highlight the shared experiences of intersecting forms of oppression, enabling us to construct a new and empowering self-perception (Bass, 2012). For me, Black feminism is not just an academic concept but a lived experience, a daily negotiation between various facets of my identity. Motherhood further enriches my perspective. As a mother, I'm driven by the desire to create a more equitable and inclusive world for my children. I am acutely aware of the impact of systemic discrimination on their lives, and it strengthens my commitment to DEIB work. Motherhood has made me more compassionate and patient, attributes that I believe are invaluable in fostering inclusivity. The heart of my Black feminist perspective is intersectionality. It is crucial to understand that individuals experience oppression in complex and multifaceted ways. Intersectionality recognizes that race, gender, and other identity markers are interconnected, influencing our experiences and opportunities (Crenshaw, 2022).

In my role as a DEIB leader, I strive to make inclusivity truly intersectional. I advocate for recognizing and addressing the specific challenges faced by marginalized groups. It is about ensuring that no one is left behind, that everyone's unique experiences are acknowledged and valued. As a DEIB Leader, I make it a priority to meticulously define each facet of DEIB. However, I go beyond imparting practical knowledge; I also lend an empathetic ear to help individuals pinpoint tangible starting points for catalyzing change within their communities and educational institutions. One of my central objectives is to champion authentic representation. As a Black feminist and mother, I know how vital it is for individuals, especially young people, to see themselves reflected in leadership positions. It is not enough to talk about diversity; we must actively seek out and promote diverse voices and perspectives. I am dedicated to actively supporting and facilitating the growth and advancement of individuals who belong to groups that have historically had limited representation. By providing support and pathways for growth, we can create a more inclusive environment that celebrates different backgrounds and experiences.

Motherhood has filled me with skills that I believe are invaluable in DEIB leadership. Patience, empathy, and the ability to nurture are traits I draw from my experience as a mother. Black motherhood is an act of infinite strength, resilience, and love. It is a profound testament to the power of the human spirit, the beauty of the Black community, and the unyielding fight for a better future. Specifically, Black motherhood examines how Black mothers use strategies and practices to shield children from, as well as help them navigate through, experiences of racism and isolation (Brantley, 2023). These qualities allow me to create safe spaces for conversations around DEIB, where individuals can share their experiences and concerns without fear of judgment. Brantley highlighted the tireless and exhaustive efforts undertaken by Black mothers as they employ various strategies to protect their children from the pervasive impact of racism.

As a DEIB leader, I advocate not only for my own children but also for marginalized groups, recognizing that every individual within these groups is someone's child.

In my new role, I intend to employ these motherhood-inspired skills to facilitate open and honest dialogues or have courageous conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is about creating a culture of care and empathy, where individuals feel heard and supported. Specifically, Singleton (2021) states courageous conversations seek to engage those who won't talk, sustain the conversation when it gets uncomfortable or diverted, and deepens the conversation to the point where authentic understanding and meaningful actions occur. Having courageous conversations serves as a strategy for deinstitutionalizing racism and improving student achievement.

I have weaved this journey, marked by evolving identities, shifting beliefs, and a profound exploration of values. I've ventured from the world of a dedicated school counselor to the challenging, yet exhilarating path of a DEIB leader, guided by the unwavering force of spirituality, and enriched by the perspectives of a Black feminist and a mother. This braided journey has not been without its challenges, but it is precisely these trials that have illuminated my path. I've learned that in DEIB leadership, my identity and lived experiences are potent tools for fostering inclusivity, for in embracing the multifaceted nature of my being, I empower others to do the same.

The essence of my transformation is this: in DEIB leadership, I am more than just a leader; I am a beacon of hope, champion of authenticity, and an advocate for those who've been historically underrepresented. My commitment to embracing the intersectionality of identities, my dedication to nurturing the strengths of motherhood, and my reverence for spirituality have become the cornerstones of my approach.

As I take these insights and experiences forward, I do so with the knowledge that my journey is far from over. It is a journey of perpetual growth, exploration, and innovation. I look forward to the path ahead, to new perspectives, and to the continued pursuit of a world that truly embodies diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. My story is a testament to the transformative power of authenticity, the profound influence of personal values, and the unwavering commitment to fostering change. As I intertwine the threads, I am determined to weave these invaluable lessons into the intricate pattern, fully aware that they will continue to strengthen the braid of my ongoing journey as a DEIB leader.

The Doubts Are Real

While there is an undeniable sense of purpose and grounding as I embark on this transition, I would be remiss not to acknowledge the internal doubts and tensions that have accompanied the journey. The initial days in a new role are inevitably a mix of anticipation and trepidation. Despite the outward excitement, there were moments when uncertainty crept in, questioning whether I was up to the task. Stepping into a new position, especially one with the responsibility of standing in front of a crowd of teachers and educators, brought about a unique set of internal tensions.

I recall my inaugural workshop at Evergrove, where I took on the challenge of delivering a 7-hour presentation on Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging with a Focus on Race. The nerves leading up to the event were palpable, and despite weeks of meticulous preparation, self-doubt lingered. Armed with printed slides and scripted words, I faced a room of unknown faces, and the weight of my perceived inadequacy bore down on me. Questions such as, *"Why would anyone value what I have to say?"* echoed in my mind as I began to speak. Struggling with the internal dialogue, I grappled with the unfamiliarity of my newfound

leadership role. As one of the few Black women in leadership positions, the absence of relatable examples left me feeling out of place. This sense of unpreparedness intensified when tasked with educating others on diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging with a Focus on Race. The contrast of leadership and inadequacy created a unique internal landscape that marked the beginning of my journey, one punctuated by doubts and the challenge of forging a path in an underrepresented leadership role.

Embarking on my journey at Evergrove, where I stand as one of the few representations of Black leadership, has frequently triggered a complex internal struggle. While navigating the rewarding and passion-driven role of a DEIB leader, the persistent doubts and feelings of imposter have not been confined to that initial presentation; they linger as a subtle undercurrent. In this role, I frequently seek solace and guidance in my spirituality, especially when grappling with questions of belonging. Embracing the diversity within the room, I strive to take equitable actions to ensure inclusion for all present, fostering a sense of belonging not only for those who come to learn but also for myself.

However, these moments of doubt were not barriers; instead, they became integral strands of my story, shaping my understanding of courage and fortitude in leadership. Amidst these challenges, spirituality emerged as a guiding force, providing solace and strength during times of uncertainty. Just as a braid gains resilience from its interwoven strands, my journey is fortified by the spiritual dimension, infusing my narrative with a sense of purpose and resilience. It is through these internal struggles, bolstered by spiritual reflection and grounding, that the narrative seamlessly transitions into the realm of 'courageous conversations.' Here, authenticity and vulnerability are not merely embraced but celebrated as powerful tools for connection and growth. In embracing spirituality, I found the courage to confront difficult truths, fostering

deeper connections and catalyzing personal and collective transformation. As the threads of spirituality intertwine with courage and vulnerability, they form a tapestry of resilience, guiding my journey towards DEIB leadership with authenticity and grace. Proverbs 17:22 (King James Version (KJV)) says, “A merry heart doth good like medicine”. So, I offer this riddle:

I am the whisper in the wind,
The anchor in the storm's blend.
Though doubts may swirl and reel,
In the Lord, my soul finds its seal.

What am I?

Faith

Attending the Courageous Conversation Conference: Weaving Strands of Inspiration

I had the opportunity to attend the Courageous Conversation Conference. Upon returning to my job, we had a team meeting where the entire team shared their experiences from a Special Education Conference they attended in my absence. During the discussion, some team members emphasized that I should have been there, as one presenter covered the topic of race and early education. While listening to their reflections, it became evident that they were genuinely enlightened by the insights shared, and it seemed to be their first exposure to such material. It was a bit frustrating for me because, having personally lived through the intersection of race and early education, I didn't need someone else to tell me about experiences I've already lived. This was how I felt, but I could not find the words to convey my feelings meaningfully for them. Rather than telling them my feelings I simply smiled and replied, *“Wow, please send me the resources and power points I would love to look over it. May I tell you about the Courageous Conversations Conference?”*

What I yearned to express was the overwhelming sentiment that engulfed me during this exceptional experience. It truly marked the pinnacle of my life's encounters. The presence of numerous accomplished Black professionals was inspiring. This was an entirely novel experience for me, largely due to my upbringing and education within a predominantly White school system—White Settlement Independent School District, to be precise. Throughout my educational journey, exposure to more than two Black educators, one of whose first language wasn't even English, was virtually non-existent.

To find myself amidst not just one or two, but *hundreds* of educated Black professionals left me utterly speechless. Growing up and receiving education in a predominantly White community and society, I often felt out of place. The very name of my school district, *White Settlement*, underscored the predominant racial composition. In this environment, I rarely encountered more than a single Black educator, and linguistic diversity was limited. The contrast was stark. To be surrounded by a multitude of educated Black professionals was a revelation that left me dumbfounded. It was unlike my past, where I, as a Black student, had been told by my peers that I did not conform to certain stereotypes of Black behavior.

I believe my White peers would say things like: “*You don’t act Black.*”

At home, my adherence to correct grammar, articulate speech, and the avoidance of Ebonics (which is a term that combines "ebony", meaning black, and "phonics", referring to sound. It is used to describe the distinctive linguistic and language patterns or forms of English that are spoken by some African American communities) aligned perfectly with my family's values, yet in the wider societal context, it seemed to set me apart. This transformative

experience of attending the Courageous Conversation Conference not only enriched my doctoral journey but also provided a profound reflection on the impact of racial dynamics in educational settings. Despite wanting to express these sentiments, I hesitated, feeling that my coworkers might not fully grasp the depth of my experience, especially since I am the sole Black person on my team and one of only 3% within the entire organization.

Embarking on this transformative experience was akin to weaving strands of inspiration, each session a unique strand in the braid of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. It felt as though I were braiding together a mosaic of ideas, interlacing my own beliefs with the vibrant threads of like-minded individuals. The conference, a harmonious braid of voices and perspectives, stood in stark contrast to the isolated threads of conventional events, creating a dynamic weave that echoed the core values of unity and understanding. What I shared was, *“This experience was truly transformative, being surrounded by like-minded individuals, attending a conference entirely dedicated to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging was truly remarkable. Typically, I’ve been to conferences with only a few sessions on these topics, but never an entire event centered around them.”* However, what I wanted to express goes deeper, revealing a hesitation and internal struggle. It is a dilemma of whether to articulate my true feelings and risk being truly seen and heard. Will others comprehend the pain and past trauma that shaped me without breaking me? Can they identify with my experiences and accept who I am today?

These past traumas, while not breaking me, have empowered me to become a voice for those still finding theirs - even though I clearly have some hesitation to speak up in certain scenarios. I recognize that students today grapple with similar internal struggles, and Black, educated, professional men and women share these experiences. The conference reassured me

that I'm not alone in this internal struggle and that the work I'm doing extends beyond just me and my students.

It illuminated a larger picture, revealing the systems that have attempted to minimize and silence our voices. The conference provided a sense of community and empowerment, affirming that my voice matters. As I progress in completing my doctorate, I now understand that it's not the end but a continuation. The individuals I met at the conference symbolize the belief that the best is yet to come, and I can and will be a part of better systems and programs to better enrich and teach students.

Though the work can be exhausting, being surrounded by many highly educated Black professionals reminds me that it has a profound purpose. This experience reaffirmed that within myself and the students I work with, as well as other young Black children, there is untapped potential. This work is not just necessary; it is purposeful.

Conclusion and Recommendations

As a counselor, I honed the art of cultural awareness, recognizing the strands of diverse backgrounds and unique needs within each student and family. These stories, intricately woven into my counseling narrative, have proven to be the compass guiding my approach as a DEIB leader. I've carried forward the lessons of empathy, understanding that every individual, regardless of background, deserves to be heard and acknowledged. This skill, cultivated in the counselor's chair, is now the cornerstone of my commitment to fostering an inclusive educational environment.

Transitioning into the role of a DEIB leader, I realized that the skills of open communication and building trust, forged in countless counseling sessions, are the tools that dismantle barriers and lay the groundwork for genuine collaboration. The ability to uncover

challenges rooted in cultural differences, a proficiency nurtured in my counseling days, has become my strategic advantage in crafting policies and initiatives that resonate with the diverse needs of our community.

My identity as a Black woman, which evolved with my professional mission as a counselor, has seamlessly integrated into my role as a DEIB leader. The principles of equality and empowerment, once the foundational strand in counseling, now intertwined with the path toward a more inclusive and equitable future. I leverage my understanding of the profound influence of connection and belonging, extending these principles beyond students to encompass teachers, educators, faculty, coworkers, and the broader community.

In DEIB leadership, the narratives shared with me as a counselor have become more than anecdotes—they are guiding beacons steering the ship toward a horizon of equity and belonging. The transformative power of culturally sensitive counseling approaches, witnessed in the lives of students like Jamaal's, now shapes the initiatives and interventions I champion as a DEIB leader. These experiences underscore the imperative for DEIB leaders to not only acknowledge diversity but to weave it into the very fabric of institutional policies and practices.

Reinforced and feeling empowered after the Courageous Conversations conference in this journey from counselor to DEIB leader, I've come to appreciate that my ability to empathize, understand, and advocate for the diverse needs of individuals stems from the rich tapestry of stories that once graced my counseling office. These skills, carried forth with intention and purpose, have not only shaped my identity but have become the driving force behind my commitment to weaving a more inclusive and equitable educational landscape. As I stand at the intersection of counseling and DEIB leadership, I am not just a leader; I am a storyteller, braiding and weaving narratives of change, understanding, and empowerment.

Here are some recommendations for practice:

- Embrace personal growth and reflection by engaging in ongoing self-assessment and seeking opportunities for professional development to enhance counseling skills and effectiveness.
- Leverage counseling skills and experience to provide comprehensive support to individuals and communities, employing evidence-based practices and approaches tailored to diverse needs.
- Advocate for systemic change and equity by actively challenging unjust policies and practices, advocating for marginalized groups, and promoting policies that foster inclusivity and social justice.
- Promote collaborative partnerships by fostering relationships with stakeholders, including educators, community organizations, and policymakers, to address systemic challenges and enhance access to resources and support services.
- Lead by example and cultivate a culture of inclusion within counseling settings and broader communities, demonstrating commitment to diversity, equity, and respect for all individuals, thereby creating an environment conducive to growth and well-being.

Part 3: New Leadership Braids Forming

This part explores my personal experiences and internal reflections as I navigated the transition from a school counselor to a DEIB leader. It explores the profound changes in my identity, the transformation of my beliefs, and the evolution of my core values. Throughout this transition, my role has evolved from a supportive counselor to a proactive advocate for inclusivity and equity. The experiences shared in this chapter showcase the dynamic nature of personal growth and professional development in the context of DEIB leadership.

Embarking on a new braid, I intricately blend the essence of Leadership Focus with the visionary thread of a DEIB leader's perspective. From this union, a third strand emerges, weaving together the elements of *Leading: Educating Counselors and Advocating for Students*, *The Visionary Perspective of a DEIB Leader*, *Cultivating a Vision*, *Embracing Transformation*, *Purposeful Action*, and *Dreaming Big*.

In Figure 4.4 Braiding with intention, I find myself at an almost midpoint of this intricate process, where the artistry is still unfolding. While I have covered a significant distance, the full beauty of the braids has yet to fully reveal itself. There's a certain anticipation, an acknowledgment that the journey is not yet through. The distinction in each carefully woven strand and the purpose behind every twist and turn provide a compelling reason to persist. Yet, in this moment, there exists a tranquil appreciation for the incomplete, a recognition that the ultimate allure and complexity of the braids will become more pronounced as the journey unfolds.

Figure 4.4. *Braiding with Intention*



Leading: Educating Counselors and Advocating for Students

I attended one of my children's award ceremonies, a familiar event for me as a school counselor. The ceremony, typically held at midday over a lunch break, aims to get all students across the stage within an hour. As I observed, I noticed two distinct awards being presented. One award, determined by teachers, recognized the student who best represented the entire student body. Interestingly, this award went to an educator's White son. The second award, chosen by the student body, honored the student perceived to best represent their class, and it was awarded to my Black son. This disparity intrigued me, highlighting a contrast between the educators' choice and the students' choice.

As the ceremony progressed, I engaged in a quiet conversation with the person next to me. However, our whispers had to grow quieter suddenly. Upon investigation, I realized the ceremony had come to a halt because a student in a motorized wheelchair was attempting to navigate a stage that lacked wheelchair accessibility. The realization left me with a mix of concern and disbelief, compounded by the constraints of the ongoing ceremony.

After the event, I sought out the counselor responsible for the ceremony. Drawing on my counseling experience, I opted for a constructive approach rather than expressing anger. I had the self-awareness to know I may be experiencing anger and prefer to revisit this at a later date but speaking now when my feelings are genuine is probably a better opportunity to practice my own self-awareness and to engage in a meaningful, courageous conversation, one where I can: 1) stay engaged, 2) speak my truth, 3) experience discomfort, and 4) expect and accept non closure (Singleton, 2021). I asked a series of questions to gain insight into the decision-making process:

- Who is the counselor of the young lady in the motorized wheelchair?

- Why was the ceremony held in the auditorium instead of the gym, where all students could walk across the stage without singling out the student in a wheelchair?
- Why was the wheelchair accessibility issue not identified in our practice of guiding all students across the stage?
- How can we address this issue more broadly to ensure it doesn't happen again?

By framing my concerns as questions, I aimed to foster understanding and open a dialogue for a more inclusive approach in future ceremonies. Failing to hold the ceremony in a venue that accommodates diverse physical abilities may potentially result in a violation of laws governing accessibility standards. Such a breach could encompass various laws and regulations, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Under the ADA, discrimination against individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, such as auditoriums, is prohibited (Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990). Therefore, if the auditorium did not meet the accessibility requirements outlined by the ADA, it could be deemed a violation of this law. This narrative serves as a testament to my role as a leader, amplifying my voice in advocating for inclusivity and demonstrates the skills I have absorbed throughout my educational journey. This is not always easy – and I felt discomfort in starting the conversation. However, in order to advocate for students with diverse needs I felt a need to push through the discomfort while trying to maintain the professionalism needed to engage in these conversations. I felt a need to lead in this moment.

As I continue to navigate future endeavors and conversations while assuming leadership responsibilities, the lessons and experiences shared in this narrative will inform my approach. Lessons and experiences I have learned throughout my upbringing, educational journey, and my professional career establish a foundation for proactive engagement in conversations, initiatives,

and decisions that prioritize and champion diversity, equity, inclusivity and belonging. By amplifying my voice, I aim to contribute to a future where diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are integral components of leadership and organizational culture. This narrative, therefore, becomes a dynamic compass guiding my trajectory towards fostering positive and lasting change in the realms of leadership diversity, equity, inclusivity and belonging.

The Visionary Perspective of a DEIB Leader

Bennis (1989) outlined a four-step approach for aspiring leaders to set meaningful goals: (1) Clearly identify your desires and capabilities, discerning the distinctions between them. (2) Recognize the factors that motivate you and the experiences that bring satisfaction, distinguishing between the two. (3) Define your personal values and priorities, aligning them with those of your organization, and gauge any disparities. (4) After completing the initial three steps, assess your readiness and willingness to confront the obstacles that may impede your progress (p. 6).

Visionary leadership transcends the confines of today and reaches into the possibilities of tomorrow. It is a mindset that believes in the power of transformation and the ability to create change, guided by a profound sense of purpose and a clear vision of a more inclusive and equitable future. Visionary leaders in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion dare to dream big and, most importantly, take decisive actions to realize those dreams. To do this, it is essential to foster a leadership approach that transcends current limitations and embraces a forward-thinking mindset. This involves cultivating a vision, embracing transformation, purposeful action, dreaming big, and guidance by purpose. By encapsulating these principles, leaders can embody visionary leadership in the realm of diversity, equity, and inclusion, working towards a future that reflects their aspirational vision.

Cultivating a Vision

According to Bennis (1989) and continuing to be reinforced in national leadership development standards (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2020), effective leaders exhibit a distinct vision for both their professional and personal spheres, driven by unwavering passion and a genuine commitment to integrity. They establish trust through consistent leadership, showcasing maturity, and foster innovation and growth through an insatiable curiosity and a willingness to take risks. Therefore, as a DEIB leader it is important to develop a clear and compelling vision that envisions a future characterized by inclusivity and equity. This involves a comprehensive understanding of the values and goals associated with diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. DEIB leaders should articulate a vision that not only reflects the current needs but also anticipates the future landscape. It is not a one-person mission but a collective endeavor that involves engaging all stakeholders. This process aligns those individuals with a common purpose, ensuring that everyone's voices are heard, and their perspectives integrated into the vision. This vision serves as a guiding light, aligning the leader and their team towards a collective aspiration for a more inclusive and equitable future. Whether in an educational setting or within the community, the foundational step for DEIB leadership is the cultivation of a vision.

As I engage with various districts and communities, I recognize the crucial importance of initiating the DEIB leadership process by establishing a rubric or scoping sequence for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging principles. This initial step involves assessing the current position of the community or educational setting. It facilitates alignment between them and myself, fostering a shared understanding of their perspectives and shedding light on areas they may have perceived differently from the actual scenario. This process opens the door for them to

be receptive to growth in areas they may not have initially identified, promoting a more comprehensive and equitable outcome.

Table 4.1, the Evolution Framework: Navigating Towards Inclusive Excellence, is a scope and sequence, woven from the fabric of my lived experiences, observations, and professional journey. Each column represents not just a stage in organizational DEIB development but a thread in the intricate tapestry of my own understanding. The stages from "Unaware" to "Integrated Balance" mirror the evolution I've witnessed in my own perceptions and practices, weaving together a narrative that emphasizes continuous learning, transformative growth, and the intersectionality inherent in DEIB efforts.

The Unaware stage, reminiscent of my early encounters with DEIB concepts, reflects a time when I had minimal awareness of its significance. As I progressed through my career, the Compliance stage mirrors moments when external regulations nudged me toward reactive initiatives. Recognizing Importance aligns with my awakening to the critical role DEIB plays in organizational success, prompting me to move beyond mere compliance.

Cultural Transformation resonates with my commitment to infuse DEIB principles into the core values and culture of organizations, promoting an environment that prioritizes inclusivity. Continuous Learning mirrors my dedication to ongoing education and training, both for myself and others, to deepen DEIB understanding.

The subsequent stages, from Ignoring DEIB to Intersectionality Awareness, parallel my journey in grappling with and addressing biases, seeking to create comprehensive policies, and forming collaborative partnerships. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and Inclusive Decision-Making reflect my recognition of the need for targeted support structures and diverse perspectives in organizational growth.

As I reflect on the creation of the Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging Scope and Sequence (Table 4.1), I see it not just as a static framework but as a living guide that can evolve and adapt in my leadership journey. It is a beginning, built on my lived experiences that I expect to grow and adapt the more I circle out with the perspectives of others, as well as new scholarship and research. This table is more than a tool; it's a manifestation of my commitment to fostering inclusive environments, drawing on the intertwined threads of my experiences to craft a strategic and balanced approach to DEIB. Moving forward, I envision utilizing this comprehensive tool to strategically integrate DEIB principles into every facet of organizational life. This includes fostering a culture of continuous learning, developing inclusive leadership, and ensuring equitable resource allocation.

In my leadership roles, I plan to implement the DEIB Scope and Sequence as a roadmap for cultural transformation, as well as collect feedback to adapt and evolve the framework. As I grow in my role as a leader, I hope for this framework to help guide the development of robust policies, collaborative partnerships with diverse communities, and the establishment of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs).

Table 4.1. *Evolution Framework: Navigating Towards Inclusive Excellence*

	Unaware	Compliant	Strategic	Integrated	Balance
Proactiveness	Minimal Awareness: Limited understanding of DEIB concepts, their significance, and their impact on individuals and the organization.	Reactive Compliance: Initiating DEIB efforts primarily to meet external regulations or legal requirements.	Recognizing Importance: Acknowledging DEIB as a critical aspect of organizational success and growth.	Cultural Transformation: Infusing DEIB principles into the organization's core values and culture.	Continuous Learning: Promoting ongoing education and training for all members to deepen DEIB understanding.
Leadership Growth	Ignoring DEIB: Little consideration or acknowledgement of diversity-related challenges, biases, or exclusionary practices.	Surface-Level Training: Conducting basic DEIB training sessions or workshops without deep integration into organizational practices.	Data-Driven Insights: Utilizing data to identify DEIB gaps and formulate targeted strategies for improvement.	Inclusive Leadership: Developing leaders who champion DEIB and lead by example in everyday practices.	Intersectionality Awareness: Recognizing the interconnectedness of multiple identities and experiences and value diverse staff perspectives
Policies and Infrastructure	Absence of Policies: Lack of formal policies or initiatives addressing DEIB concerns within the organization.	Policy Development: Developing minimal policies related to DEIB but with limited follow-through in implementation.	Leadership Involvement: Actively engaging organizational leaders in DEIB initiatives and decision-making.	Diverse Talent Pipeline: Proactively seeking diverse talent and ensuring equal opportunities for growth and advancement.	Equitable Resource Allocation: Ensuring fair distribution of resources to support DEIB initiatives across the organization.
Internal and External Partnership	Unconscious Bias: Unawareness of unconscious biases that may influence decision-making and interactions with others.	Token Representation: Focusing on representation numbers without addressing the underlying systemic issues.	Comprehensive Policies: Establishing robust policies that address various aspects of DEIB within the organization.	Collaborative Partnerships: Forming partnerships with diverse communities and organizations to promote inclusivity.	Employee Resource Groups: Establishing ERGs to provide support and amplify the voices of underrepresented employees.
Attention to Continuous Improvement	Limited Inclusivity Efforts: Few or no efforts to foster an inclusive culture or support underrepresented groups.	Low Engagement: Little involvement or commitment from leadership to champion DEIB beyond the compliance level.	External Engagement: Collaborating with external DEIB experts or consultants to enhance strategic planning and implementation.	Inclusive Decision-Making: Encouraging diverse perspectives in decision-making processes for better outcomes.	Sustained Progress: Committing to continuous improvement and monitoring progress to maintain balance and avoid complacency.

Furthermore, I see the table as a means to navigate the complexities of decision-making, valuing diverse perspectives and sustaining progress.

As I introduced the Evolution Framework: Navigating Towards Inclusive Excellence in various presentations, the response has been both invigorating and insightful. My peers and audience members have engaged actively, expressing their appreciation for a practical and comprehensive tool that addresses the nuanced facets of DEIB. Here is an account around the conversations of this tool.

In a crowded conference room, participants from different organizations gathered for my DEIB presentation. As I unveiled the *“Evolution Framework: Navigating Towards Inclusive Excellence”*, a hush fell over the room. *“Moving from compliant to strategic is our next big challenge,”* one participant murmured, his words echoing the sentiments of many. Another nodded, *“And inclusive decision-making in the 'Integrated' stage is crucial for our success.”* Their words lingered in the air, resonating with the shared experiences and aspirations of the group. As the presentation progressed, attendees conversated at their tables, engaging with the framework presented. Sarah, a seasoned HR manager, shared an instance where the table prompted reflection on their current DEIB initiatives. *“This tool really makes you pause and evaluate where you stand,”* Sarah remarked. *“It's not just about checking boxes; it's about addressing real gaps in our efforts. Looking at what we are doing and asking is this contributing to our efforts?”* Her words resonated with others in the room, sparking conversations about areas within their districts and organizations needing further attention. As personal stories were woven into the discussion, attendees nodded in agreement, recognizing the practicality of a tool shaped by real-world challenges and successes. The positive response encourages me to continue

evolving and refining this tool, ensuring its relevance and effectiveness in guiding organizations toward more equitable and inclusive practices.

The table isn't just a static creation; it's a dynamic instrument that will evolve with our ever-changing landscape. I aim to use it proactively, monitoring progress, adapting to emerging challenges, and ensuring that DEIB efforts remain integral to our organizational values. By doing so, I hope to contribute to the creation of an environment that not only meets current DEIB standards but sets a benchmark for continuous improvement and inclusivity.

Embracing Transformation

Foster a mindset that welcomes change and sees it as a powerful force for positive transformation. DEIB leaders understand that meaningful progress often requires a departure from the status quo. Embracing transformation means acknowledging the necessity of change and viewing it as a catalyst for positive growth. Leaders foster a culture that encourages adaptability and innovation, positioning the organization to respond effectively to evolving challenges and opportunities (Kotter, 2003).

DEIB leadership demands innovative strategies. Inclusivity is not just a buzzword; it is a dynamic force that adapts and evolves over time. DEIB leaders must be open to new ideas and approaches, continually pushing the boundaries of traditional norms and structures. Exploring innovative strategies for fostering inclusivity, including embracing other holidays, flexible work or learning environments, and proactive diversity trainings.

In my role as a counselor, I endeavored to maintain an open-minded approach, allowing each student to share their unique story, and facilitating the discovery of conclusions that would best guide them toward necessary action steps for favorable outcomes. This skill, I have found, is crucial for a DEIB leader, it involves fostering a mindset that embraces change. I empower

individuals to embark on self-reflection, acknowledging their personal identity and how they present themselves in various social settings. This guidance assists them in discovering meaningful ways to contribute actively to fostering a more inclusive and equitable environment.

Purposeful Action

Turning vision into reality requires purposeful action. DEIB leaders must translate their aspirations into tangible and strategic initiatives. This involves developing actionable plans, setting measurable goals, and mobilizing resources effectively. Purposeful action is characterized by a commitment to implementation, ensuring that the organization progresses steadily towards achieving its vision for inclusivity and equity.

The braiding of my experiences and observations brought forth a comprehensive framework aimed at purposeful and actionable steps. The Purposeful Action Plan seen in Table 4.2 seeks to not only articulate intentions but also delineate tangible actions for a DEIB team or faculty to undertake. It recognizes the nuanced challenges faced by educational institutions and offers tailored strategies to address them effectively. Like the Scope and Sequence table above, this is born out of my experiences and is a beginning, as I expect this to evolve through ongoing synthesis with the literature as well as ongoing feedback from peers and clients.

Table 4.2. Purposeful Action Plan

Build the Team	Define Understanding	Acknowledgement and Recognition	Shifting Perspectives and Challenging Biases	Healing and Reconciliation	Staff Training
	DEIBteam/faculty	DEIB team/faculty	DEIB team/faculty	DEIB team/faculty	
Identify potential DEIB team members from diverse backgrounds and perspectives.	Cultivate empathy and understanding of individual differences.	Acknowledge the historical, societal, and institutional influences on underrepresented groups.	Critically examine their preconceived notions and existing understandings of underrepresented groups.	Seek processes to address and heal the wounds caused by historical injustices and systemic discrimination.	Secure specialized training for the DEIB team to enhance their expertise and effectiveness.
Consider member roles and responsibilities within the DEIB team.	Educators are familiar with DEIB concepts and its impact on both staff and students.	Regularly review data and resources to promote meaningful change in the school community.	Encouragement of a transformative shift in perspectives among team members and school staff.	Safe space for dialogue and healing within the school	Provide DEIB training to all school staff members.
Clearly define member roles and expectations based on competence, availability, and commitment.	Training and workshops to enhance educators' understanding of DEIB principles are offered.	Able to provide a list of local resources to support underrepresented groups.	Foster an inclusive and open-minded school environment.	community are designated.	
Regularly revisit role assignments with consideration for competence and willingness to fulfill the role.		Acknowledge and observe holidays and practices of underrepresented groups within the school and district.			Establish procedures for ongoing training for new staff and review training for existing staff, either annually or on demand.
Determine appropriate storage for DEIB-related documentation, ensuring ease of access for underrepresented groups.		Consider ease of access for underrepresented groups			
Consider the accessibility of resources and materials to cater to the diverse needs of the school community.					

Note: This framework was developed by myself as part of this dissertation process.

The first strand, 'Build the Team,' underscores the significance of assembling a DEIB team that reflects diverse backgrounds and perspectives. Drawing from my encounters with the complexities of team dynamics, this aspect emphasizes the importance of role definition, regular role revisitation, and accessible documentation storage to ensure the team's success.

Moving into the second strand, 'Define Educators Understanding,' my experiences navigating educational spaces highlighted the necessity of cultivating empathy and understanding among educators. This section suggests targeted training and workshops to enhance educators' grasp of DEIB principles, promoting a more informed and compassionate teaching approach.

The third strand, 'Acknowledgement and Recognition,' taps into my observations of the need for educational institutions to acknowledge historical, societal, and institutional influences on underrepresented groups. It advocates for regular reviews of data, provision of local resources, and cultural inclusivity within the school environment.

Shifting perspectives and challenging biases, stemming from the first three strands, reflects my commitment to fostering transformative shifts in attitudes. Informed by my encounters with preconceived notions, this section encourages a critical examination of existing understandings and the promotion of an open-minded school environment.

The final strand formed, 'Healing and Reconciliation,' addresses the need for processes to heal wounds caused by historical injustices and systemic discrimination. This element, deeply rooted in my belief in restorative practices, advocates for designated safe spaces and specialized training for the DEIB team.

As we interlock each strand, the Purposeful Action Plan aims to guide educational institutions in practical steps towards embedding DEIB principles, ensuring that it is not merely an abstract concept but an actionable roadmap for transformative change. Table 4.2 is the action plan I developed to help showcase what a purposeful action plan might look like.

Purpose is the driving force behind DEIB leadership. DEIB leaders must and should be guided by a profound sense of purpose rooted in the principles of diversity, equity, inclusion and belonging. This sense of purpose serves as a moral compass, influencing decision-making and ensuring that actions align with the broader goals of creating positive social impact. DEIB Leaders communicate and reinforce the purpose to inspire and motivate their teams, fostering a shared commitment to the vision.

As I introduced the Purposeful Action Plan to peers and diverse audiences throughout my dissertation journey, I came to realize that the approach to fostering Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging is consistent across both educational institutions and organizations. The response from participants has been uniformly affirming and invigorating. Engaging in thoughtful discussions, sharing personal experiences and insights, we collectively cultivated a collaborative atmosphere that epitomized the inclusivity championed by DEIB principles. Notably, one participant succinctly captured the essence of our shared endeavor: *“I appreciate the practical approach of this plan. It feels like we're finally moving beyond just talking about DEIB and into actionable steps.”*

The DEIB team members, for whom the plan was crafted, expressed enthusiasm for its practical approach. They resonated with the emphasis on role definition and revisitation, recognizing the potential for these measures to enhance team dynamics. The acknowledgment of the historical influences on underrepresented groups struck a chord, prompting conversations

about the importance of cultural inclusivity within educational settings. In an evaluation a participant wrote: *“The Purposeful Action helped me to identify the progress of our action steps.”*

During workshops and presentations, educators exhibited genuine interest in the *Define Understanding*. The call for targeted training and workshops to enhance their grasp of DEIB principles resonated strongly, leading to inquiries about potential avenues for professional development. I recall one educator telling me: *“I’ve been wanting more training on this for a while now. It’s great to see that it’s finally being prioritized.”* This response reinforced the understanding that educators are eager to engage in continuous learning to foster a more empathetic and informed teaching approach.

Shifting Perspectives and Challenging Biases sparked intriguing conversations about the power of transformative shifts in attitudes. Educators shared personal reflections on confronting preconceived notions, fostering a collective commitment to creating an open-minded school environment. The comment that seems to stick with me the most is when an educator said, *“I never really thought about how my own biases about poverty, and socioeconomic status might be influencing my interactions with students. This plan is making me rethink a lot of things”*.

Healing and Reconciliation drew responses that reflected a shared commitment to addressing historical wounds and fostering a culture of understanding. Attendees highlighted the significance of safe spaces and specialized training, recognizing the potential for these initiatives to promote healing within educational communities. One participant stated, *“It’s important for us to acknowledge the pain of the past and work towards healing. This plan is a step in the right direction”*.

The Purposeful Action Plan has not only been well-received but has ignited meaningful dialogues and reflections.

Dreaming Big

Dare to dream ambitiously, thinking beyond the current constraints and envisioning possibilities that may seem audacious but are aligned with the values of inclusivity and equity. DEIB Leaders should and can dare to dream big. You must allow yourself to emerge as a leader by applying to the way you do your job the wisdom and insight gained from your reflections on life's lessons (Bennis, 1989). This involves thinking expansively and imaginatively about the possibilities that exist beyond current limitations. Dreaming big encourages leaders to challenge conventional boundaries, envision innovative solutions, and set ambitious goals. By daring to dream big, leaders inspire both themselves and their teams to reach for loftier objectives in the pursuit of a more inclusive and equitable future.

In my role as a DEIB leader within school districts, I dare to dream ambitiously, envisioning a future where diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging are not just checkboxes on an agenda but integral elements shaping the educational environment. I envision a school culture that goes beyond meeting diversity quotas and actively embraces and celebrates the unique contributions of every student and staff member. Recognizing that change is the sole constant in a leader's journey, I acknowledge the necessity to navigate within an environment that is continuously evolving, adapting, and adjusting to serendipity (Bennis, 1989). This perspective propels me to not only dream big but also to actively work towards establishing an educational atmosphere where DEIB principles become integral elements shaping the very fabric of our learning environment.

Acquiring an inclusive perspective is a multifaceted journey that involves countless experience, and fostering meaningful connections with mentors and groups, and a commitment to ongoing education (Bennis, 1989). In pursuit of this vision, I work with districts starting with a scope and sequence, identifying where the district believes they are currently so that together we can create a road map of where they want to be. I implemented comprehensive training programs for educators and staff to promote cultural competence and inclusivity. Together we identify and address structural issues that create disparities or disadvantages for certain groups of students, parents, and staff. The purpose is to create a more level playing field by ensuring that all students, parents, and staff regardless of their background, have fair and unbiased access to educational resources, opportunities, and support. I envision mentorship programs that foster connections among students from diverse backgrounds, and when needed I assist the team in constructing these mentorship programs.

While these initiatives might seem gallant at first, they align with the values of inclusivity and equity. By daring to dream big, I inspire not only myself but also the entire educational district and community to challenge conventional boundaries, envision innovative solutions, and take initiative. This approach fosters a school environment and community where diversity is not just acknowledged but actively celebrated, which contributes to a more inclusive and equitable future for all students, teachers, and community members.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The pivotal moments, challenges, and deeper meanings of my transformation from a Black female school counselor to a DEIB leader have been documented. This chapter serves as a bridge between reflection and future aspirations, offering insights into the road ahead and the vision for inclusive leadership. Reflecting on my journey as an autoethnographer of my own

experiences, it becomes evident that self-awareness, advocacy, inclusivity, and a profound understanding of diversity and identity are not merely abstract concepts. These are living principles that have influenced my beliefs and values. They have, in turn, propelled personal growth and evolution.

DEIB leadership with a vision for the future is not just a theory; it is a commitment to creating a world that genuinely values diversity, promotes equity, fosters inclusion, and ensures that everyone feels a sense of belonging. As DEIB leaders explore the various aspects of shaping the future, remember that the future we envision today will be the reality we live in tomorrow. Let this vision be the guiding force in our journey as inclusive leaders, driving us to create a better, more inclusive world for all. According to Bennis (1989), effective leaders exhibit a distinct vision for both their professional and personal spheres, driven by unwavering passion and a genuine commitment to integrity. They establish trust through consistent leadership, showcasing maturity, and fostering innovation and growth through an insatiable curiosity and a willingness to take risks.

As DEIB leaders navigate the dynamic braiding of leadership, there is a call to be catalysts for meaningful change, advocating for justice and equality in every sphere of influence. It is through collective dedication and unwavering commitment that DEIB leaders can forge a path towards a future where diversity is celebrated, equity is realized, inclusion is embraced, and everyone experiences a genuine sense of belonging.

Here are some recommendations for practice:

- Cultivate a Vision: Establish a clear vision that reflects the organization's commitment to DEIB, inspiring alignment and direction for all stakeholders.

- Embrace Transformation: Encourage openness to change and growth, fostering a culture where challenging norms and addressing inequities are valued.
- Take Purposeful Action: Implement deliberate initiatives and policies to advance DEIB goals, driving measurable progress and impact.
- Dream Big for Change: Foster innovation and aspiration by setting ambitious goals for diversity and inclusion, empowering stakeholders to envision and work towards a more inclusive future.

Part 4: This is Me

I have given background, provided meaning, and now the unfolding artistry continues. Each weave and twist in this intricate journey contribute to the overall pattern, creating a visual symphony of interconnected strands. As I progress, the beauty of the braids becomes more pronounced, with each section revealing its own unique charm. The intentional crafting of these patterns serves as a testament to the dedication and skill poured into this endeavor. With every careful motion, the strands come together, forming a tapestry that transcends the simplicity of individual threads. The journey is not just about reaching completion but savoring the evolving beauty that emerges with each added layer.

Figure 4.5. *Artistry in Braids: Crafting Patterns*



Much like this dissertation, the intricate process of braiding mirrors the journey of understanding and implementing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging in my professional endeavors. As I work on DEIB, I see it as a purposeful creation, reflecting my commitment and skills. Each careful step I take in developing DEIB strategies is like adding strands of hair to a braid. This journey is more than just completing initiatives; it's about recognizing the evolving beauty that comes with every effort. Having reached this juncture, my intention is to fashion four additional braids, symbolizing the integration of key concepts that will culminate in a comprehensive depiction. These final strands encompass the vital principles of *Diversity*, *Equity*, *Inclusion*, and *Belonging*, each contributing to the intricate braiding of my narrative.

Diversity

Diversity encompasses the multitude of ways in which individuals and groups differ, encompassing various characteristics that distinguish one person or group from another. It involves recognizing and valuing everyone and every group as integral components of diversity. This extends beyond traditional categories such as race, ethnicity, and gender, to encompass a broad range of factors. Age, national origin, religion, disability, sexual orientation,

socioeconomic status, education, marital status, language, physical appearance, and more all contribute to the diverse fabric of our communities.

To comprehend or define diversity is to recognize the presence of multiple identities, each contributing to the complex concept of self. One's evolving self-concept encompasses various aspects of life, including elements beyond personal control such as place of upbringing, birth order, and the color of one's skin. It is crucial to distinguish between personal identity and social identity, with the latter playing a more significant role in what is typically measured as diversity in professional and educational settings. Social identity forms a part of an individual's self-perception shaped by perceived group membership, and it may manifest visibly or remain invisible. Recognizing the invisible nature of social identity is vital, as individuals may sometimes align with certain groups merely to conform to societal expectations, choosing to project a facade that aligns with perceived roles.

Considering social identity as a factor in diversity becomes even more significant in professional and educational contexts. This introspective exploration prompts reflection on one's participation in DEIB (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging) initiatives. Questions about the training received and its application in practice, active involvement in DEIB efforts, and the impact of diversity and inclusion on personal and professional experiences offer a nuanced perspective on the individual's relationship with DEIB. Sharing DEIB experiences and exploring their influence on one's views further enriches the understanding of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging in the broader context of personal and professional development.

Diversity extends beyond these visible aspects to include different ideas, perspectives, values, and all the unique qualities that make individuals distinct. It is a comprehensive acknowledgment of the rich braiding of human experience, embracing the vast array of

preferences, perspectives, and characteristics that contribute to the multifaceted nature of diversity.

Equity

Equity is the fair access to and distribution of opportunities, resources, and power within and outside of schools regardless of race, class, gender, ability, sexuality, language, immigration status, or religious preference (Sharp, Green, & Lewis, 2017). I personally view equity as the vital bridge between Diversity and Inclusion. To aspire to equity means examining power dynamics—identifying who holds power and working to ensure its continuous and consistent redistribution. Achieving equity goes beyond acknowledging and embracing diverse identities; it involves actively dismantling systemic imbalances to foster fair and just treatment for all individuals and groups. In this perspective, equity becomes the guiding force that propels us towards a truly inclusive and just society. To effectively promote and demonstrate equity within school environments, it becomes imperative to explore the transformative role of data. Data serves as a powerful instrument, unraveling disparities, guiding targeted interventions, and cultivating a truly inclusive educational landscape.

Data plays a crucial role in promoting equity within the realm of school environments by providing insights into educational disparities, informing decision-making processes, and guiding interventions. Data facilitates the identification of disparities by allowing schools to scrutinize academic achievement across diverse demographic groups, discern discipline trends, and reveal discrepancies in resource allocation. These insights form the basis for informed decision-making, guiding the strategic allocation of resources, curriculum design, and overall policy adjustments to address prevailing inequities.

Data empowers schools to implement targeted interventions, such as early support for at-risk students and initiatives focused on social-emotional learning. Data can be used as comprehensive examination and evaluation of policies, practices, and procedures within an organization or institution to assess their impact on equity and diversity; also known as an equity audit. An equity audit is a comprehensive evaluative process employed to scrutinize organizational policies, practices, and procedures with a specific focus on their impact on equity and diversity (Jones Roberson, 2023). The purpose of an equity audit is to identify and rectify potential biases, disparities, and barriers that may exist, ensuring that educational systems are fostering a fair and inclusive environment. The process involves analyzing various aspects, including but not limited to hiring practices, resource allocation, curriculum design, and disciplinary actions, with the goal of promoting equal opportunities and addressing systemic inequities. Equity audits are instrumental in guiding educational systems toward more equitable and just practices by providing a systematic framework for critical self-assessment and improvement.

Equity audits provide sharable data. By sharing data with stakeholders, schools foster accountability and collaboration, creating opportunities for joint efforts in addressing disparities. data is a powerful tool in the pursuit of equity. It helps identify, measure, and address disparities, guides policymaking, and holds institutions accountable for their commitment to equity. Data-driven strategies are essential in creating a more just and inclusive society.

I was working in a district that was trying to improve student sense of belonging. The district decided to put out a questionnaire asking questions such as:

“Do you feel like you belong in the school?”

“Do you feel as though the school is diverse? Do you feel as though you are well represented within the school?”

There were about 10 questions on this questionnaire, and it was pushed out to all 1200 students. Upon analyzing the data, it was discovered that only 10% of the 1200 students felt as though the school was not diverse and felt as though they were not well represented. To this district this was good news. The district felt as though the students who did not feel as though they belonged and who did not have a sense of belonging probably did not participate in school activities and functions. The district met with a few students who identified as other than White to review the data and each one was shocked, noting they were one of the students who felt as though they were not well represented. This made the district want to look deeper into the data provided.

When the district compared the data from the questionnaire to the students of color within the student body population, they found that about 10% of their student body identify as other than White, which meant it was possible that the 10% of students who felt like they were not well represented or that the school was not diverse could have been the 10% of the student body who identified as other than White. When the district looked at the data from this perspective, they felt as though they had a problem and used that data to inform their interventions and decisions to make the school a more inclusive environment. Starting these conversations can be uncomfortable, but in order to change these systems to work better for all students, leaders must build a culture where these tough conversations are possible – and eventually become normal. Additionally, this is an example of how data can work, but it is also an example of how data can be misinterpreted and the importance of ensuring a thorough examination of data by incorporating diverse perspectives, preventing the oversight of valuable insights that data can

offer. Equality may ask why you can't reach the apple when we gave you the same access as everyone else?!

Inclusion

Genuine inclusion revolves around valuing the thoughts, ideas, and perspectives of all individuals, emphasizing not only the demographics of a group but also the sense of belonging experienced by its members. It is a deliberate and active process that seeks to reach out to individuals who may otherwise be excluded or marginalized due to their minoritized identities. While diverse groups naturally form clusters, the challenge lies in ensuring these clusters actively exchange ideas and feel an integral part of the broader conversation.

The vision for inclusion is to seamlessly integrate with others and your surroundings. To actively participate in conversations and become an essential component of surrounding groups and structures. The key to achieving this lies in equity, acting as the connective strand between diversity and inclusion. Once equity is established, discussions surrounding justice can commence. Meaningful and courageous conversations can now take place.

Inclusion, in its truest sense, encompasses the feeling of involvement and welcome, involving acts and practices that integrate individuals into the classroom or school setting. It goes beyond mere acceptance, fostering an environment where everyone is respected for their unique contributions and can fully participate and contribute. Through inclusion, a celebration of social differences can take place. Inclusion gives a way for students and faculty to be recognized as vital components in a diverse community and school.

Belonging

Entering my second year of doctoral classes marked a significant juncture in my academic journey. Having completed courses like Leadership of Diverse Populations and

Foundations of Social Justice, I embarked on a profound exploration. This journey aimed to unearth deeper meanings within an educational system where individuals who looked like me were considered the minority. During this period, I vividly recall working in my home office and guest bedroom when Brandon, my husband, entered. His gaze wandered across the walls adorned with newly added Afrocentric art from a local Ross, complemented by matching bedding. As Brandon hugged and kissed me, he playfully remarked, *"Baby, you weren't this Black when I met you."* We shared a laugh, recognizing the absurdity of the notion that one can *"act Black."* However, this comment reflected a pervasive stereotype often encountered by us throughout our educational journey.

Brandon's words alluded to the emerging sense of comfort and authenticity I was discovering within myself. It was a moment of mutual understanding, signifying that I was embracing my Blackness as a source of strength, beauty, and pride. This realization marked a shift, emphasizing that my color doesn't define me but constitutes an integral aspect of my identity. Figure 4.6 depicts my home office and guest bedroom.

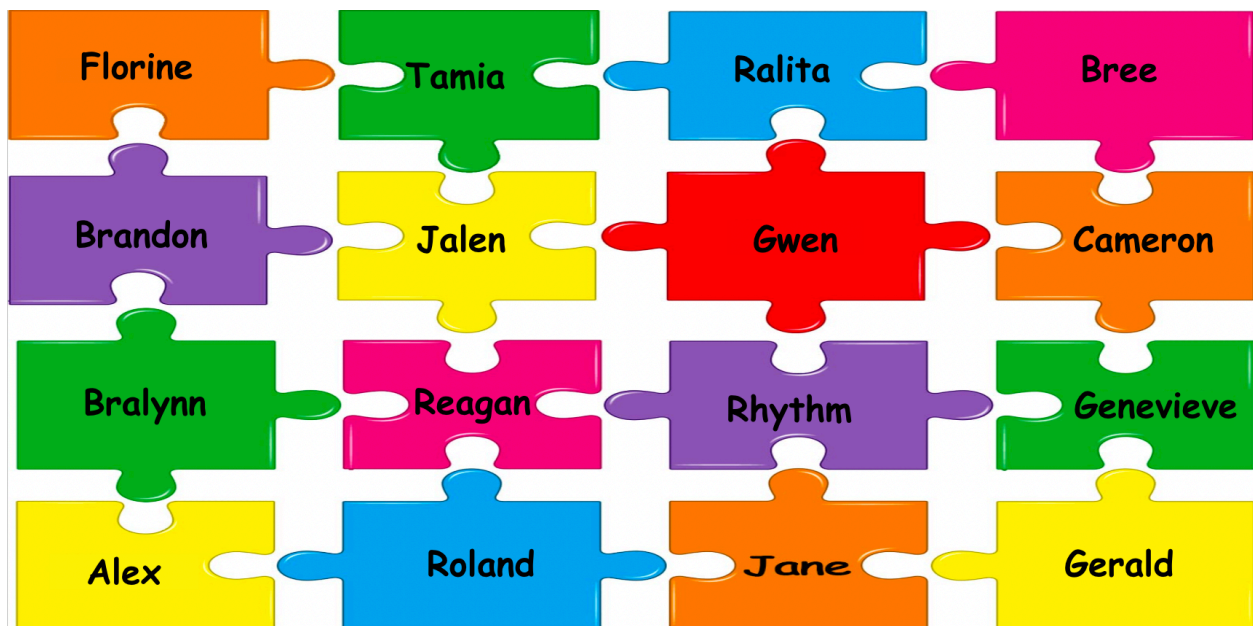
Figure 4.6. *Afrocentric Home Office*



This sense of comfort that I have now is one that I want all students and people to have. The feeling I am describing is belonging. I describe belonging as feeling that you as an

individual matter, and as an individual you get to show up to different spaces and places as you. Belonging can be compared to a puzzle piece in a larger, beautifully diverse jigsaw puzzle. Each puzzle piece represents an individual, unique in its shape, color, and design. The puzzle image depicted in Figure 4.7 holds personal significance as the names listed below represent my family members, apart from my professor. The inclusion of my doctoral professor's name is deliberate, acknowledging my doctoral professors' substantial role in guiding me to perceive and comprehend how the concept of belonging resembles puzzle pieces, but the concept of belonging is just another strand in the braid of this dissertation.

Figure 4.7. *Belonging is A Part of The Puzzle*



This jigsaw puzzle piece, within the broader context of DEIB, exemplifies the comprehensive nature of DEIB. In this framework, every individual brings distinct qualities, backgrounds, and experiences to the collective narrative. Just as puzzle pieces differ in shapes and sizes, individuals encompass a range of diverse identities, including aspects such as race, gender, sexual orientation, abilities, and more.

To complete the puzzle and create a harmonious picture, it's essential for all these pieces to fit together. In DEIB, this means fostering an inclusive environment where every person's unique attributes are valued and recognized. Just as a puzzle piece is essential for the completion of the picture, each individual contributes to the richness and vibrancy of the collective whole.

However, it's not just about fitting in. It is also about ensuring that the puzzle piece is not forced to change its shape to fit. In DEIB, this relates to creating an environment where people don't have to compromise or hide their true selves to belong. Rather, they are accepted and embraced for who they are, just like a puzzle piece that finds its natural spot without alteration. Furthermore, a puzzle piece is not isolated or disconnected. It connects with others to create a more substantial, coherent image. In DEIB, this signifies that belonging is not an individual achievement but a collective one. It is about forging connections, building bridges, and working together to create a more diverse, equitable, inclusive, and belonging society. In essence, belonging in terms of DEIB is like being an integral puzzle piece in a broader, inclusive mosaic where each piece contributes to a more complete and more beautiful picture, celebrating the uniqueness of every individual and the strength of unity in diversity. While my DEIB leadership work early on emphasized the puzzle, which still works to a degree, now those ideas are further evolving. *For me, my puzzle is a braid.*

I understand that each strand builds to a fuller, richer braid and braid, in my life, symbolizes the intertwining facets of my upbringing, professional counseling career, and ongoing educational journey. Each strand of my puzzle represents a distinct aspect of my identity, shaped by my experiences, values, and aspirations.

Here are some recommendations for practice:

- Promote and celebrate culture and diversity. Encourage cultural exchanges, celebrations, and awareness initiatives that highlight the unique contributions of different cultural groups.
- Take part in equitable actions. Engage in actions that promote equity and fairness for all individuals, regardless of background or identity. This may involve advocating for equitable policies and practices, challenging biases and discrimination, and actively working to dismantle systemic barriers to equality. By taking a stand for equity, you contribute to creating a more just and inclusive society where everyone has equal opportunities to succeed.
- Be purposefully inclusive in your interactions and decisions. Consider the diverse perspectives and needs of all stakeholders and strive to create spaces and opportunities where everyone feels heard, valued, and respected.
- Foster a culture of belonging by actively listening to diverse perspectives, validating individual experiences, and creating inclusive spaces where everyone feels valued and respected.

Growing up in a predominantly White environment, I often felt out of place in my social and often personal identity. My upbringing with my church, siblings and mother laid the foundation for my sense of self. My exposure to a predominantly White education left me yearning for an appreciation of differences, understanding, inclusion and belonging. The early lack of representation left a void that I had to fill through personal growth and higher education where I was given the opportunity to learn new truths and compose a braid that was beautiful to me. This experience has exposed and instilled in me a deep respect for various perspectives and backgrounds. As I ventured into a professional counseling and DEIB career, I recognized the

power of fostering inclusivity and promoting mental well-being. Guided by principles of diversity and equity, my counseling and DEIB leader journey has become a dedicated effort to provide support and empowerment to individuals from diverse backgrounds. Simultaneously, my educational pursuits acted as another strand, weaving through the intricate tapestry of my identity. Courses such as Leadership of Diverse Populations and Foundations of Social Justice added depth and nuance to my understanding of DEIB. Each lesson became a new strand, contributing to the intricate braid that is my evolving comprehension of the complex issues surrounding diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging. Diversity, equity, and inclusion serve as the essential threads in the intricate braid of fostering belonging and a sense of community. Much like the weaving together of diverse strands creates strength and beauty in a braid, embracing differences, ensuring fairness, and cultivating inclusivity are the foundational tools that intertwine to create a braid of belonging for all individuals.

Figure 4.8. *There is Beauty from Every Angle*



Figure 4.9. *A Complete Set of Braids: Feeling Whole*



In essence, my life's puzzle is a braided journey, where the intertwining strands of upbringing, counseling career, and education form a cohesive narrative. This braid, much like the interconnected puzzle pieces, symbolizes the collective effort required to create a society where every individual is valued, celebrated, and contributes to a harmonious mosaic of unity in diversity. This dissertation stands as a testament to the ongoing commitment to unravel complexities, bridge gaps, and contribute to the continual evolution of a more equitable and inclusive society.

Synthesizing Recommendations for Practice and Reflecting on Future Research Needs

While I have offered a few recommendations for practice, here I synthesize a larger conversation about these recommendations for practice and future research in a few highly relevant contexts in this current year. As a school counselor and DEIB leader in Kansas, I am acutely aware of the complexities surrounding the current climate in education, particularly concerning the debate over Critical Race Theory and its implications for teaching practices (Gillborn, 2015). This is what is unraveling here in Kansas, however there are parallel conversations and legislative action taking place in states like Texas, Florida, and Utah, among others. This section examines the challenges and tensions faced by school counselors in Kansas

and attempts to navigate the dissonance between established American School Counselor (ASCA) standards, National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards, anti-CRT politics, and legislation.

Current Climate in Kansas

In Kansas, the landscape of education is shaped by a commitment to excellence and equity in teaching and learning. As a school counselor, I adhere to professional standards established by organizations such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), which prioritize principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (ASCA, 2019). These standards guide my work in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional development while fostering an inclusive school environment. However, the emergence of anti-CRT politics in Kansas has introduced new challenges to the educational landscape. Recent legislative efforts aimed at restricting the teaching of CRT-related concepts have raised concerns among educators about their ability to address issues of race, privilege, and social justice in the classroom. For example, Senate Bill 515, introduced in 2022, seeks to ban the teaching of divisive concepts related to race and sex in Kansas schools.

Dissonance Between Standards and Legislation

The tension between established counseling standards, such as those outlined by Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP), and the Kansas code of ethics for educators, and anti-DEIB policies is palpable. Legislation is outlawing policies which are creating tension between national accreditations, standards and practice. For example, CACREP looks for these standards to be implemented in the counseling program for counselors to be accredited. NELP and ASCA standards emphasize the importance of cultural competence, social justice advocacy,

and inclusivity in leadership and counseling practice. For instance, the ASCA Ethical Standards model, section B, school counselors have responsibilities to parents, guardians, the school, and themselves (ASCA, 2019). This includes advocating for the use of vetted, bilingual/multilingual translators to represent languages used by families in the school community, thereby supporting broader cultural communication and engagement (Standard J). Additionally, counselors are tasked with providing culturally responsive information to families, aimed at increasing understanding, improving communication, promoting engagement, and ultimately enhancing student outcomes (Standard L). According to the Building Level NELP Standards (NPBEA, 2018), aspiring leaders must engage in continuous professional growth and leadership to advance student learning and well-being. This includes understanding and demonstrating the capacity to use data to evaluate, design, cultivate, and advocate for a supportive and inclusive school culture (Component 3.1), as well as evaluating, cultivating, and advocating for equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction and behavior support practices among teachers and staff (Component 3.3). However, recent laws and policies in states like Texas (Texas House Bill 3979), Florida (HB 7), and Utah (House Bill 1175) may undermine these principles by restricting discussions on sensitive topics and perpetuating systemic inequalities.

Navigating the Dissonance

In confronting this dissonance, I am dedicated to upholding the principles of equity and inclusion delineated in the American School Counseling Standards, 2022, while simultaneously adhering to legal mandates. One strategy I employ is leveraging established frameworks like ASCA's Ethical Standards for School Counselors to inform my professional conduct (ASCA, 2022). These standards underscore the significance of advocating for every student, championing social justice, and challenging systemic obstacles to academic achievement.

I actively engage in advocacy endeavors to raise awareness of embracing diversity, championing equitable practices, and fostering purposeful inclusion, thereby nurturing a sense of belonging. Through presentations to various organizations and school districts on DEIB, I strive to contribute to a discourse that promotes policies conducive to inclusive education within Kansas schools. Given the restrictive legislative landscape, fostering a sense of belonging in educational and organizational settings becomes imperative. This dissertation serves not only as an exploration but also as a call for further research that advocates for policies supporting inclusive education in schools and inclusive organizations.

My awareness of legislation, NELP standards, and ASCA standards extends to the nuances of language necessary for acceptance across diverse spaces and political ideologies. I recognize the need to adapt terminology, such as diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging, to align with varying viewpoints. Consequently, I prioritize using terms like "climate" and "culture," as they encompass a broader spectrum of perspectives. "climate" emphasizes the importance of inclusivity for all individuals, while "culture" involves an understanding of individual backgrounds and experiences.

As a school counselor and DEIB leader in Kansas, I am steadfast in navigating the intricate dynamics of the educational landscape with integrity and professionalism. Through adherence to ethical standards, advocacy for inclusive education, and collaborative efforts with stakeholders, I endeavor to cultivate learning environments where every student feels valued, supported, and empowered to achieve their fullest potential. But overall, I have felt the ways that these broader political environments and legislative actions are creating tension between professional standards for educators and new laws and policies at the state and local levels. This creates a need for a new wave of innovative practice and affiliated research.

Future Research Needs in Educational Equity and Inclusion

As we navigate the complexities of diverse learning environments and strive to address systemic inequalities, there arises a need for continued research to inform and guide our efforts. This section explores key areas where future research in educational equity and inclusion should prioritize based on what I found through this autoethnographic process. These areas include analyzing the impact of legislation and policy decisions on educational equity, examining the intersectionality of marginalized identities, investigating the effectiveness of culturally responsive pedagogy, exploring the role of teacher preparation programs in promoting equity and diversity, understanding the influence of school climate on student outcomes, exploring strategies for engaging families and communities in promoting educational equity, leadership, and school counselor prep.

Education, Legislation, Law, and Policy as it translates to practice:

- Focus on analyzing the impact of legislation and policy decisions on educational equity and inclusion.
- Examine the effectiveness of existing policies, identifying gaps and barriers to equity, and advocating for policy changes that promote social justice and dismantle systemic oppression are critical areas for future research and advocacy efforts.

Intersectionality Research:

- Examine the complex interactions between identity factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and ability, to gain insights into the unique challenges and barriers faced by diverse student populations.

- This understanding is essential for developing targeted interventions that address the specific needs of marginalized students and promote equitable outcomes in education.

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP):

- Research should examine the effectiveness of specific CRP interventions, such as culturally relevant curriculum materials or culturally responsive teaching strategies, in diverse educational contexts.
- Investigating best practices for incorporating CRP principles into school counseling and leadership preparation programs, as this is already embedded into ASCA and is required by CACREP.

Teacher Preparation and Professional Development:

- Studies could explore the impact of culturally responsive teaching training on educators' attitudes, beliefs, and instructional practices.
- Exploring how mentorship, coaching, and peer collaboration can support teachers' continuous growth and development in culturally responsive pedagogy within the framework of DEIB can provide valuable insights into effective strategies for fostering equity and diversity in education.

School Climate and Sense of Belonging:

- Research should examine the factors that contribute to a culturally affirming environment, including inclusive school policies, supportive relationships, and opportunities for student voice and leadership.

- For instance, studies could explore the impact of restorative justice practices, culturally relevant curriculum initiatives, and student-led diversity clubs on school climate and student outcomes.

Family and Community Engagement:

- Research should examine the impact of family-school partnerships, community-based initiatives, and culturally responsive outreach efforts on student outcomes and school-community relationships.
- For example, studies could explore the effectiveness of parent engagement programs, culturally relevant family workshops, and community-led advocacy initiatives in promoting educational equity and empowering marginalized communities.

Leadership:

- Research in leadership should delve into examining practices that foster equity and inclusivity within educational institutions.
- This could involve studying the effectiveness of leadership models that prioritize DEIB initiatives and investigating the impact of leadership styles on school climate and student outcomes.
- For example, studies could explore the role of transformative leadership in promoting cultural responsiveness among staff and empowering marginalized student populations.

School Counseling:

- Research should explore the unique challenges and barriers faced by school counselors in supporting students from diverse backgrounds, including those related to cultural competence, language proficiency, and access to resources.

- For instance, studies could examine the effectiveness of counseling interventions tailored to meet the specific needs of marginalized student populations, such as trauma-informed counseling for refugees or culturally sensitive approaches for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer/questioning, intersex, asexual, and pansexual/polysexual (LGBTQIAP+) youth.

By focusing on these key areas, researchers can contribute to creating more equitable and inclusive educational systems that meet the diverse needs of all students.

Conclusion: Once My Baby Always My Baby

As I defended this dissertation, I was asked a question, why did I pursue my doctorate? I embarked on this dissertation journey driven by the scarcity of Black women role models for my daughters and my desire to provide more Black female figures for my son to admire. Inspired by the graduates I've had the privilege of guiding, who have now transitioned from being my students to active participants in the world, I imparted to them a simple truth:

“Once my baby, always my baby.”

I reassure them that even though our roles as student and counselor have evolved, my love for them remains unwavering, and I am committed to continually striving to make the world a better place for each of them.

Becoming a DEIB leader is the natural progression for me. Starting with a foundation in faith and spirituality. I walked into school counseling and whereas I will always be a school counselor becoming a DEIB leader is the next natural step as it holds true to what faith, spirituality, and school counseling hold at its roots. Creating space for others no matter their

background or surface layers. In becoming a DEIB leader I am still counseling students, and I am still trying to be Christ like. Matthew 19:14 reads, “Jesus said, ‘Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these.’” Jesus didn’t limit his companions to those with a righteous background; instead, he welcomed people from diverse backgrounds, creating a space for them to be themselves and accepting them despite their faults. He recognized the value of their diversity in enriching the Kingdom of God, inviting them to come as they were, as expressed in Matthew 11:28-30, which reads,

Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

My aim is to create a welcoming space for those who are weary and burdened, where individuals can find rest and acceptance just as they are, embracing the rich diversity that enriches the Kingdom of God.

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Appendix A - Braiding Multiple Frameworks:

Autoethnographic Process and Writing

Below you will see how I blended the beginning of my writing process by writing through prompts that are aligned with research purpose and questions found in Chapter 1, as well as the core theoretical frameworks outlined in Chapter 2 and found in Figure 3.2. Drawing on the foundational ideas discussed in earlier chapters, this critical autoethnography is deeply shaped by fundamental concepts such as Black Feminism and Motherhood. As elucidated in preceding sections, numerous theories contribute to this inquiry; however, Black feminism and intersectionality stand out for their emphasis on probing the intricate interplay of various forms of oppression, including racism, sexism, and classism. These intersecting dimensions coalesce within dynamic and multifaceted social landscapes, forming a rich tapestry of experiences where the delineation between concepts and subjects is often blurred. This interconnectedness enables me to interlace the diverse facets of Black female identity, thereby illuminating the distinct experiences and hurdles encountered at these intersections.

Below are some of the writing prompts that served as guiding principles for the remainder of this dissertation. Using writing as method (see CAP ethnography and Pierre and Adams (2015), these served as the methodological starting points for my autoethnographic process. Throughout the processes, and following some narrative smoothing (Kim, 2015), as well as engaging in deeper self-analysis, which involved ongoing and iterative reflexive writing in conversation with the literature, based on my evolving understanding of my own stories. Additionally, you will see topics listed in parenthesis that line up with those frameworks, as well.

RQ 1: First Round of Writing Prompts Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling

Competencies:

- Reflecting on my time as a student across various levels of the education system, I'm reminded of the diverse environments, teachers, and peers who have played a role in my academic and personal growth. What are the recurring themes and patterns that emerge as I analyze these experiences, and how do they line up with Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies? (Self-awareness)
- Recalling a pivotal moment where my student worldview clashed with institutional norms, and how did these clashes shape my educational journey? (Student world view)
- How has the presence or absence of a meaningful counseling relationship influenced my sense of belonging and well-being within these learning environments? (Counseling Relationship)
- How has advocacy, both personally and institutionally, influenced my educational path? (Counseling and advocacy interventions)

Second Round of Writing Prompts (while look back on the same stories): Social Identity

- How does social identity theory (Tajfel et al., 1979) explain the process by which individuals categorize themselves and others into distinct social groups based on shared characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, or nationality?
- How does social identity influence behavior, attitudes, and interpersonal relationships, leading individuals to favor their in-group members and exhibit biases against out-group members in order to bolster their self-esteem and social status, as suggested by Wearing (2011)?

Third Round of Writing Prompts (while looking back on the same stories): Personal Identity

- What dimensions are encompassed within personal identity, including traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills, as described by Hannum (2007)?
- Why is it essential for individuals to explore and understand personal identity, as stated by Wearing (2011), in order to develop a strong sense of self and effectively navigate their roles within society?

Fourth Round of Writing Prompts (while looking back on the same stories): Black Feminism, Motherhood, Spirituality, and Intersectionality.

- Reflecting on my personal journey as a Black female student: How have my lived experiences shaped my educational experience? How do Black feminist ideals and Black motherhood play a role in this journey, while recognizing Black feminism is a platform to acknowledge the work of Black women who have served their communities and beyond, allowing others to recognize the worth of all Black individuals (Cooper, 2015)?
- Exploring the complexities of my identity as a Black female student: How do my lived experiences and spirituality influence my approach to fostering inclusivity, drawing on Black feminist principles and the lens of Black motherhood, while considering there is no singular or standard experience for Black women, and the aim of Black feminist thought is to highlight the shared experiences of intersecting forms of oppression, enabling us to construct a new and empowering self-perception (Bass, 2012)?
- What are the internal reflections tied to my Black feminist perspective and experiences of Black motherhood as they inform my path towards promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion (Howard-Hamilton, 2003)?

RQ 2: First Round of Writing Prompts Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

- How does my journey of counseling self-awareness as a Black female counselor unfold, especially in navigating challenges and empowering others within diverse settings?
(Counseling self-awareness)
- As a Black female school counselor, how did I navigate the diverse identities, beliefs, and values of my students? I will reflect on my reactions and experiences while fostering an environment of student world view and support (Student world view).
- As a Black female school counselor, how did I navigate the diverse identities, beliefs, and values of my students? I will reflect on my reactions and the impact of the counseling relationship while guiding them through their unique lived experiences (Counseling Relationship).
- As a Black female school counselor, how did I navigate students' diverse identities, beliefs, and values, and how did counseling and advocacy interventions influence my approach? (Counseling and advocacy interventions)

Second Round of Writing Prompts (while looking back on the same stories): Social Identity

- As a Black female counselor, what are my experiences with students and families of color, highlighting how social identity's contextual aspects impact their lives (Wearing, 2011)?
- Exploring my journey as a Black female counselor, what are experiences with students and families of color, emphasizing social identities and relational concepts in their daily lives (Wearing, 2011)?

Third Round of Writing Prompts (while looking back on the same stories): Personal Identity and Spirituality

- As a Black female counselor, what are my experiences with students and families of color, highlighting how person identity shows up in shared traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills (Hannum, 2007)?
- Exploring my journey as a Black female counselor, what are my experiences with students and families of color, emphasizing personal identities and traits, behaviors, beliefs, values, and skills (Hannum, 2007)?
- How have my own encounters with spirituality influenced my understanding of personal identity (Cohen, 2020)?
- How have my own encounters with spirituality influenced how I interact with my students as they form their personal identity (Coles, 1990)?

Fourth Round of Writing Prompts (while looking back on the same stories): Black Feminism, Motherhood, Intersectionality and Spirituality.

- What are my experiences that illustrate how lack of representation can play an essential role in understanding the developmental experiences of Black students during adolescence, as defined by Rivas-Drake et al. (2014)?
- Reflecting on my role as a Black female school counselor, how have my students' diverse experiences impacted me emotionally and professionally (Cooper, 2015)?
- How has intersectionality of Black motherhood, Black feminism, Spirituality, and its influence on supporting students' identities, beliefs, and values shown up in my lived experiences (Cooper, 2015)?

RQ 3: First Round of Writing Prompts Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies

- Reflecting on my lived experiences as a Black female counselor collaborating with predominantly White teachers and leaders in DEIB efforts, how do my experiences align with the ASCA and Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (American Counseling Association, 2015)? What challenges and successes have arisen (ASCA, 2019)?
- With leadership being a key role in the ASCA model Multicultural and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (American Counseling Association, 2015), what stories have I experienced as it relates to leadership for students and families of color (ASCA, 2019)?
- What are my experiences as I collaborate with appropriate officials to remove barriers that may impede the effectiveness of the school and/or the school counseling program in promoting equitable student outcomes (ASCA, 2019)?

Second Round of Writing Prompts (while look back on the same stories): Social Identity

- Reflecting on my lived experiences as a Black female counselor collaborating with predominantly White teachers and leaders in DEIB efforts, how do social identity dynamics shape our interactions and progress (Wearing, 2011)?
- What are the challenges and successes in my role as a Black female counselor, working alongside predominantly White teachers and leaders in DEIB initiatives? How do our diverse social identities influence the effectiveness of our efforts (Wearing 2011)?

Third Round of Writing Prompts (while look back on the same stories): Personal Identity

- What is my unique journey as a Black female counselor collaborating with predominantly White teachers and leaders in DEIB efforts, exploring the impact on my personal identity and professional growth (Hannum, 2007)?
- What are my encounters as a Black female counselor navigating the realm of DEIB work alongside predominantly White educators and leaders? How has this journey shaped my sense of self and understanding of identity and Spirituality (Hannum, 2007)?

Fourth Round of Writing Prompts (while look back on the same stories): Black Feminism, Spirituality, Motherhood, and Intersectionality.

- How do my lived experiences as a Black female counselor shape my interactions with predominantly White teachers and leaders in DEIB efforts, focusing on perspectives from Black Feminism and Spirituality (Ospina & Foldy, 2009)?
- Reflecting on my journey as a Black female counselor, how has my experience of motherhood influenced my approach to DEIB work alongside predominantly White educators (Cooper, 2015)?

How have I experienced the complexities of intersectionality in my role as a Black female counselor collaborating with predominantly White teachers and leaders, navigating DEIB initiatives with authenticity and empathy, as suggested by Crenshaw (2022)? Difference between chapters and appendices:

1. Chapters contain essential information, including tables and figures. Appendices are for supplemental data. There's no limit on the number of chapters or appendices.
2. From Chapter 1 on, the content and format of your research is up to you, your adviser(s), and your graduate committee. You have many choices on fonts, headings, paragraph style, tables, captions, etc. Consistency is essential.

Appendix B - Recommendations for Practice

1. **Cultivate a Vision:** Establish a clear vision that reflects the organization's commitment to DEIB, inspiring alignment and direction for all stakeholders.
2. **Embrace Transformation:** Encourage openness to change and growth, fostering a culture where challenging norms and addressing inequities are valued.
3. **Take Purposeful Action:** Implement deliberate initiatives and policies to advance DEIB goals, driving measurable progress and impact.
4. **Dream Big for Change:** Set ambitious goals for diversity and inclusion, empowering stakeholders to envision and work towards a more inclusive future.
5. **Promote Cultural Diversity:** Encourage cultural exchanges, celebrations, and awareness initiatives that highlight the unique contributions of different cultural groups.
6. **Advocate for Equity:** Engage in actions that promote fairness for all individuals, challenging biases, and actively working to dismantle systemic barriers to equality.
7. **Be Inclusively Intentional:** Consider diverse perspectives and needs, creating spaces where everyone feels heard, valued, and respected.
8. **Foster a Culture of Belonging:** Listen to diverse perspectives, validate experiences, and create inclusive spaces where everyone feels valued and respected.