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Blinded by Whiteness: Middle-Class White Teachers' Explorations of Identity and Deficit Discourse at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Perceived Ability

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Deficit Discourse at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Perceived Ability

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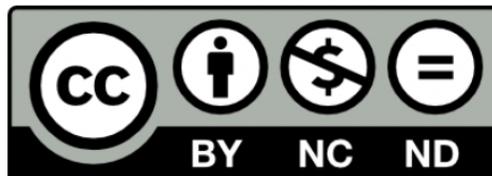
ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Middle-Class White Teachers' Explorations of Identity and

Deficit Discourse at the Intersection of Race, Class, and Perceived Ability

By

Tracy Driehaus

Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, 2022

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Directed by Dr. Michele White

A legacy of placing children of color and poverty at the center of the "problem" of race and class in education has left us in a holding pattern marked by a prevailing deficit discourse and problematizing of students. Scholars agree that the predominantly white, middle class, female teaching force who occupy US public school classrooms embody and perpetuate these inequitable educational practices endemic within this system. In this study, a small population of White, middle class teachers--including the researcher--organized within a Professional Learning Community (PLC) explored identity and deficit discourse at the intersection of race, class, and perceived ability. Grounded in Feminist Standpoint Theory, Social Identity Theory, Critical Whiteness Theory, and Transformative Learning Theory and employing a critical-ideological stance, the investigation sought to understand how participation in a professional learning group impacted teachers' perceptions of themselves and their students. To that end, meeting transcripts, interviews with PLC participants, artifacts, reflective journals, memos, and classroom

observations provided data that was examined through a heuristic phenomenological lens. Research findings indicate that participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse in the classroom results in White, middle-class teachers' increased awareness of privilege and power disparities between teachers and students as well as increased sensitivity to the mindsets that inform their discourse to and about students. Further, evidence suggests that PLCs can create safe spaces which foster deep professional relationships, vulnerability, and sustained self- and group-reflection are appropriate and effective sites for engaging identity work. Implications of these findings at all levels of the educational system--classrooms, school districts, and broader policy issues--are presented with an eye toward affecting sustainable change. Finally, study limitations and opportunities for further research are considered and framed.

Keywords: Professional Learning Community (PLC), professional development, heuristic, phenomenology, critical whiteness, identity

Signature of the Investigator: _____ Date: 3/10/2022

Dedication

As I look back on my adult life, I find that the biblical story of Esther has appeared and reappeared at key moments to remind me that we are where we are, when we are, always "for such a time as this" (*English Standard Version Bible*, 2001, Est. 4:14). That is not to say that, like human automatons, our fates are predetermined and we do not have the free will to make our own decisions or choose our own paths. Rather, the verse makes explicit that we have opportunities for purpose and the choice to take advantage of those opportunities…or not.

As a wife, a mother, and an educator, I can clearly see instances where those occasions have arisen. As for Esther and her family, the decisions made at those junctures have all carried consequences, often significant and long-lasting. At each of those times, the overwhelming and steadfast support of my husband Paul is not just something of which I could be confident, but something on which I have depended completely. Likewise, I would not have been able to do what I have without my daughters--my joy since their births--whose encouragement and understanding remains a truly invaluable gift. I cannot put into words how proud I am of each of them and the strong, intelligent women they have and continue to become. I await with breathless anticipation the lives they have yet to live. I dedicate this work to my family, who allowed me the time necessary to fulfill my purpose "for such a time as this."

Acknowledgements

Dr. Michele White is the epitome of grace and kindness at all times. Her quiet confidence, critical eye, and probing dialogue made this process intensely meaningful. The value of her depth of knowledge and wise guidance cannot be overstated.

My first and second readers--Drs. Muzeta and Pfeiler-Wunder--provided context and perspective that required me to analyze my data and myself through diverse lenses. I cannot measure the depth of knowledge I have gained from this experience, but I owe it in large part to the members of my committee. Thank you.

Obviously, this study would not have been possible without my co-researchers and the cooperation, vulnerability, and authenticity they were willing to engage. I am forever grateful for the collegiality and partnership of four talented educators who truly want to be the best they can be for their students, even when the work is hard.

More broadly, as a career educator whose awareness of the inequities inherent in our educational system is just emerging, I feel like Newton, as I stand "on the shoulders of giants." Without the work of countless pioneers in the field who have long fought these arduous battles, my pitiful efforts would not have been possible.

Finally, to all of my students--past and future--who have allowed me to learn right along with you, I express my sincerest gratitude and eternal thanks. You enrich my life in ways I cannot--as yet--fully comprehend, but each day appreciate more and more.

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and has failed. (Clifton, 1993, p. 20)

When I began my doctoral studies, my experience with words like racism, classism,

deficit thinking, identity, privilege, and critical theory were cursory at best. I am a white[2],

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[1] A note about the title: Blindness is used not as an expression of ableism or to indicate illness or sickness, but to describe a state of being. Simply, I cannot find better language to capture the state of being unable to recognize the truths that are obvious to those who do not experience the privilege and power that comes from my position as a middle-class, white woman. Like Schor (1999), I search for new language to replace this catachresis and apologize for any offense.
[2] Following the model of Kendall (2013), I choose to capitalize "Black" and not capitalize "white" so that my work does not echo white supremicist groups' writings.

cisgender, middle class, female educator who enjoyed success in a public high school

mathematics classroom for 15 years. By that, I mean that the majority of my students exhibited

appropriate growth and achievement on state assessments. Because of their demonstrated

acquisition of requisite concept and skill, I was not only allowed to continue my practice

unhindered within the confines of my own classroom walls with little guidance from without, but

I was routinely given "Distinguished" evaluation ratings and even held up to other teachers as an

example of what "good teaching" should look like. But I became discontent.

As I encountered more and more students whose lives looked so different than my own,

and my three daughters began moving through a system which obviously prized productivity

over creativity and compliance with questionable practices over problematizing such routines, I

sought out change within my own classroom to more closely align my professional practice with

emerging personal belief that those state tests could not be the sole determinant for student

success. Through reading, discussion, and deep thinking about the experience of the students in

front of me, I began to realize and personalize that the system was simply not built to facilitate

success for any but the privileged few, and my own privilege began to make itself known to me.

At this point, I had done no more than peek behind the veil that shrouds conversation around the

systemic racism and classism that mark the U.S. public education system. To state that I was

lacking in appreciation for my students' experiences is a gross understatement. But every

marathon begins with a first step.

When I moved from the classroom to become an Instructional Coach within my district a

handful of years later, I realized that, like me, many of my colleagues do not realize their own

positionality or that of their students and community. Our privilege allows us to hide behind a

lack of awareness of and complicity in the system founded and sustained on the "Othering" of

anyone who does not identify as white and middle class. I have become attuned to hearing and

am evermore bothered by conversations in which teachers refer to students as "the low kids" or

make assumptions about everything from a lack of cultural awareness to quality of living

situations to intelligence, all based on a student's classroom behavior or academic performance.

My role frequently places me in other teachers' classrooms, where I listen as families are

routinely categorized as lazy, uncaring, or mentally unstable based on the amount of work

students complete. Combined with previous dissatisfaction in my own classroom, these

encounters have created for me an "edge of meaning" that has allowed me to engage critical

analysis of my own experience (Taylor, 2009, p. 10). When I read Clifton's (1993) "why don't

you celebrate with me?", the misalignment of my students' lives and educational experience with

their teachers was magnified even further.

    I do not claim enlightenment. I do, however, claim responsibility for addressing our

personal and professional roles within the institutions that "produce, circulate, and maintain the

dominant culture's norms, values, definitions, language, policies, and ideologies--and do so in

ways that are above as well as below the surface of the cultural water," i.e., consciously and

unconsciously perceived (Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017, p. 103). Further, moving from the

oppression and Othering historically established and promoted by experts such as Lewis (1959),

Moynihan (Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965), and Payne (2019) toward

awareness--if not comprehension--of exactly what we are perpetuating within our classrooms

and hallways, cafeterias and gymnasiums is fundamental to understanding both our students and

ourselves. To that end, I chose to follow Brantlinger's (2003) model of looking "upward and

inward at segments of the middle class who have high levels of educational attainment as well as

high level of influence on schools" (pp. 26-27), specifically, the teachers actively working within

the walls of those venerable institutions.

Statement of Problem

Although there is a wealth of research detailing the impact of class and race on school

achievement, much of it has been informed by thought and trends that emerged in the latter half

of the 20th century. With origins in Lewis's (1959) "culture of poverty" and fueled by the

Moynihan Report (Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965), understandings of most

middle class whites toward a solution to the "problem" of class and race in public education

became professional development for herds of teachers in the form of Payne's (1995/2019)

Framework for Understanding Poverty. Though some critical scholars have dissented with her

conclusions and recommendations (Bomer et al., 2008; Boucher & Helfenbein, 2015; Dworin &

Bomer, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2004; Ng & Rury, 2009; Smiley & Helfenbein,

2011), those who have controlled race and class relations in a US which was still trying to

contain the effects of the Civil Rights Movement embraced and promoted the images of

non-white, non-middle class persons that have been "ingrained in the mainstream psyche, …

[and which] result in middle class assumptions of moral, spiritual, and intellectual deficiency

among economically disadvantaged people" (Gorski, 2008, p. 138).

Neither Lewis (1959), Moynihan (Office of Policy Planning and Research, 1965) nor

Payne (1995/2019) were wrong when they asserted in their differing ways that non-White,

non-middle class individuals often struggle to experience success within the confines of the

structures and institutions long revered by the dominant society. More than sixty years after

Lewis's (1959) ethnographic studies, the problem persists. Keefer (2017) pointed out that

"although the US is a world leader in educational innovation, social problems such as poverty

and racism have hindered equitable academic achievement" (p. 50). Scholars argue, however,

that it is the positioning of class and race as the cause and assimilation into dominant society as

the solution for this lack that is problematic (Brantlinger, 2001; Clycq & et al., 2013; Comber &

Kamler, 2008; Dudley-Marling & Lucas, 2009; hooks, 2000; Hunt & Siever, 2018; Keefer, 2017;

Ladson-Billings, 2004; Louie, 2020; Martin et al., 2018; Marx, 2002, 2006; Milner, 2013;

Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2017; Van Galen, 2004, 2007).

Valencia (1997) and others detailed the perpetuation of this "deficit thinking" that

continues to hobble both students and teachers in public school classrooms (p. 1). Indeed, a

legacy positioning the "poor … [as] different from the rest ... [has] long been [one of the]

seductive and unfortunately pervasive narratives in society and the schools" (Boucher &

Helfenbein, 2015, p. 743). In direct opposition to Payne, Louie (2020) maintained that

"oppression in schools, at all levels, stems from historic, systemic, and individual enactments of

privilege and oppression" (pp. 181-182). Thinking, acting, and speaking in deficit terms is just

one of the most powerful and unconscious tools that schools employ to label, subjugate, and

oppress the Other. Riegle-Crumb and Humphries (2012) theorized that teachers' "disparate

perceptions of ability" that arise from the deficit mindset makes success in schooling for certain

students impossible (p. 291). Only by asking teachers to "investigate their own privilege or

unreconciled" prejudices and the perceived abilities that originate from them can we hope to

move beyond the view that sees students as an inevitable result of their own shortcomings rather

than as individuals the teacher might ultimately be able to influence (Boucher & Helfenbein, 2015, p. 744). Hoffman-Kipp (2008) maintained that such investigation would naturally lead teachers toward a consciousness of their own pedagogical identities within their classrooms, thereby helping them to recognize and connect more deeply with "the realities and identities of their students" (p. 151).

Professional development is one vehicle for deliberate construction of teacher pedagogical identity and address of the deficit mindset that so often characterizes classroom discourse (Braun, 2016; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008). Braun (2016) defined professional development as "the professional growth of a teacher, accomplished through both individual and group reflection, the examination of current trends in education, and one's on-going analysis of core beliefs and values with education … [that] can be done both formally and informally in venues such as" Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) (pp. 74-75). According to Dufour et al. (2008), PLCs are composed of "educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (p. 14).

Unfortunately, the efficacy of such Professional Development toward the proposed ends is largely theoretical (Braun, 2016; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Servage, 2008; Whitaker, 2020). The lack of extant research with the middle-class, white inservice teachers in non-urban settings who occupy the majority of public school classrooms leaves the question of how to move those practitioners toward more democratic classrooms unanswered. This study seeks to begin to fill that gap.

Purpose of Study

The focus of this heuristic phenomenological study is to investigate the experience of teachers' transformation through professional learning in the areas of pedagogical identity and deficit discourse. Toward that end, teachers will participate in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) focused on teacher identity, their use of deficit discourse, and their perceptions of their students' identities and abilities. Viewing the experience through a heuristic lens positions the researcher as participant (Douglas & Moustakas, 1985; Moustakas, 1990), therefore, all PLC participants--including the researcher--will engage in a series of activities, dialogues, and reflections that encourage deep examination of our own positionalities in the classroom and the wider community. By navigating the "complex positions within class hierarchies [that] influence how teachers, families, and students understand the world, self, and others," we will document how perception of the Other is also affected (Hunt & Seivers, 2018, p. 342).

Research Questions

Employing a heuristic phenomenological approach, this study will seek answers to the questions:

1)   How does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher perception of students' identities at the intersection of race, class, and perceived ability?

2)   How does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher pedagogical identity?

Theoretical Framework

According to Green (2014), "frameworks have been described as the map for a study, giving rationale for the development of research questions" (p. 35). Many ideas have informed the development of this study including hooks's (2000) and Brantlinger's (2003) seminal works around social class in public schools, as well as the role of race in education and society as discussed by Marx (2001), DiAngelo (2018) and others. Digestion of these ideas are pivotal to understanding the current state of education and to looking forward to a possible solution to the problems created by the racism and classism inherent in educational institutions. For this particular study, however, the theoretical framework used to examine the research process and its potential results is underpinned most by 1) feminist standpoint theory, 2) critical whiteness theory, 3) social identity theory, and 4) transformative learning theory.

Feminist Standpoint Theory

Standpoint theories arose from marxist tradition to analyze and explain the experience of populations that arose from their membership in a subordinated community and which could not be understood or explained by the vernacular available through the dominant discourses (Harding, 1993, 2004; Wylie, 2003). As examples of critical theory, standpoint theories seek to empower oppressed peoples. To that end, in the 1970s and 80s, feminists appropriated standpoint theory to fill in gaps within feminist empiricism that insufficiently understood the experience of female scientists and academics subject to the misogynistic culture of male supremacy prevalent within the academy (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 2004; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 1974). The resulting feminist standpoint theory is comprised of two main parts:

1)   The Situated-Knowledge Thesis: "Social location systematically shapes and limits

what we know, including tacit, experiential knowledge as well as explicit

understanding, what we take knowledge to be as well as specific epistemic

content" (Wylie, 2003, p. 27).

2)   The Thesis of Epistemic Advantage: "Some *standpoints* (as opposed to *locations*)

have the especially salient advantage that they put the critically conscious knower

in a position to grasp the effects of power relations on their own understanding

and that of others" (Wylie, 2003, p. 28, emphasis in original).

To ignore one's standpoint by failure to acknowledge its existence is to ignore the fact that all

knowledge is subject to the standpoint from which it is consumed and processed (Williams &

Melchiori, 2013). But standpoints are not automatically conferred by virtue of membership in a

specific population (Intemann, 2010). Rather, being located within a community can potentially

lead to standpoint, which is only "achieved through a critical, conscious reflection on the ways in

which power structures and resulting social locations influence knowledge production"

(Intemann, 2010, p. 785).

Harding (2004) maintained that, once achieved, a standpoint situates persons within and

exposes for them the structures and practices of power utilized by groups to oppress. Within the

classroom, educators require a critical consciousness of the inherent biases embedded within and

perpetuated by the system and the power agents who operate within it, as well as how those

oppressions shape and limit the experience, success, and failure of the Other.   As feminist

standpoint theory is a "social epistemology," this critical consciousness cannot be achieved by

individuals in isolation, but by communities of similarly situated members (Intemann, 2010;

Wylie, 2003).   Once achieved, then, standpoints require action. "They require understanding

and revising our epistemic practices so as to identify, understand, and ultimately abolish the ways

in which systems of oppression limit knowledge production" (Intemann, 2010, p. 786).

Within the social context of a classroom and the power structures at play within it,

standpoint theory situates individual teachers in the positions that they occupy both personally

and professionally. Consciousness and adoption of their standpoint comes through critical

reflection on their positionalities, their conferred privilege, their classroom practice, and their

perceptions of the other members of their community--both within and beyond the classroom

confines (Au, 2012; Bailey, 1998; Braun, 2016; Rogers & Hoover, 2010).

Regarding the applicability of a feminist theory to investigation which focuses on

intersectionality of race and class, but which does not center gender, this study adopts the

vantage point of scholars who maintain that standpoint theory can and should be applied to

"explore the complex relationships between identity, geography, and oppression" (Kokushkin,

2014, p. 15). Collins (1997), in particular, asserted "groups who share common placement in

hierarchical power relations also share common experiences in such power relation" (p. 377) and

that these shared experiences generate shared knowledge that, given the social construction of

identity (discussed in a subsequent section), becomes part of the very identity itself. "Standpoint

theory seems especially suited to explaining relations of race and/or social class because these

systems of power share similar institutional structures" (p. 378).

Such work is exactly the focus of the PLC under examination in this study. By

investigating how professional development may facilitate standpoint adoption, teachers can

move one step closer to equitable educational practice toward non-white, non-middle class

students. To date, such research has focused on student populations within very narrow confines, with little extension into the vast spaces occupied by race and class (Braun, 2016; Intemann, 2010).

Critical Whiteness Theory

As middle class, white, female educators, each well-established within her tenure and workplace, all five research participants enjoy the privilege conferred upon them by virtue of their membership within those groups. Their individual realizations of privilege, position, and ultimate standpoint must be understood through a broader lens of whiteness. Critical Whiteness Theory (CWT) provides a scope through which to "understand what it means for a group of white middle- and upper-class females to be white and how that relates to their/our understandings of whiteness" (McIntyre, 1997b, p. 4).

CWT arose in the late 1980s as theorists and activists recognized that, in "the post-civil rights era of formal (though not material) equality," racial oppression was still as rampant as ever (Owens, 2007, p. 203; see also Hurtado, 2019).   Because the privilege given to whites is not chosen by individuals, but is rather invested by larger systems and societal forces, the oppression inherent in whiteness is not something that individuals can simply choose not to accept. Whites may potentially be affected by other labels, including socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual orientation, but they are first and foremost white (Chen, 2017; Owens, 2007). Therefore, CWT situates whiteness, not as a social identity, but as a "structuring property of the social system, … [which] cannot be simply abolished or refused by force of will. Whiteness, understood as a structuring property of the social world can, however, be exposed, challenged, resisted and disrupted" (Owens, 2007, p. 205).

Central to this particular definition of whiteness is that whiteness is "normalized" and, therefore, "invisible to whites and yet highly visible to non-whites" (Owens, 2007, p. 206; see also DiAngelo, 2018; Frankenberg, 1993; Hartigan, 1997; Hurtado, 2019; Marx, 2006; McIntosh, 2015; McIntyre, 1997a, 1997b). In studies conducted by Frankenberg (1993) and Hurtado (2019), white research participants' inability to describe their culture as anything other than "normal" and "cultureless" has historically been pointed to as indicative of the oppression brought on by colonization which had dual impacts of both displacing and marginalizing other cultures and identities. Meanwhile, non-whites are all too aware of "whiteness as a position of dominance" and their collective and individual exclusion from its privilege (Hartigan, 1997, p. 497).

Bohonos (2019) was careful to point out that CWT is not a way "to draw attention away from people of color's experiences with discrimination; rather, … [its purpose is] to focus on Whiteness as a means of problematizing racism" (p. 316). Historically, whites have been positioned as the standard by which all other groups are measured and found wanting, creating and propagating an adversarial mindset. By situating whiteness at the very heart of the race problem, whites are exposed as the source of the phenomenon rather than a victim of it (Bohonos, 2019; Chen, 2017; Owens, 2007).

From this centralized position, Frankenberg (1993) asserted that whiteness becomes a standpoint, "a place from which white people look at themselves and others, and at society" (Hartmann et al., 2009, p. 406). But scholars maintain that whites need not remain bound and blinded by their whiteness (DiAngelo, 2018; Hurtado, 2019; Marx, 2006; McIntosh, 2015; McIntyre, 1997a, 1997b). Hurtado (2019) used the "traitor" language of standpoint theory to

characterize whites who recognized and gave oppositional voice to the privilege conferred upon them. Bohonos (2017), Marx (2006), DiAngelo (2018), and others maintained that acknowledging the privilege endowed by their whiteness is a first step--small though it may be--toward resolution, as they work to become traitors to their white standpoints by adopting an antiracist standpoint. Bailey (1998) described "race traitors as privilege-cognizant whites who refuse to animate the scripts whites are expected to perform, and who are unfaithful to worldviews whites are expected to hold" (p. 28). She further asserted that privileged whites in positions of power in historically oppressive institutions such as education are central to the transformative work of becoming critical whites, as they redefine and find ways to express their identities.

This study will look at the process and product of white teachers' realization and navigating of their identities within the confines of their classrooms, as these identities impact the ways in which they see and interact with their students. Though such work has been undertaken in the past, it has been primarily limited to preservice teachers (Marx, 2006; McIntosh, 2015).

Social Identity Theory

Social Identity Theory (SIT) originated in the mid-20th century in the work of Tajfel (1959, 1963), as he studied "cognitive and social belief aspects of racism, prejudice, and discrimination" (Hogg et al., 1995, p. 259). According to Whitaker (2020), SIT provides a framework through which individuals understand themselves and others as members (and non-members) of groups, as they engage in behaviors to promote or undermine group norms. According to SIT, social identity is fluid, iterative, and dependent on social context (Hogg et al.,

1995; Huddy, 2001; Turner, 1985; Whitaker, 2020). Postmodern interpretations of SIT find it comprised of three main tenets: 1) part of an individual's identity comes directly from inclusion in social groups with others who share commonalities; 2) an individual's identity arises directly from the collective self, as defined by the group and having the characteristics of the group; and 3) individuals' behavior--toward both group and non-group members--is produced by group membership (Hogg et al., 1995; Huddy, 2001; Whitaker, 2020). The last two of these principles provide the most visible components of one's identity, as they inform what Tajfel (1959) defined as one's social identity.

The second principle, self-categorization, emerged as a sub-theory to SIT in the 1980s and focuses on the sociocognitive processes by which individuals sort persons--including themselves--into social groups based on common features (Turner, 1985). Through categorization, a person "explains how one uses their own frames of reference to describe and label groups of people according to shared patterns of thought, feeling, and behavior (i.e., group norms)" (Whitaker, 2020, p. 693). The results of the self-categorizing process, as well as the individuals' behavior within the group, point to and derive from the group norms established by membership.

The last subtheory of SIT outlined above, intergroup behavior, is not only a measure of membership within a group, but also provides a tool to evaluate group norms. The more closely aligned a person's behavior is with group norms, the more salient his membership. Conversely, deviation from norms indicates distance from the group in a directly proportional relationship. At the same time, membership is routinely assessed, and norms are shaped and reshaped from in- and out-group influences (Hogg et al., 2017; Whitaker, 2020).

From group norms that survive the forces of time, membership, and social context arise

prototypes. Hogg et al. (2017) defined a prototype as a "fuzzy set of attributes" that encapsulate

the thoughts, behaviors, and emotions seemingly characteristic of a particular group (p. 572). A

prototype provides a mental image for how group members are viewed primarily by those

out-group, but also can serve as a model for emulation among group members. Huddy (2017)

argued that, while group norms are remarkably changeable, group prototypes are not as

malleable, and provide for the stubborn identity stability that is modeled in existing research

around stereotypes and discrimination.

Citing institutions such as schools as sites of reproduction of social identity, Whitaker

(2020) posited that SIT is especially useful to understand how teachers construct their own social

identities as well as those of their students. More to the point, educators dedicated to social

justice must understand how the prototypes for both teachers and students are labeled, interpreted

and enacted within the environs of the classroom and educational systems. Specifically, she

pointed to the strength of SIT to explicate how "teachers' social identities influence their

perceptions of and expectations for" their students from in- and out-groups (p. 693). Further,

SIT can give insight for teachers' pedagogical decisions that arise from their own group norms

and from stereotyping students according to their group memberships. Research supports that

these decisions often serve to further marginalize out-group members within the classroom

(Whitaker, 2020).

The goal of this research endeavor is to put under a microscope this very process of

prototype construction and understanding--both for dominant and subordinate groups--to make

sense of the five participants' classroom experiences with class and race and how they enact

those with their students. Whitaker (2020), Marx (2006), McIntyre (1997a, 1997b), and

McIntosh (2015) identified gaps in current examination with inservice teachers in public K-12

institutions, as most prior research has been restricted to preservice teachers and university

settings. Hoffman-Kipp (2008) and Izadinia (2013) point both to the centrality of teacher

identity to classroom decisions and a decided lack of research around how such are defined,

constructed, or understood. Further, both lament the restriction of such existing literature to very

narrow populations of teachers, specifically student teachers and those employed in urban

settings.

Transformative Learning Theory

According to Luguetti et al. (2018), defining and redefining identity is a transformative

learning process achieved through social interaction with self and others and marked by deep and

continual reflection.   The mechanics of identity formation can best be understood within the

context of transformative learning theory. The PLC under investigation in this study will engage

professional learning which is situated squarely within the principles and tenets of transformative

learning.

Introduced in 1978, transformative learning was posited by Jack Mezirow as "the social

process of construing and appropriating a new or revised interpretation of the meaning of one's

experience as a guide to action" (Mezirow, 1994, pp. 222-223). Taylor (2009) identified three

elements of "transformative educational experiences … : individual experience, critical

reflection, and dialogue" (p. 4). Drawing on philosophy from Bruner (1961) and Habermas

(1971) in their descriptions of the process of adult learning, Mezirow (2000) took the construct

of learning beyond the mere meaning-making that both theorists presented in very analytical

terms one step further to the transformation of habits of thinking, acting, and being that true

learning in responsible adults should elicit. Mezirow (2000) stated that transformative learning

theory's

> focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our own purposes, values, feelings, and
>
> meanings rather than those we have uncritically assimilated from others--to gain greater
>
> control over our lives as socially responsible, clear-thinking decision makers. (p. 8)
>
> Negotiating meaning through this minefield is a complex--often controversial--endeavor.

Mezirow (2000) emphasized the centrality of "contextual understanding, critical reflection on

assumptions, and validating meaning by assessing reasons" to that process (p. 3). According to

Taylor (2000), transformative learning cannot be willed, but opportunity to engage is created by

a "disorienting dilemma" or notable life occurrence (pp. 299). Although most adults can point to

a distinct beginning of the transformative process when it has occurred, the journey toward

transformation is recursive and "linear though not always step-wise" (Taylor, 2000, p. 290).

According to Mezirow (1998), however, the process hinges on "critical reflection [which]

may be either implicit, as when we mindlessly choose between good and evil because of our

assimilated values, or explicit, as when we bring the process of choice into awareness and assess

the reasons for making a choice" (p. 186). When the object under consideration is "an

assumption or presupposition, a different order of abstraction is introduced, with major potential

for effecting a change in one's established frame of reference" (Mezirow, 1998, p. 186). When

critical reflection on assumptions (CRA)--and its variant, critical *self*-reflection on assumptions

(CSRA)--becomes habitual, conscious, and deliberate, true reasons for decisions reveal

themselves and consistency of assumptions and reason can be evaluated. At that point,

assumptions can be challenged and either built up or torn down, as appropriate. Mezirow (1998) asserted that "learning to think for oneself involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values, and feelings" (p. 197). For this study, this transformative process will be documented and recorded largely through personal narratives and discourses.

Toward a Methodology: Ontological and Epistemological Orientations

This individual and collective journey from obliviousness of the power structures at play within their classrooms through a forest of "expressions, self-reflections about … the struggle with the epistemological, methodological, and political issues that are always inherent in … educational and social settings" to activism toward addressing hegemony in the classroom is, at its essence, a personal story of transformation (Smyth & Shacklock, 1998, p. 1). As such, the research that prompts, prods, and promotes that growth is perfectly situated to be undertaken in a qualitative, action research setting. According to Given (2016), qualitative research is defined by

> a focus on people's thoughts, processes, meanings, and experiences; … constructionist view of reality, where multiple meanings are possible; inductive design, where theory emerges from the data; direct researcher engagement with participants during data collection and analysis; use of multiple data sources to investigate a phenomenon from various perspectives; [and] embracing of context surrounding participants' experiences. (p. 3)

Built on that foundation, this study is guided by a critical realist ontology--what is possible to know--and ideological epistemology--how that knowledge can be formulated (Crotty, 1998). Like interpretivist-constructionist perspectives, critical-ideological stances are grounded

on the assumption of multiple realities, while maintaining one overarching "real" reality that

acknowledges and centers the existence of oppression and power (Morrow, 2007).   The critical

stance maintains that knowledge is subjective to experience, and that subjectivity is held as a

centerpiece for understanding and interpreting the social interactions of the world outside one's

self. Intrinsic to this epistemology is the value that "knowledge is not neutral and is influenced

by human interests. Knowledge reflects the power and social relationships within society, and

the purpose of knowledge construction is to aid people to improve society" by ending oppression

(Sweetman et al., 2010, p. 442).

        These assertions are consistent with standpoint theory, which also holds normative the

ideas that knowledge is derived from within and subject to power structures and that objectivity

is not "value-free" as the scientific and academic traditions long asserted (Intemann, 2010).

Harding (2004) cautioned, however, that standpoint theory should not be seen as a vehicle for

unbridled relativism. "Standpoint theory is a transitional epistemology and philosophy of

science that points toward a world where truth and power do not issue from the same social

location, as is now the case" (Harding, 2004, p. 39).

Summary of Frameworks

        With its grounding in feminist standpoint theory, critical Whiteness theory, social identity

theory, and transformative learning theory as a critical-ideological epistemologically-based study,

phenomenology provides an appropriate methodology for this study. The main focus is the lived

experiences of the participants, including the researcher, as they participate in a Professional

Learning Community whose focus is identity and deficit discourse, including its origins in their

social identities from dominant standpoints and its role in their classrooms. Further, heuristic

phenomenological investigation is necessary because, as an insider who shares a community and

work site, their stories are my story.

Potential Significance

Research toward raising awareness of identity and moving teachers away from the use of

deficit thinking--which most overtly manifests itself in the use of deficit discourse--is primarily

focused on either pre-service teachers or university faculty. Limited studies have been

completed with practicing, experienced K-12 in-service teachers. Marx (2001) specifically

called for further research with practicing educators who are, themselves, great influences on

pre-service and new teachers who join their ranks each year.

The latest federal data indicates that 79.3% of US public educators are white, middle

class women (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2020; Will, 2020).

Simultaneously, however, "the K-12 population in the US is increasingly poor, Hispanic, and

Black" (Keefer, 2017, p. 51). According to Marx (2001), "the problems associated with the

overwhelming Whiteness of the teacher workforce is endemic in our system. It is a plague" (p.

13). At the same time, a teacher population which is increasingly distanced by age from their

preservice training coupled with a ever more diverse student population widens the gap between

those who experience material deprivation and their affluent peers (Baroutsis & Woods, 2018;

Braun, 2016; Comber & Kamler, 2004; Johnson, 2002; Keefer, 2017). This reality further ramps

up the urgency to ensure that not only are we producing new teachers who recognize and have

"experience outside their own White enclaves," but that current in-service teachers are similarly

equipped (Boucher & Helfenbein, 2015, p. 744). Baroutsis and Woods (2018) argued that

developing ways to move individual teachers to a new awareness, discourse, and classroom

practice in relation to class and race is necessary both for students' immediate success, and also

for systemic reform to break free from the habits of deficit thinking and resultant oppression.

> These ways of thinking are not only resilient but tenacious. Finding ways to support
>
> teachers to move beyond deficit understandings of the children they teach is instrumental
>
> in moving the institution of schooling beyond a position of collusion with disadvantage in
>
> enabling failure for some students and success for others. (Baroutsis & Woods, 2018, p.
>
> 327)
>
> Scholars have long theorized that perceived ability that manifests as deficit thinking

around students from diverse backgrounds is not just an unfortunate byproduct of the rampant

discrimination in our racist, classist society, but is a purposeful "self-fulfilling prophecy" that

performs its own work of continual and continuing subjugation of othered populations (Braun,

2016). Valencia (1997) contended that one of the essential purposes of deficit thinking is

oppression, and--historically--"education is filled with examples of how economically

disadvantaged students of color were kept in their place" (p. 4). Ostrove and Cole (2003)

likewise lamented that "despite the fact that education is intended to be the great equalizer, more

often it serves to reproduce the class structure across generations" (p. 678), employing deficit

mindsets and discourse as one of its most effective, insidious tools. They therefore offer "sites of

education … [as] a rich laboratory in which to study" teaching and learning at the intersection of

class and race (p. 678).

Using Lareau and Horvat's (1999) conceptualization of social reproduction, based on "moments of inclusion" and "moments of exclusion", teachers' discourse to and about students provide opportunities to engage in social reproduction. At the same time, each of those moments is an equal opportunity to contest that same reproduction. Teachers must be aware of the power of their words and the deeply held beliefs that they expose. Valencia (2010) indicated that, when teachers employ deficit discourse to express perceptions of their students, student recognition of the teacher as authority is automatically affected--often negatively. He argued that the only way to "maximize human powers in school … [is] to ensure that all students have access to … an [optimal learning] environment" (p. 154). Clearly, such an environment would be devoid of deficit discourse and the thinking of inferiority that promotes it.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, the following definitions will be employed:

Deficit Thinking: Based on the work of Ryan (1971), Valencia (1997, 2010), Brantlinger (2003), and others, deficit thinking is a framework used to describe school failure as a person-centered problem linked to group membership, specifically non-white, non-middle class members. The deficit thinking model often manifests itself in deficit discourse.

Deficit Discourse: Ways of speaking about and to students, especially those of subordinate groups, that reveal racism, classism, and other explicit or implicit bias (Solorzano & Yosso, 2001; Valencia, 2010).

Discourses: Ways of being, feeling, and doing that indicate membership within a group or outside another group. Discourses reveal, reinforce, and are configured by group norms (Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Whitaker, 2020).

Pedagogical Identity: The cycle of pedagogical identity formation is created by professional identity, pedagogical decisions, and classroom experience (Hoffman-Kipp, 2008; Keiler, 2018; Peressini et al., 2004; Walkington, 2005; Whitaker, 2020).

Perceived ability: Described by Riegle-Crumb and Humphries (2012) as the "disparate perceptions of ability" which cannot be accounted for by observed academic performance (p. 291).

Social capital: Defined by Bordieu (1987) as the resources endowed to individuals based on group membership. For students in educational contexts, this may include non-material capital, such as

> the quantity and quality of supportive family relationships and the capacity of a family to invest time in its members. It promotes academic success by serving as a mediator, activating other resources (financial and human) to fully serve the educational needs of the student. A heavy investment of social capital, characterized by frequent parent-child discussions, small family size, and the presence of a two-parent household, is related to improved standardized test scores and higher school grades. (Ansalone, 2001, pp. 34-35)

Whiteness: A socially constructed boundary ostensibly based on skin color and ethnicity but truly centered in privilege and power over Others. Whiteness assumes domination over non-whites and manifests itself in classism, racism, and deficit thinking (Marx, 2001). In general, Whiteness is marked by "the production and reproduction of dominance rather than

subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage"

(Frankenberg, 1993, pp. 236-237).

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

My analysis of the literature will focus on areas that relate to my investigation into

teacher identities, deficit discourse, and perceptions of students' identities and abilities.

Specifically, I will look at teacher pedagogical identity, social class, the intersection of race and

social class, and manifestations of the inherent classism and racism in the educational system. In

addition to problematizing current practice, I also present an overview of the professional

learning models and tools that may facilitate teachers' deep dive into their own positionalities

within their classrooms and how those impact perceptions of students' situations and abilities.

A Slippery Concept: Defining Social Class in Education

Although often largely absent from popular discourse, research has long maintained that

"class matters" in the educational and occupational trajectory of children (hooks, 2000; see also

Anyon, 1980; Bell, 1992; Boucher & Helfenbein, 2015; Brantlinger, 1990, 1991, 1993, 2003,

2004; Deschenes et al., 2001; Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Gorski, 2008; Hunt & Seiver, 2018;

Keefer, 2017; Milner, 2013; Ng & Rury, 2009; Payne-Bourcy & Chandler-Olcott, 2003; Thein et

al., 2012). Ostrove and Cole (2003) maintained that, at a time when psychology, sociology,

education and all other sectors of society have increasingly opened examination of "the ways

race, class, and gender critically shape our … experiences, it seems that class is the least

explored of these three" (p. 679). They pointed to the difficulty in defining social class, the fluid

nature of social class--especially as opposed to race and gender which are connected more

directly to biological or ethnic origins--and "the broader political zeitgeist in the United States"

as reasons for the overwhelming silence around the topic of class (p. 679). As food insecurity

has increased from 2018's 14% of households with children to a staggering 32% as of July 2020

(Bauer et al., 2020, p. 16), there is urgency to examine and address the negative effects of

discrimination due to classism which cannot be denied (Brantlinger, 2003; Gorski, 2008, 2013;

Milner, 2013; Ostrove & Cole, 2003).

      Scholars have pointed out that definitions of class are difficult to grasp largely because

there are so many factors to be considered. While some social scientists define class solely

based on monetary considerations, others include influences of culture, as well as access to

health care, education, and other institutions (Anyon, 1980; Brantlinger, 2003; Felski, 2000;

Gorski, 2008; Langhout et al., 2006; Milner, 2013; Payne-Bourcy & Chandler-Olcott, 2003).

Class differences involve not just work or income, but also take into account lifestyle and

consumer practices that do not align with any one income level or step on the capitalist ladder

(Felski, 2000). Langhout et al. (2007) concluded that "social class is partly about money and

partly performative in that the person must be able to function in the dominant class" (p. 146).

      Further, because class is also "contextually mediated" (Langhout et al., 2007, p. 146),

how individuals interact within and without their class distinctions vary--often dramatically--

depending on the context in which they find themselves situated at a given time. Milner (2013)

highlighted that, though poverty exists in both rural and urban environments, it is experienced in

markedly different ways depending on the topology and geography of their respective contexts.

He maintained, however, that one commonality between rural and urban children living in

poverty continues to be less than equitable educational experiences when compared to those enjoyed by their white, middle class peers.

Based on all of this, social class will be defined based on the ideas posited by Bourdieu (1987) and others (Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Lamont & Lareau, 1988; Weber, 1998): Class is a social construct in which members of the dominant group impose oppressive constraints upon groups of Others, with--in this case--boundaries drawn upon lines of perceived capital, be it economic, social, or cultural. These theoretical "boundaries" are no more clear-cut when applied to real people and places than any other set of arbitrary markings in the real world (Weber, 1998). Lines dividing countries may exist on maps, but not on the earth. Similarly, class distinctions become less distinct the closer one moves toward the people and spaces occupying them. In Bourdeian fashion, Dworin and Bomer (2008) maintained that

> poverty and social class are discursively created objects. There are, of course, very
>
> material realities about living in poverty that demand the attention of any ethical person.
>
> Those particular material conditions are named poverty by discourses, and certain
>
> discourses about poverty have long been common in the middle-class USA. (p. 104)

The reason for such discourses is positional in nature; by engaging the discourse, individuals make clear their position outside the boundaries--imaginary though they may be--of poverty and the lack of privilege that it entails (Dworin & Bomer, 2008; Weber, 1998). Gorski (2013) added that the discourses are purposeful and driven toward the conditions that they create and perpetuate to firmly establish those groups at either end of the divide.

Accordingly, Hunt and Seiver (2018) stated, "social class is more than a demographic category; it is an aspect of social identity associated with particular ways of knowing, being, and doing" (p. 342). Anyon (1981) concluded that

social class is considered as a series of relationships to several aspects of the process in society by which goods, services, and culture are produced. That is, while one's occupational status and income level contribute to one's social class, they do not define it. (p. 4)

The interpretation of one's social class by others also marks it as a different type of categorization from gender or race. According to Ostrove and Cole (2003), strongly held beliefs regarding the culture that ostensibly marks people of poverty combined with the "ideologies surrounding mobility and meritocracy encourage people to make individual (rather than structural) attributions for the cases of social class positions" (p. 683). They pointed to the common characterization of poor people as lazy or uninterested in hard work as notably different than any such generalizations along gendered or raced lines. For example, no one would hold someone up as White because he was assiduous or female because she was nurturing. Yet, poor people are often accused of being so *because* of their alleged laziness. Social class, then, may be unique in its position as both a cause and an effect, simultaneously a system of stratification that subjugates and a personality trait of the subjugated.

Adding to the difficulty in pinning down what makes a social class is the fact that families' and individual's positioning within class itself can be very fluid and easily hidden (Brnatlinger, 2003; Thein et al, 2012). hooks (1999) spoke from experience when she related that

class differences were boundaries that no one wanted to face or talk about. It was easier

to downplay them, to act as though we were all from privileged backgrounds, to work

around them, to confront them privately in the solitaire of one's room, or to pretend that

just being chosen to study at such an institution meant that those of us who did not come

from such privilege were already in transition toward privilege … It was a kind of treason

not to believe that it was better to be identified with the world of material privilege than

with the world of the working class, the poor. (p. 75)

In the early 1970s, hooks was moving from her "working-class background … [within] the

comfortable confines of a small town Kentucky life to attend Stanford University" (p. 74). Fifty

years later, hooks is a well-established professor, author, academic, and activist whose

experience in academia has indelibly altered her class identity due to her habitation within the

academy (Felski, 2000).

To use hooks's experience as evidence to support the popular story that public education

is the transit system that leads to social equality, however, would be disingenuous and misleading

(Ansalone, 2001; Anyon, 1980, 1981; Brantlinger, 1991, 1993, 2001, 2003; Cole & Omari, 2003;

Comber & Kamler, 2004; Deschenes et al., 2001; Langhout et al., 2006; Luke, 2010; Marx,

2001; Ostrove & Cole, 2003; Weber, 1998). Indeed, Brantlinger (2003) asserted unequivocally

that "instead of facilitating social mobility, schools reproduce the stratified class structure of

society by socializing children for predetermined class-related adult roles and circumstances" (p.

2). The middle-classed pedagogy, deficit discourse, meritocratic reward-and-punishment system

employed by US public schools are all pointed reminders that and indicators of how "the

dominant classes actively pursue advantage and … social class formation depends on the

discursive and actual development of subordinates" (Brantlinger, 2003, p. 3).

At The Intersection of Class and Race

According to Cole and Omari (2003), "because every individual occupies multiple social

locations, all identities are fundamentally intersectional" (p. 786). They asserted that trying to

isolate the lived experience of one identity (e.g., class) from others (including race and gender)

would be a futile effort, and the end product would be a lived experience effectively devoid of

any real life. Weeks and Lupfer (2004) pointed out that the intersection of race and class are so

intrinsically entwined that "when a person thinks White, they are also thinking middle class, and

when they think Black, they are thinking lower class" (p. 973). When independently analyzing

the relationships between racial and social class categorizations, their "results clearly illustrate

the informativeness of social class membership as a social category, independent of and in

conjunction with race" (p. 982). While it may be fruitless, if not impossible, to untangle class

from race, the research seems to indicate that class plays an important role in the positioning of

Other by the dominant group.

Cole and Omari (2003) cautioned, however, that the "intersectional model of race and

class does not assume that class categories have the same meaning for members of different

racial or ethnic groups" (p. 786). Weber (1998) pointed out that each of us simultaneously

occupies both privilege and disadvantage depending on our unique positionality within race,

class, gender, and sexuality categories. Further, "we cannot say that disadvantage in any two

dimensions is the same as in any other two" (p. 25). It stands to reason, then, that Black boys

living in poverty will have different experiences than white girls in the same social class.

Because "we each experience our own lives and develop our identities based on our location along all dimensions" simultaneously (Weber, 1998, p. 24), we cannot--first of all--ever experience both realities firsthand nor--secondly--compare the two experiences objectively to parse out the particular effect of one social construct over the other.

Intersectionality in the Classroom

Milner (2013) maintained that, although race and social class are, for all practical purposes, utterly inextricable from one another, teachers often fail to recognize the connection between them. He asserted that educators often feel more comfortable discussing poverty while excluding race entirely from the conversation, which is problematic when "the likelihood of growing up in an impoverished family is much higher for racial-minority children than for White children" (p. 11). Langhout et al. (2007) asserted that a student who deviates in the slightest from the wealthy, white model student automatically has a higher probability for negative school experience throughout their K-12 career.

According to Brantlinger (1991, 1993, 2001, 2004), all manner of educational structures have been predicated by, built upon, and deemed necessary through the strictures of social class. Research documents practices from inequitable accountability measures (Brantlinger, 2004) and distribution of materials (Anyon, 1980) to unequal application of school discipline (Brantlinger, 1991) and access to high-quality curriculum and teachers (Brantlinger, 2001) to be productions of social class within schools while facilitating its reproduction outside their walls (Luke, 2010; Parekh et al., 2011).

Within the classroom, students and teachers alike consume the myth that education is the great equalizer and all children are similarly positioned to reap its upward benefits, while at the

same time, poor children are exposed--often for the first time--to the vast chasm of difference

caused by material deprivation (Adair, 2002; Ostrove & Cole, 2003). Ostrove and Cole (2003)

recognized schools as sites where certain students are positioned for success and propelled

toward that goal while others are situated on a very different trajectory that is difficult if not

impossible to change. They were careful to point out that these designations "tend to be

systematically related to social class" (p. 683).

According to Gorski (2013), the myth of meritocracy is often dispelled quickly for

students through the common rhetoric of the culture of poverty discourse, including the firmly

entrenched beliefs that "poor people are lazy, [and] poor people don't value education" (p. 88).

The veil is ripped away both implicitly--by the positioning of these students within tracks and

application of school discipline--and explicitly--through the ways in which teachers and school

officials speak to and about them. By extolling the superiority of hard work and parental

involvement toward success and bemoaning the lack thereof by these students and their families,

educators perpetuate the false narrative that the meritocratic system will work for them just as

well and in the same way as it functions for their more affluent peers (Brantlinger, 2003; Felski,

2000; Gorski, 2013; Milner, 2013).   Indeed, it is the "simultaneous enactment *and* denial of

social class" and classism that fixes the discourse so seamlessly within classroom interactions

(Van Galen, 2010, p. 254, emphasis in original).

Perceived Ability

A primary topic of investigation for this study, the phenomenon of pathologizing the

poor, often manifests itself in classrooms as students themselves are problematized. In

particular, students' lack of perceived or real social capital translates to teacher perceptions of

ability that view students as deficient even if that judgment is unsupported by empirical

evidence. Teacher expectations and perceptions become then, not a motivator for success, but a

weapon to further oppress (Cherng, 2017; Glock, 2016; Voet & De Wever, 2019; Wentzel, 2009).

How, then, are teacher expectations and perceptions of student abilities formed and made

manifest?

Wentzel (2009) maintained that teacher expectations for students include not just

academic goals, but also behavioral, motivational, and social outcomes. She further asserted that

teachers' vision of a model student is fairly consistent across grade levels and geography, and

that teachers diligently and continuously articulate "these ideals directly to their students,

regardless of their instructional goals, teaching styles, and ethnicity" (p. 306). These

communicae are not limited to general views for schooling, however. Instead, contained within

these messages are also teacher expectations regarding ability and potential for success for

individual students.

The literature is rife with examples of how teacher expectations play a significant role in

student achievement (Cherng, 2017; Gershenson et al., 2016; Hattie, 2009). According to Hattie

and Zierer (2018), high teacher expectations of student achievement have a higher than average

"effect size" ($d = 0.43$), indicating that high teacher expectations over the course of a school

year can lead to student growth greater than would normally be expected in a single year. They

contended that teachers communicate their expectations--low or high--to students, who then

potentially "perform in line with them" (p. 132). For high expectations, teachers' enthusiasm is

motivating for students (Hattie & Zierer, 2018; Lazarides & Ittel, 2013). When expectations are

low, however, teachers tend to "adjust their classroom activities accordingly and primarily work on rote-learning tasks and avoid giving more challenging tasks to the students" (Glock, 2016, p. 496; see also Boaler, 2016; Voet & De Wever, 2019).

How, then, to get a handle on teacher expectations? The term itself is fraught with tension and controversy because of the concept of teacher expectation as self-fulfilling prophecy alluded to by Hattie and Zierer (2018). Jussim and Harber (2005), however, found that the Pygmalion effect documented by Rosenthal and Jacobson in 1968 may be a fiction for many teachers and students. They referenced a selection of recent research that indicates that teacher expectations may align with empirical metrics of student achievement simply because the teachers were accurate in their assessments of students (see also Gershen et al., 2016; Glock, 2016; Ouazad, 2014; Riegle-Crumb & Humphries, 2012; Whitaker, 2020). Unfortunately, this may not be true for all students, especially those within marginalized populations. Wentzel (2009) pointed to Black students and students of poverty specifically as groups for whom low teacher expectations may have particularly negative impact.

Glock (2016) speculated that as more White teachers come into contact with greater numbers of students from diverse backgrounds--those who stray from the vision of a model student--stereotypes and group prototypes increasingly become the basis upon which teachers' judgments are predicated. This is particularly true of students from unfamiliar backgrounds. According to Glock (2016), using stereotypes to make judgments about unknown situations reduces the teacher's cognitive load because preconceived notions based on alleged unifying characteristics help connect the new information to existing schema. Stereotyping, then, becomes the default point of interaction with students from novel populations. "Teachers made

less favorable academic achievement judgments, more specifically, language proficiency

judgments, when judging a below-average ethnic minority student than when judging a

below-average ethnic majority student" (Glock, 2016, p. 495).

This tendency to rely on stereotypical markers to describe members of marginalized

groups in the classroom results in teachers imposing on students a "perceived ability" that is

typically deficit in nature and, unlike the aforementioned teacher expectations, may not be

aligned with any observable academic performance. This definition of perceived ability aligns

with Riegle-Crumb and Humphries's (2012) "disparate perceptions of ability" (p. 291). To avoid

confusion with the more widely understood concept of teacher expectations, then, this study will

employ this definition to discuss the ways in which teachers perceive students' abilities for

academic achievement from a variety of sources--including non-academic ones. In so doing,

teachers may be able to retake responsibility for student achievement, and thereby gain control

over teaching and learning in their classrooms. Gorski (2011) and Cherng (2017) pointed out

that teachers often feel helpless to affect student learning outcomes when the perceived ability of

students is based on home environments, parental involvement, or other non-academic factors.

The sense of hopelessness leaves both teacher and student nowhere to turn for overcoming the

perceived deficit, which--at that point--truly can become a self-fulfilling prophecy.

By reinforcing stereotypes, othering marginalized populations, and contributing to the

deficit discourse of the classroom and the school system, the imposition of these perceived

abilities works as another tool of oppression. Research shows that teachers' perceptions of

students' abilities are often applied in this way, but most of that research is concentrated in urban

settings (Cherng, 2017) or in teacher education programs with preservice teachers (Glock, 2016;

Gorski, 2012; Marx, 2006). Even in those circumstances, there is little or no guidance for

specific steps to take toward dismantling the systems that underpin and encourage these

tendencies. By exploring the impact of professional learning with inservice teachers on the topic

of the deficit discourse they use to describe their students--including how they perceive students'

performance and abilities--this study may begin to fill that gap in the extant literature.

Deficit Discourse in Education

According to Baroutsis and Woods (2018), "some research on children's outcomes and

poverty demonstrates that in large-scale analyses of students' outcomes, the 'within school'

variance is as large as the 'between school' variance, indicating that teachers, curriculum and

expectations may be as important as the neighbourhood that a child grows up in" (p. 327).

Despite the evidence, however, school personnel continue to view and address children of

poverty as the problem to be fixed rather than focusing on eliminating the classism that

negatively impacts those children (Baroutsis & Woods, 2018; Brantlinger, 2003; Gorski, 2008;

Milner, 2013; Valencia, 1997). Valencia (1997) maintained that deficit thinking is "a form of

oppression" and--quoting compulsory ignorance laws, school segregation, and high stakes

testing--marked instances in the "history of education … filled with examples of how

economically disadvantaged students of color were kept in their place by macro and micro level

educational policies/practices fueled by class and racial prejudice" (pp. 3-4).

Rooted in the 20th-century notions that poverty is somehow genetically endowed or

stemming from cultural deprivation, the ideology that students from non-middle social classes

arrive at their classroom doors suffering from a lack continues to form educational discourse and

policy (Brantlinger, 2003; Gorski, 2008). Baroutsis and Woods (2018) maintained that "'deficit'

is often identified as endogenous in that any so-called inadequacies in the performance of

children is attributed to individual deficiencies or internal deficits. This attributes the blame for

presumed lack of academic resources to the children and their families" (p. 327). Built on the

premises touted by Lewis (1959) and Payne (2019) that imbued poverty-stricken children with a

"culture" unique to them while at the same time shared by anyone who found themselves in a

similar economic situation, deficit ideology pervades social and educational policies whose sole

purpose is to maintain the position of the dominant class while non-members are told explicitly

and implicitly that they are the ones who must change (Brantlinger, 2003; Gorski, 2008).

Although deficit ideology permeates practically every facet of education, nowhere is the

deficit stance more apparent than the application of the "at-risk" label.

> The "at-risk-of-failure" construct is perhaps the most embraced form of cultural deficit
>
> thinking in American education today. It seeks to pinpoint children who are 'predisposed
>
> to dropping out' of school for reasons such as language background, family income,
>
> family structure, age as compared to peers, and 'other person-centered explanation[s] of
>
> school failure' (Valencia & Solorzano, 1997, pp. 195-197). (Marx, 2006, p. 14)

According to Valencia and Solorzano (1997), the at-risk label arose from critics of the

"excellence" movement of the 1980s, which maintained that educational success or failure was a

product of individual effort. Coupled with high-stakes testing, labeling students at-risk was an

attempt to hold schools accountable to the success of their students. Brantlinger (2001) pointed

out, however, that

students who pass [high-stakes tests] are mostly white and from middle-class families.

Educated in high 'ability' groups in elementary school, then in honors, gifted/talented, or

advanced placement sections during their secondary years, passing students have high

grade-point averages and score above average on other tests. In contrast, students who

fail are largely poor and/or of color. (p. 9)

Thus, the labels and the tests are mechanisms to retain the dominance of one group and the

subordination of others, while creating a record of the wide gap between the two (Brantlinger,

2001). These are just further examples of using "deficit perspectives [to] explain academic

failure in terms of cultural, linguistic, moral, intellectual, and social pathologies that exist in

minority and lower income communities" (Keefer, 2017, p. 52; see also Gorski, 2008; Valencia,

1997; Valencia & Solorzano, 1997; Walker, 2011).

Almost a decade ago, Gorski (2011) asserted that speaking out about the negative impacts

of deficit thinking and deficit discourse was fast becoming a trending issue in educational circles.

Though it may have been a hot topic of discussion, it has not translated into a flurry of research

at the level of the general K-12 classroom, but rather has been confined to explorations in theory

(Gorski, 2010); pre-service teacher programs (Browning, 2018; Cirillo-McCarthy et al., 2016;

Garcia-Olp et al., 2017); and within narrow situations involving non-native English speakers,

alternative education settings, and urban populations (Dyson, 2015; Shapiro, 2014; Sperling,

2020). For this reason, Gorski (2011) and Garcia-Olp et al. (2017) call for additional research

with inservice teachers practicing within the authentic environments of their classrooms,

specifically, of the reality of working within the system to combat the prevailing deficit

discourse. Goodall (2019) also pointed out that, once teachers engage such work through critical

reflection, further work is required because the change process will continue beyond the confines of a single practitioner to "provide challenges to the systemic issues that create the need for our work in the first place" (p. 10). This is precisely the call to which this study seeks to respond.

Constructing a Pedagogical Identity

Part of answering that call will involve investigation of how teachers perceive themselves as professionals within their classrooms. Beijaard et al. (2004) documented how researchers have historically interpreted teacher professional identity and professional roles, including that the literature cannot agree on explicit, universal definitions of the terms--if, indeed, they attempt a definition at all. Building upon their work, Keiler (2018) made a minimal distinction between professional roles as the actions that teachers take in the classroom, and professional identities, which describe how teachers view themselves as professionals within their classrooms. Incorporating a grounding in Social Identity Theory (SIT), this study will employ her broad terms to build a definition of pedagogical identity.

A teacher's professional identity is foundational to pedagogical identity. According to Peressini et al. (2004), professional identity is both cognitive and social. The cognitive components "encompass a complex constellation of goals, values, commitments, knowledge, beliefs and other personal characteristics, drawn together to create a sense of 'who I am' as a teacher" (p. 79). The social aspects are formed by interactions with in- and out-group members within the immediate (and changeable) social context, whether they be administrators, colleagues, students, parents, or community members. Hoffman-Kipp (2008) asserted that teacher identity is a

mix of values, beliefs, attitudes, approaches to interaction, and language that has been

developed in personal realms (life history, family, community of origin) combined with

understandings, pedagogical commitments and approaches, and routines of professional

practice developed in teacher education programs and on the job. (p. 153)

Professional identities are dynamic, evolving, and informed by daily personal and

professional experiences (Canrinus et al., 2011; Grier & Johnston, 2000; Hoffman-Kipp, 2008;

Walkington, 2005). Formed and reformed on an on-going basis, teachers' professional identities

undergo countless iterations from preservice experiences through the ends of their tenures. It

follows, then, that the profile of a beginning teacher's professional identity must be different--in

some cases, vastly so--from her more experienced self (Canrinus et al., 2011; Garcia-Martinez &

Tadeu, 2018; Peressini et al., 2004). Not only has the teacher undergone learning from

experience and professional development which has reshaped her professional identity, but,

according to Proweller and Mitchener (2004), students and interactions with them are central to

the development of teachers' professional identities. Ultimately, experience shapes professional

identity which guides selection of professional roles and adoption of pedagogical models which

create new experience, thus perpetuating identity formation and reformation (Korhonen &

Törmä, 2016; Mockler, 2011).

Scholars caution that realization of identity cannot be done in isolation, but requires

opportunity for continued reflection and dialogue on experience and how it shapes identity

(Greene, 1988; Luguetti et al., 2019). Luguetti et al. (2019) maintained that "learning is an

identity process" (p. 855). At the same time, developing awareness of identity is not something

that just happens, but is rather the result of transformation through knowledge, experience, reflection, and discourse.

Marsh (2002b) theorized that such teacher identity is "discursively fashioned." Though she did not attempt to determine different categories of teacher identity, she concluded that identities of white, middle-class teachers often manifest in "the discourse of normalization intertwined with the discourses of child-centeredness and children at risk" (p. 344). By situating Whiteness as normative and children and their families as the sites of classroom problems, the preservice and beginning teachers that Marsh investigated reveal their membership within the dominant culture and enact social practices that perpetuate and reproduce social inequities (Marsh, 2002a, 2002b).

Izadinia (2013) maintained that most research around teacher identity formation is situated largely in the US, the UK, and Australia. Most of that critical study is very general and concentrates almost exclusively on identity formation among preservice teachers (Barty, 2004; Enyedy et al., 2005; Izadinia, 2013). Within those narrow confines, the UK is the only site of research that positions teacher identity formation squarely within the influences of nationalism and neo-liberalism that mark policy decisions and political climates of the early 21st century (Barty, 2004; Grosvenor & Lawn, 2001). Rahmawati and Taylor (2018) cited "the current era of globalisation" as impetus for renewed study of teacher identity formation from a political viewpoint as a means of resistance to the tendency of colonization of students from non-dominant cultures (p. 526). For in-service teachers, Professional Learning Communities may provide a venue for such endeavors (Dehdary, 2017; DuFour et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2020; Oakes et al., 2018; Servage, 2008).

Professional Learning Communities

The concept of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) is not new. More than twenty years ago, Richard DuFour and Robert Eaker "captured the collective imagination of North American educators with its promise of fundamentally altering teaching, learning, and the bureaucracy and individualism that pervade so many schools" (Servage, 2008, p. 63). The model persists despite ever-changing trends, initiatives and emphases within education and, more narrowly, professional development (PD) or learning. According to Stewart (2014), since the introduction of PLCs in the late 1990s, teacher learning has increasingly moved from "passive and intermittent PD to that which is active, consistent, based in the teaching environment, and supported by peers in a professional learning community" (p. 28).

PLCs are defined as "educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for the students they serve" (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Many, 2006, as cited in DuFour et al., 2008). Proponents of PLCs as embedded, collaborative professional learning toward school improvement agree that the PLC is continually focused on student learning and assumes responsibility for the learning of all students equally (Dehdary, 2017; DuFour et al., 2008; DuFour et al., 2018; Fisher et al., 2020; Muhammad, 2018; Servage, 2008; Stewart, 2014; Thompson et al., 2004).

Since their inception, improved student learning via the engagement of PLCs has primarily been envisaged as a process of developing and sharing best practices for instructional, management, and assessment strategies (Dehdary, 2017; DuFour et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2020; Servage, 2008). Such professional learning and sharing is completely appropriate and should be

occurring on a regular basis both among members of a specific school community as well as with

educators at large. If this is the sum total of its purpose, however, all students, especially those

least advantaged, are severely underserved. Servage (2008) maintained that "studying best

practices has value and utility as a form of teacher learning, but it is an incomplete representation

of collaborative processes. It is not *transformative*" and does not reimagine educational practice

and policy to meet the needs of learners long denied (p. 65, emphasis in the original).

Servage (2008) referred to the coequal responsibility for student outcomes as the "glue"

that holds communities of teachers together and allows them to work toward such transformation

within their individual and collective classroom spaces (p. 64).   Using this vision of shared

student learning as the impetus for change, Servage (2008) called for not just a reformation--or

reshaping of what schools already are and do--but a transformation of the very essence of

schooling.

> *Re-form* implies that we re-shape a lump of clay into something that looks different. It
>
> assumes the essential nature of what we are working with is redeemable (O'Sullivan,
>
> 1999). Transformation, in contrast, evokes images of transforming the clay itself into
>
> something else. It is a case of form vs. substance--school change understood as a
>
> fundamental shift in what schools *are*. (Servage, 2008, p. 65, emphasis in original)

In addition to improving basic pedagogical practices, PLCs should also actively function as sites

where educators can "uncover and challenge beliefs and practices that undermine democracy and

perpetuate social injustices" (Servage, 2008, p. 66). Oakes et al. (2018) pointed out that PLCs

are most effective for this work "when they encourage teachers to learn from one another as well

as provide a supportive check on members' perceptions of their own teaching dilemmas" (p.

446).

In their formulation of PLCs, DuFour et al. (2008) drew largely from Senge's (2006)

Learning Organization Theory, which defines a learning community within the business world as

a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly

aspire, where new and expansive patterns of things are nurtured, where collective

aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. (p.

3)

Within the private sector or business community, this definition may be sufficient. Bottery

(2003), however, critiqued PLCs that are purely learning organizations as "context-free" (p. 189).

Individuals seeking new commercial niches are not necessarily subject to the same cultural and

political influences as are educational institutions. Bottery (2003), therefore, proposed that true

learning communities within the school system must aspire to become groups of democratic

professionals, who seek professional learning as well as "remediation of larger 'ecological'

problems which affect them and the organisations within which they work" (pp. 204-205).

Bottery is not the only critic of PLCs. According to Riggins and Knowles (2020), school

districts have often found themselves "caught in the trap of PLC Lite." Marked by a lack of

communication, leadership, direction, vision, and/or commitment, teachers are turned off and

work is simply not done when PLCs are implemented incorrectly or half-heartedly (Bottery,

2003; Davis et al., 2019; Dehdary, 2017; Riggins & Knowles, 2020; Servage, 2008). Davis et al.

(2019) underscored ineffective communication and convoluted paperwork with unclear direction

from school leaders as the most prevalent complaints by teachers who reported negative

experiences with PLCs. In a particularly pessimistic outlook on the efficacy of PLCs, Leonard

and Leonard (2005) remarked that, despite a wealth of literature pointing to the potential for

school improvement through the work of PLCs, the chances of successful implementation

remains "at best difficult, at worst doubtful" (p. 25).

Servage (2008), however, maintained that, despite the "gap between the eloquence of the

professional learning community model on paper and its messiness in practice" (p. 70), PLCs

should not be abandoned. Often, when PLCs fail, the problems are human in nature and are

largely due to focusing exclusively on technical work while ignoring the human aspect of

teaching and learning. In order to attend to what Servage (2008) called the "means as well as the

ends of their work" (p. 69), teachers need safe spaces in which to take risks and trust that those

risks will not cause them to be penalized, spaces in which critical dialogue is not simply

permissible, but is required. PLCs created in this way will lead to the transformation of

individual teachers, their classrooms, and, ultimately, the system. Such goals can best be

pursued by leveraging concepts from transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1990; Mezirow,

1991; Mezirow, 1998; Mezirow, 2000; Taylor, 2009).

Transformative Coaching

According to Aguilar (2020), such work undertaken within the structure of a PLC is a

necessary component of "dismantling systemic oppression" (p. 354). Instructional coaching for

transformation (i.e., Transformational Coaching) is an integral part of those learning

opportunities, with programmatic training for staff provided so that they can work to recognize

their own positions within the cultures that form and inform their classrooms and then create

spaces were learning is possible for all learners, not just representatives from dominant groups (Aguilar, 2020).

To facilitate such growth and change, each PLC requires leadership in the form of a Transformational Coach serving as what Fisher et al. (2020) referred to as a PLC "activator." The activator of a PLC "not only facilitates the group but also adds ideas, asks questions, notices nonverbal cues, and helps the team make decisions. In other words, the activator is a full member of the team" (p. 11). By participating in the work of the PLC and using self-disclosure of insights gained through self-reflective and participation in the reflective and dialogic activities, the Coach is able to more effectively facilitate disclosure from other participants (Bach, 2002; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985).

According to Aguilar (2013, 2016, 2020), the coach's role is to focus attention on 1) his own individual transformation; 2) the transformation in the behaviors, beliefs, and ways of being by the other PLC members; and 3) the subsequent transformation of the institutional system in which all members live and work. "A transformational coach works to surface the connections between these three domains, to leverage change between them, and to intentionally direct our efforts so that the impact we have on an individual will reverberate on other levels" (Aguilar, 2016, p. 25). In PLC meetings, the Coach should work to cultivate a culture of trust and openness, model and encourage honesty and vulnerability, and engage empathetic dialogue that employs and develops high levels of emotional intelligence.

Coaching experts maintain that creating trust can be a long, incrementally realized process that requires persistence and patience (Aguilar, 2013, 2016, 2020; Anderson & Wallin, 2018; Knight, 2007, 2016). Coaches achieve a culture of trust by engaging with teachers in

formal and informal settings with "consistency, professionalism, and a focus on improving the

instructional process through nonevaluative" means (Tanner et al., 2017, p. 36). According to

Knight (2018), trust is built by carefully evaluating conversation and interaction through five

lenses: 1) Character: Do your words and actions signal that you are a trustworthy person? Do

you keep confidences appropriately? 2) Reliability: Can people count on you to follow through

on promises? 3) Competence: Can you help people realize their goals or, if not, connect with

them with resources that can help them do so? 4) Warmth: Do you demonstrate empathy and

patience? Do people feel that you care about them, celebrate their successes, and hear their

grievances? 5) Stewardship: Do you give more time and attention to others than to yourself in

your coaching conversations?

To be most effective, Knight (2016, 2018) and Auslander et al. (2018) advised that

instructional coaches employ a dialogic approach to coaching, which forms the basis for equal,

collegial partnerships toward collective goal-setting and -meeting. When teachers feel that their

goals are shared by a supportive other in whom they trust, they are more willing to take risks

toward the realization of those ends (Aguilar, 2013, 2016, 2020; Auslander et al., 2018; Knight,

2016, 2018).

Costa and Garmston (2003), Aguilar (2013, 2016, 2020), and Knight (2007, 2016, 2018)

pointed out that coaching is connecting, listening, and mediating thought--for both the coach and

the coachee. By positioning the Coach as an equal member and co-learner within the PLC rather

than facilitator, consultant, or subject-area expert, his role is to make sure that discussion focuses

on "perceptions, values, [and] mental models," and is characterized by "listening, questioning,

pausing, paraphrasing, … withholding advice, judgements or interpretations" (Costa & Garmston, 2003, p. 12).

Summary

Though the research is scarce, none can debate that social class disparities--especially when considered at the intersection of race--shape the negative educational experiences shared by an increasing population of students in K-12 schools (Baroutsis & Woods, 2018; Brantlinger, 2003; Gorski, 2008; Milner, 2013; Ullicci & Howard, 2015; Whitaker, 2020). Often, the students themselves are pathologized for their material deprivation by teachers, school administrators, and the very system whose stated purpose as the great equalizer is found to be rather incongruent with its practical function. Toward a solution to this overwhelming problem of practice, teachers' interaction with these students becomes the entry point for investigation.

Research documents that teacher perceptions of student performance are dependent on a variety of characteristics, ranging from race (Ouazad, 2014) and gender (Riegle-Crumb & Humphries, 2012) to parental involvement (Wilson & Martinussen, 1999) and language (Glusnek & Dovidio, 2010), indicating that teachers' theoretical biases play a part in the ability perceptions they hold about the very real children in their classrooms. Interestingly, each of these characteristics shares intersection with social class, and yet there is very little literature regarding how teacher perceptions are formed along classed lines. Beady and Hansell (1981) concluded that an inverse relationship between expectation level for Black students' success and teacher seniority may be attributable to "greater adherence to SES-related stereotypes of student capabilities" (p. 201), but could not make any definitive statements and called for further

investigation. Almost forty years later, there is little evidence of such study, particularly with inservice teachers in non-urban settings (Gershenson et al., 2016; Glock, 2016; Gorski, 2008; Ullicci & Howard, 2015; Wentzel, 2009; Whitaker, 2020).

This study seeks, then, to problematize the deficit discourse of teachers--specifically that which arises from the privilege-laden perceptions of students that they bring into classrooms each day as part of their social, professional, and pedagogical identities--rather than factors originating from the material deprivation of non-white, non-middle class students. The site of study will be a PLC of a small sample of teachers in a suburban school district whose student population has become increasingly diverse in recent years, but whose teaching faculty has remained overwhelmingly White and middle class.

The research base is rich with examples of how participation in PLCs and other collaborative learning structures may promote student achievement in the classroom (Auslander et al., 2018; Dehdary, 2017; DuFour et al., 2008; Fisher et al., 2020; Riggins & Knowles, 2020; Servage, 2008). There is a decided lack of depth, however, in how such professional learning can impact teacher identity and, by extension, responsiveness to student identity within the classroom. Whitaker (2020), in particular, renewed the call for focusing teacher education and research on teacher professional and pedagogical identity development, stipulating that teachers cannot teach effectively without "knowing themselves, knowing their students, and knowing their practice" (p. 702; see also Charalambos, 2012; Cherng, 2017; Garcia-Martinez & Tadeu, 2018; Keiler, 2018; Luguetti et al., 2019; Marx, 2006; Peressini et al., 2004; Schepens et al., 2009; Voet & De Wever, 2019; Walkington, 2005).

Within this context, the main focus of the investigation is the lived experiences of the participants, including the researcher, as they participate in professional learning, facilitated by the researcher/Instructional Coach employing a dialogic, transformative coaching model. Therefore, approaching the investigation from a heuristic phenomenological stance is the most effective way to study and document how these teachers' identities, perceptions and deficit discourse are impacted as they "return to the self, [come to a] recognition of self-awareness, and a valuing of one's own experience" by "swimming through the 'unknown current'" that marks a heuristic and phenomenological journey (Moustakas, 1990, p. 13).

Chapter 3: Methodology

Research Design

According to Morrow (2007), qualitative research is "grounded in a number of core assumptions … [which] include studying individuals in the natural world, learning about the meanings that people make of their experiences, investigating individuals in social interaction and in context, and reporting the results of research in the everyday language of participants" (p. 215). Characterized by "thick descriptions, including rich descriptions of the participants' meanings … with attention to the context of the research and of participants' lives" (Morrow, 2007, p. 219), qualitative research--and phenomenology specifically--is centered on capturing and giving voice to the lived experience of participants (Andrew, 2017; Creswell et al., 2007; Groenewald, 2004; Morrow, 2007). After choosing an "abiding concern" which is of interest to the researcher and the participants, "they reflect on essential themes--what constitutes the nature of the lived experience" (Creswell et al., 2007, p. 253). By creating and analyzing thick, rich

descriptions of the studied issue, the researcher makes meaning of the experience with or in the midst of the phenomenon rather than trying to interpret, explain, or analyze the existence or nature of the phenomenon itself (van Manen, 2016).

As an "insider working with other insiders" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 45), the researcher is acting as the organizer and facilitator for the Professional Learning Community that forms the work site of the research participants, so she is also undergoing the same potentially transformative process. Therefore, in addition to documenting, describing, analyzing and interpreting the experiences of the participants, she will also be subject to the same immersion, dialogue, and exploration as the other participants. According to Douglass and Moustakas (1985), heuristic inquiry begins with a willful, deliberate, and careful examination of self, which is itself an

> affirmation of subjectivity, and [an acknowledgment that] the most objective assessment
> is one that takes the personal viewpoint fully into account--my perception is known to me
> as the truth of what is and is, therefore, the source from which the initial phases of
> inquiry originate. (pp. 43-44)

Through heuristic inquiry, the researcher is not outside the work, functioning merely as observer and recorder, but is also fully immersed in and part of the work herself. Situated thus, she not only experiences awareness of herself and her own experience, but gains knowledge of the phenomenon in a way that dispassionate observation and second-hand information from other participants could not provide. In addition, using self-disclosure of insights gained through self-reflective and participation in the research itself, the researcher is able to more effectively

facilitate disclosure from other participants (Bach, 2002; Douglass & Moustakas, 1985;

Moustakas, 1990, 1994).

The goal of this study is to qualitatively explore and document how white, middle class

female educators respond to professional learning in the form of a PLC around identity and

deficit discourse at the intersection of race, class, and perceived ability. As discussed previously,

the study seeks answers to the following research questions: 1) How does participation in a

Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher

perception of students' identities at the intersection of race, class, and perceived ability? 2) How

does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit

discourse impact teacher pedagogical identity?

Study Site

For the purposes of this study, the setting will be referred to using a pseudonym which

has no connection to the school district under consideration. The Riverside School District

(RSD) in southeastern Pennsylvania is a suburban school district with influences from

neighboring urban areas to the east and the west. With a K-12 enrollment of 3306 students, RSD

is 84.0% White, 5.3% Hispanic, and 4.0% Black. In addition, 26.0% of the students are

identified as Economically Disadvantaged, 19.1% are served by the Special Education Program,

and 6.6% are Gifted. These statistics represent the beginnings of significant change in the

student population within the RSD with the movement of individuals and families from nearby

urban centers. Since the 2015-16 SY, the percentage of Latinx students has almost doubled,

while district enrollment has decreased by more than 130 students. During the same timeframe, the Special Education population has increased by 2.5%.

While the student demographic has begun to change, the makeup of the teachers across the RSD has not. Of the district's 215 professional staff, 22 have been hired since the 2015-16 school year, and two identify as non-white. Among the 16 members of the administrative team (district- and building-level administrators), only one identifies as non-white and 11 have been hired since 2015-16. In addition, six of the administrative members have less than one year of experience in their current positions.

There is a historical social divide within the district that is widely acknowledged and previous Boards of Directors have even taken steps to mitigate. Prior to the 2016-17 school year, the district was divided geographically at the elementary level according to the two primary municipalities that make up the district. Unfortunately, the geographic divide coincides with a marked socioeconomic difference from the East side of the district to the West. The administration took steps to provide the same educational experience for all students by consolidating the buildings and creating educational centers for all students in the district, separated only by grade level--K-2 and 3-5.

Four years later, students were grouped together in educational spaces, and yet still separated within the social status of their zip codes. According to registered home sales for the time period January-October 2020, the average home sale price in the East side of the district was $280,590, while the average home sale price in the West was $238,552. The East and West have a corresponding difference in the average annual household incomes of $99,137 and $81,917, respectively. Within district classrooms, there persists a perception that students who

are bussed from the West side of the district arrive at the school doors suffering from a lack of

opportunity and culture that makes educational failure inevitable and uncontrollable.

Research Participants

Moustakas (1994) argued that there are no participants in a phenomenological study,

especially when it is heuristic in nature. He stated instead that all individuals undertaking the

study of the phenomenon are "co-researchers" in the process. The participants/co-researchers

(whose names have been replaced with pseudonyms) in this PLC are four teachers who are

employed as Professional Staff members at Riverside Middle School (grades 6-8) and the

researcher/Instructional Technology Coach for RSD. All participants identify as white, middle

class, cisgender, and female, and are between 40 and 50 years of age.

Participants self-selected participation in a PLC as their chosen mode of professional

learning for the 2020-21 school year. As part of their teacher supervision plan, the RSD requires

tenured teachers who have previously been rated "Satisfactory" on their annual evaluations to

engage collaborative professional learning with their peers. One of the options for such

endeavors is to form a PLC around an area of inquiry or concern facilitated by a district-level

Instructional Coach. These professional staff members qualify for this type of professional

learning and chose to join together around this phenomenon in their classrooms. The PLC was

formed and became active at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year. At that time, all

participants preliminarily agreed to allow the PLC itself to become a site for research and for

themselves to act as co-researchers. The researcher later gained formal permission from all

participants by obtaining signatures on a Participation-Release Agreement modeled after

Moustakas's (1990) sample (see Appendix A).

Participant 1: Cathy

Cathy is an 8th grade English/Language Arts teacher. She has taught in the school for 11

years. Before that, she was employed in television broadcasting. She has two school-age

children, and does not live in the district.

Participant 2: Teri

Teri is a 7th grade Social Studies teacher. She has taught in the school for 13 years. She

has two teenage children who attend high school in a different public school district.

Participant 3: Helen

Helen is a 6th grade Reading Specialist. She has taught in the building for 16 years. She

has previously been employed as a grade-level, classroom Reading teacher. This year, she is

working as a specialist who works with small groups of students as part of our MTSS

(Multi-Tiered System of Supports) Tier 2 team. She has two college-graduated children who are

employed or in graduate school. She is the Education Association President, a position that she

has held for almost twelve years.

Participant 4: Hannah

Hannah is an 8th grade Mathematics teacher. She has been employed in the building for

18 years. She has two college-graduated children who are employed or in graduate school.

Researcher/Participant 5

I am currently the K-12 Instructional Technology Coach and the researcher. I have been employed by the district for 16 years. Prior to this year, I was a classroom mathematics teacher at Riverside High School, and, for the previous two years, a part-time Instructional Technology Coach at the high school level. In that capacity, I had the opportunity to develop collegial and collaborative working relationships with middle school faculty through a series of professional learning experiences focusing on the district 1:1 technology implementation plan. The PLC that is the focus of this research was undertaken as part of my Instructional Coaching work with district teachers toward more inclusive and equitable classroom technology integration. The PLC met bi-weekly for the entirety of the 2020-21 school year (August 2020-May 2021).

Methods of Data Collection

The research questions lend themselves to qualitative study, as they are best answered by considering the "human living experiences" that mark human interaction with each other in the context of this phenomenon (Sultan, 2019, p. 4). In order to uncover these stories, this study followed the experiences of four secondary teachers (grades 6-8) and one Instructional Coach over the course of eight weeks (March-April 2021) as they participated in bi-weekly PLC meetings whose focus was deficit discourse. Meetings were one hour in duration and were held via Zoom. PLC meetings were conversational in nature, facilitated by the researcher/coach. PLC activities relied heavily on discussion and conversation, but also included concept mapping, brainstorming and reflective activities, and idea sharing based on thinking prompts adapted from Singleton's (2015) *Courageous Conversations about Race* (see Appendix B).

Archival data in the form of meeting transcripts, memos, and participant-created artifacts

was considered from PLC meetings that occurred in the six months prior to the data collection

period. Data was collected in the forms of reflective participant and researcher journals, meeting

memos and transcripts, semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and

participant-created artifacts.

Reflective Journaling

As previously discussed, critical self-reflection on assumptions (CSRA) and capturing

those thoughts, impressions, and feelings, is central to the adult learning process that this study

documents (Mezirow, 1994). Unlike memoing, whose focus is connection between researcher

and data, reflective journaling--employed in the study of a phenomenon--allows the researcher

and co-researchers to explore their relationships with self, others, and the phenomenon itself

(Vicary et al., 2017).

For the researcher, reflective journaling has been shown as an effective "bracketing"

device (Vicary et al., 2017). According to phenomenological tradition, it is vital to the research

that the researcher recognize, acknowledge, and--where appropriate--set aside her biases before

engaging in data collection and analysis (Andrew, 2017; Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1990,

1994; Vicary et al., 2017). Therefore, reflective journaling will not simply provide a rich

narrative from which the researcher's and co-researchers' stories will be revealed, synthesized,

and grappled with, but will also allow the researcher distance and perspective through processing

of the thoughts, feelings, and experience that she brings to the study.

Co-researchers and I recorded thoughts, feelings, and responses to reflection prompts (see

Appendix C) based on PLC readings and discussion following each PLC meeting. The reflection

prompts were shared electronically in shared Google Docs between researcher and participants.

Participant responses were readable only by the researcher and the individual participant.

Reflective journals could be engaged at any additional times we desired, especially as we felt

prompted by classroom/professional interactions or independent reading and thinking.

Following the data collection period, I selected four reflective journal entries per

participant--including myself--for analysis.   Journal entries were selected according to the

following parameters: One entry was selected from the first three months of PLC meetings in

which dialogue and reflection centered on identity of teachers and students; a second, from

months four, five, and six, when the concentration moved to the culture of poverty and its

manifestations in our classrooms, our system, and our discourses; a third entry was selected from

the actual data collection period, during which we looked more closely at pedagogical identity;

and a final entry, chosen at random to provide a more complete picture of each participant's

experience as it relates to the research questions. Analyzing journal entries chosen in such a way

revealed any changes in the ways that teachers perceive identity for themselves and their

students. Reflective journals were stored electronically as shared Google Docs between

researcher and individual co-researchers.

Memoing

According to Herr and Anderson (2015), qualitative action researchers rely heavily on

"ongoing memoing or journaling due to the action orientation and fast paced nature of action

research" (p. 91). It is not just the efficiency of memoing that makes it a wise choice for data

collection. Rather, it provides space and time researchers and participants within the

phenomenon "stepping back into ongoing analysis" (p. 91). Memoing performs an analytic

function by 1) creating a map of and connection between research activities, 2) extracting

meaning from the data as it is produced, and 3) maintaining momentum as connections are made

between research activities and data collection (Birks et al., 2008; Rossman & Rallis, 2017).

Often, memoing provides for a space in which the researcher can connect with the data, thereby

engaging with her "research to a greater degree than would otherwise be the case" (Birks et al.,

2008, p. 69).

   For this study, memoing was used to capture information as it occurred so as not to lose it

during synthesis. Further, memoing was employed as a means to interpret data in the context of

the research questions and study site, as well as to be responsive to the co-researchers'

experience. Unlike reflective journaling which was completed immediately following PLC

meetings and other discrete occasions which prompt critical thinking, memoing was completed

by the researcher upon review of recorded meetings and their transcripts. By allowing time to

lapse between participation in dialogue with others and bracketing through reflective journaling

about personal reactions, thoughts, and feelings, watching and listening to the recorded meeting

at least three days after the meeting date allowed greater distance and objectivity during the

memoing process. Memoing, then, allowed me to focus on and synthesize the other participants'

experience and consider them a bit apart from though connected to my own. The process of

memoing also allowed me to capture the verbiage we use as we discuss our identities as well as

our students during PLC interactions and dialogues, thereby revealing our positionality and our

perceptions of that of our students. Memos from PLC meetings that occurred during the data

collection period were considered during data analysis. In addition, memos from those meetings

that occurred prior to data collection were also analyzed as archival data. Memos are stored

electronically as Google Docs on my personal Google Drive. For validity and reliability, they were shared with co-researchers to ensure that reporting of discussion and events was true and as objective as possible.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Moustakas (1994) maintained that, for purposes of studying phenomena, "the long interview" is the typical method of data collection (p. 114). He was careful to point out that phenomenological interviews are not interrogations, but rather they are conversational, dialogic, and responsive to the direction in which the participant moves during the course of exploring her reaction to as well as thoughts and feelings evoked by the phenomenon. Therefore, it is imperative and incumbent upon the researcher that she begins by creating a calm, relaxing environment of trust in which the participant feels comfortable to be honest, open, and free from judgment regarding the story that unfolds. To that end, the researcher may prepare and use an interview protocol that employs open-ended comments and questions. Moustakas (1994) argued, however, that the questions may be "varied, altered, or not used at all when the co-researcher shares the full story of his or her experience" (p. 114).

I decided to utilize interview questions for the two interviews adapted from McIntyre's (1997b) *Making Meaning of Whiteness* and Settlage (2009) (see Appendix D). To capture the experience of all participants in spontaneous, dialogic ways, I conducted two semi-structured interviews with each participant (one per week for eight weeks), spaced four weeks apart. This interview schedule allowed for more manageable data collection. Further, as heuristic inquiry examines each participant's experience independent of the others, the staggered interview schedule did not seem to negatively impact the collection of data for any one co-researcher.

Coupled with other data collection tools, staggered interviewing provided a comprehensive

depiction of each participant's experience. In addition, semi-structured interviewing allowed the

researcher to probe teacher perceptions of student identities as well as conceptions of their own

pedagogical identities as they participated in PLC activities and dialogues. Interviews were

recorded so that I was required to take minimal notes, thereby allowing greater attention to the

co-researcher, interview process, and resultant dialogue (Moustakas, 1990). Interviews were

conducted via Zoom and each was one hour in length.

Classroom Observations

To further triangulate the data and to compare teachers' self-reported and conversational

beliefs and thoughts with their enactment in her classroom setting, classroom observations were

conducted. According to Adler and Adler (1994), observation is "the fundamental base of all

research methods" (p. 389). Patton (2002) maintained that, due to the power of language to

shape the experiences of speaker and hearer, emic observation of language is particularly crucial

to "faithfully represent participants in their own terms and be true to their worldview" (p. 290).

Enyedy, Goldberg, and Welsh (2005) asserted that observation of teacher classroom interaction is

especially important to analyzing teacher identity. Therefore, each co-researcher was observed

for a regular 72-minute blocked class period during a single class. To the extent possible, these

observations were scheduled in such a way that, when combined with the interviews, they

provided a continuity of data collection across the time period for each participant. Prior to the

observation, I met with the teacher for context within the classroom setting including

demographics of students, culture of the classroom environment, etc. During the observation, I

took contextual notes around teacher discourse to and about students. Classes were recorded

using a Swivl device and iPad to allow for transcription and coding following observations.

      The observation protocol was developed by the researcher and piloted in a series of six

classroom observations in the two months preceding data collection. After the first observation,

the protocol was revised to provide a space to document the type of interaction that the teacher

engaged (teacher-to-student, teacher-to-group, or teacher-to-teacher). The next revision occurred

following the third observation, at which time a column was added to allow for the capture of the

type of learning activity occurring at the time of the teacher interaction. The revised observation

protocol was used successfully for an additional three observations (see Appendix E).

Observation of teacher interaction and discourse to and about students provided demonstration of

teachers' self-reported perceptions around teacher and student identity. By positioning the

observation between the two interviews as much as possible, the researcher had the opportunity

in the second interview to drill down on observed interactions, as necessary, to provide texture

and fill in any gaps in the emerging depiction of any participant's experience (see Figure 1).

Figure 1.

Data Collection Timeline by Week.

Artifacts

Key to understanding the experience of individuals as they experience a phenomenon is a complete picture of that experience. While a significant part is revealed through journaling, interviewing, dialogue, and observation, there are other means by which individuals add depth and texture, shadow and light to the emerging portrait. Moustakas (1990), Sultan (2019), and Creswell et al. (2007) maintained that artifacts in the form of documents including poetry and artwork "offer additional meaning and depth and supplement depictions of the experience obtained from observations and interviews" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 49). Co-researchers and I produced artifacts during PLC meetings based on activities and discussion around identity development, class, race, and perceived ability in the classroom. Such artifacts were considered during the data collection process as they further illuminate the impact of PLC participation on the teachers' perceptions of their own pedagogical identities, as well as their students' identities and abilities.

An artifact that was of particular interest were culturegrams (Chang, 2008) produced by the co-researchers and used as Identity Maps (see Appendix F). To create these maps, participants were asked to consider themselves situated within their classrooms. Then, they identified and described their most influential affiliations with various groups in twelve different categories (occupational, religious, gender, geography, family, health, age, economic, political, recreational, aesthetic, and ethnic). Finally, they were asked to identify and rank the three affiliations that most informed their Primary Identities, or "who they are" in the classroom as they interact with students, peers, curriculum, etc.

Each co-researcher actually produced two Identity Maps, one at the initial PLC meeting in September 2020, as well as a "terminal" identity map at the end of the 8-week data collection period in April 2021. During the data analysis process, the two maps were compared to identify trends and changes in the co-researchers' perceptions of their own identities.

Data Analysis Framework

Data was analyzed through the Moustakian approach to heuristic and phenomenological analysis. Moustakas (1990, 1994) defined six phases to the data analysis process: 1) Initial Engagement, 2) Immersion, 3) Incubation, 4) Illumination, 5) Explication, and 6) Creative Synthesis (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Moustakian heuristic analysis
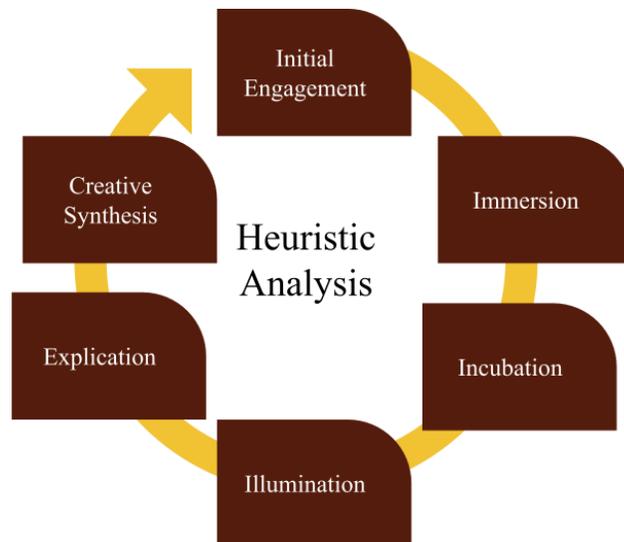
From the initial engagement phase, the puzzle of practice is realized and the researcher "discovers an intense interest, a passionate concern that calls out to the researcher, one that holds important social meanings and personal, compelling implications" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 27).

Once the puzzle coalesces into a question, the researcher immerses herself in the topic.

"Walking, sleeping, and even dream states" are consumed with the connection between the

question, the researcher's auto-biographical context, and the larger world (p. 27). But such

all-consuming attention can be sustained only so long. From immersion, the researcher retreats

into a period of incubation, marked by "intense, concentrated focus on the question" (p. 28). The

growth that occurs during incubation is unlike that of the joyous clamor of immersion. Instead,

this is a quiet growth of realization and a clarification--a cognitive honing in on the embers that

remain once the initial fireball has burned out. During incubation, "a seed has been planted; the

seed undergoes silent nourishment, support, and care that produces a creative awareness" of the

question under consideration (p. 29).

At this point, the researcher is ready for purposeful, focused study. During illumination

the researcher has become receptive to the story that data has to tell. Practically, it is during this

phase that raw data will be collected, analyzed, and coded for themes and patterns. From those

themes and patterns, the story of the phenomenon emerges. Explication fills in gaps in the

landscape created and charted by the researcher as she engages sense-making of the data, themes,

and the phenomenon that they unveil. The depiction remains flat and incomplete, however, until

creative synthesis allows intuition and tacit knowledge to create texture, deepen shadows,

brighten horizons, and extend the boundaries beyond the discrete snapshots provided to

formulate the living experiences of the phenomenon's inhabitants.

According to Moustakas (1990), "the synthesis of essences and meanings inherent in any

human experience is a reflection and outcome of the researcher's pursuit of knowledge" (p. 33).

Because of the researcher's high profile within the data and its interpretation, Sultan (2020)

encouraged heuristic researchers to engage self care activities, including peer debriefing, to

support the researcher's ability to be fully present within her own experience and,

simultaneously, fully integrate the co-researchers' experience, as well. Thus, for purposes of self

care, I employed three critical friends, with whom I debriefed before and after interviews,

classroom observations, and PLC meetings. In addition, during the data analysis phase, I

frequently shared raw data as well as my analyses and interpretations. According to Costa and

Kallick (1993), "a critical friend, as the name suggests, is a trusted person who asks provocative

questions, provides data to be examined through another lens, and offers critique of a person's

work as a friend" (p. 50). Pfeiler-Wunder (2021) argued that, as white educators, "engaging in

ongoing conversations" with critical friends is particularly vital as we wrestle with our

positionality and power in an oppressive system (p. 13). As part of the framework provided by

heuristic inquiry, employment of critical friends who were outside the research site but were

well-informed regarding the study under examination and the methodology under which it was

conducted provided the opportunity to realize the "cognitive and emotional engagement

necessary" to fully understand, appreciate, and be able to articulate the shared experience of the

phenomenon (Sultan, 2020, p. 169). To ensure that my white, middle class positionality was

removed as much as possible from my interpretations of data and events, my critical friends were

a group of strategically selected educators, representing Pacific Islander, Indigenous American,

and Black communities as well as urban and rural areas of the US.

Data Analysis Process

The framework of heuristic inquiry undergirded this study. As I analyzed the data from each participant, however, I specifically followed Moustakas' (1994) transcendental phenomenal methodology (see Figure 3).   As prescribed by this method, before I even began considering the collected data, I first engaged the "epoche" or "bracketing" process described by Moustakas (1990, 1994) and Andrew (2017). Here, "we set aside our prejudgments, biases, and preconceived ideas about things" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85). Andrew (2017) maintained that "this bracketing should go beyond cognitive understanding and seek to embrace emotional and somatic knowledge of my motives" (p. 32). Both authors agreed that only by spending time intently reflecting on one's own thoughts and experiences, thereby "indwelling" the topic at hand can heuristic researchers simultaneously reside within the phenomenon and maintain objective distance from it. To that end, before looking at data, I spent several hours over a series of days reflecting on my own thoughts, experiences, and motives, and engaging my critical friends so that I could approach the experience as something "to be gazed upon, to be known naively and freshly through a 'purified conscious'" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 85).

Figure 3.

Moustakas's Transcendental Phenomenal Methodology
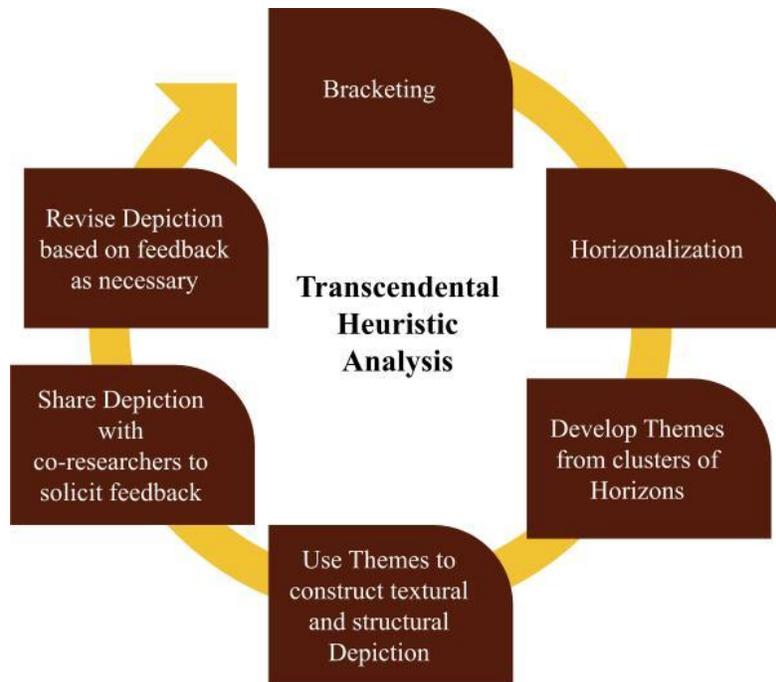
After bracketing, I compiled the data for a single participant, including memos, reflections, artifacts, and transcripts from PLC meetings; transcripts from interviews; as well as tally sheets, memos, and transcripts from classroom observations (see Table 1). The participant's data was then organized into a sequence that revealed her experience of this phenomenon. Beginning with historical, biographical data (taken largely from interviews) and then progressing chronologically through the period that marked data collection, the objective was to be able to live the experience as she had done, even as I had lived it alongside her.

Table 1.

Data Types by Participant and Data Collection Week Number

Participant(s)	Type	Week #
All	Archival Data: PLC Meeting Transcripts (9/20-3/21)	N/A
	Archival Data: PLC Meeting Memos (9/20-3/21)	N/A
	PLC Meeting Transcript 1	2
	PLC Meeting Transcript 2	4
	PLC Meeting Transcript 3	6
	PLC Meeting Transcript 4	8
	PLC Meeting Memo 1	2
	PLC Meeting Memo 2	4
	PLC Meeting Memo 3	6
	PLC Meeting Memo 4	8
Cathy	Archival Data: Initial Identity Map	N/A
	Terminal Identity Map (4/21)	8
	Journal Entry 1	2
	Journal Entry 2	4
	Journal Entry 3	6
	Journal Entry 4	8
	Interview 1	1
	Interview 2	5
	Classroom Observation Protocol	7
	Classroom Observation Transcript	7
	Classroom Observation Field Notes	7
Hannah	Archival Data: Initial Identity Map	N/A
	Terminal Identity Map (4/21)	8
	Journal Entry 1	1
	Journal Entry 2	3
	Journal Entry 3	5
	Journal Entry 4	7
	Interview 1	2
	Interview 2	6
	Classroom Observation Protocol	3
	Classroom Observation Transcript	3
	Classroom Observation Field Notes	3
Helen	Archival Data: Identity Map	N/A

	Terminal Identity Map (4/21)	8
	Journal Entry 1	1
	Journal Entry 2	3
	Journal Entry 3	5
	Journal Entry 4	7
	Interview 1	3
	Interview 2	7
	Classroom Observation Protocol	5
	Classroom Observation Transcript	5
	Classroom Observation Field Notes	5
Teri	Archival Data: Initial Identity Map	N/A
	Terminal Identity Map (4/21)	8
	Journal Entry 1	1
	Journal Entry 2	4
	Journal Entry 3	5
	Journal Entry 4	7
	Interview 1	4
	Interview 2	8
	Classroom Observation Protocol	1
	Classroom Observation Transcript	1
	Classroom Observation Field Notes	1
Tracy	Archival Data: Initial Identity Map (9/20)	N/A
	Terminal Identity Map (4/21)	8
	Journal Entry 1	2
	Journal Entry 2	4
	Journal Entry 3	6
	Journal Entry 4	8

At that point, true data analysis began. The first step was "horizonalizing" the data. During this phase, I recorded and treated each statement by the co-researcher under investigation as having equal value. Then, I revisited each statement and deleted those that were redundant or overlapping. I also eliminated statements that were irrelevant to the research, including greetings; planning for subsequent meetings, interviews, or observations; and questions/statements clarifying reflection questions. This process left only the "horizons," which

Moustakas (1994) defined as the "textural meaning and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (p. 97). Once all of the horizons had been identified and defined, I grouped them into themes, which were then organized--with the horizons--into a textural (what) and structural (how) depiction of the phenomenological experience. This process was then repeated for each of the four other participants.

For the first participant, I employed en vivo coding for the identified horizons. For the second and third participants, a combination of en vivo (for emerging) and a priori (for existing) codes was utilized. Finally, the fourth and fifth participants' horizons fit almost completely into the codes that had already been established, so I used a priori coding almost exclusively for the last two data sets. Following the analysis of each participant's data, I shared the constructed depiction with her and asked her to carefully examine the description and make additions, deletions, or modifications as desired to provide the most comprehensively accurate depiction possible.

Validity and Reliability

Moustakas (1990) argued that validity of heuristic inquiry cannot be measured quantitatively, but is rather an issue of meaning. For him, the validity of a heuristic research can be evaluated by answering the following question: "Does the ultimate depiction of the experience derived from one's own rigourous, exhaustive self-searching and from the explications of others present comprehensively, vividly, and accurately the meanings and essences of the experience?" (p. 32). Although there is obvious subjectivity inherent in the

approach, steps can be taken to protect the validity of the research and increase reliability of the results.

First, research recommends using data triangulation, including at least two--if not more-- different types of data in order to ensure that emerging depictions of the experience are true to the experience (Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Herr & Anderson, 2015; Patton, 2002; Rossman & Rallis, 2017). I chose to incorporate five types of data, including direct observation, in order to promote reliability across sources. Secondly, I employed two methods for bracketing, including reflective journaling and critical friends. In addition to privately reflecting on and capturing my thoughts and feelings in journals, I also employed three critical friends with no connection to the research site to "support [the] inquiry through examination, critique, and dialogue" (Blake & Gibson, 2021, p. 135; see also Mat Noor & Shafee, 2020). Conversations with these individuals provided safe sites in which I could be honest about my own thoughts, feelings, motives, interpretations, fears, frustrations, etc. in order to process those things with an "objective and disinterested" outsider (Blake & Gibson, 2021, p. 135). Through these bracketing tools, researcher bias and positionality was better contained so that co-researchers' experiences were presented as true to their intentions as possible (Andrew, 2017; Creswell et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Vicary et al., 2017).

Moreover, to further ensure that findings are verified to be honest and reflective of participants' experience at every stage of the data analysis process, I employed investigator triangulation, by frequently returning to the co-researchers for validation for, clarification to, and any necessary correction of emerging depictions and synthesis to ensure that their voices were honored (Herr & Anderson, 2015; Moustakas, 1990, 1994; Patton 2002). Finally, by engaging in

an iterative process--not limited to each participant's individual depiction of the experience--but

encompassing our shared and even my own experiences, true meanings were parsed out and

brought into sharp relief so that the synthesized product is a comprehensive and honest

elucidation of the living experience (Moustakas, 1990).

Validity of Rigorous Qualitative Action Research

In addition to considering the validity of the data and reliability of results, according to

Herr and Anderson (2015), rigorous qualitative action research must meet five criteria: 1) The

generation of new knowledge (dialogic and process validity), 2) The achievement of

action-oriented outcomes (outcome validity), 3) The education of both researcher and

participants (catalytic validity), 4) Results that are relevant to the local setting, (democratic

validity), and 5) A sound and appropriate research methodology (process validity). As

articulated previously, I have formulated this study to meet each of these marks.

Confidentiality and Security

In order to ensure anonymity of participants, pseudonyms for the individual teachers, the

district, and the school have been utilized. These pseudonyms were selected intentionally so that

they have neither connection to nor qualifying characteristics in common with the actual

participants and study site.

All hard copies of artifacts, documents, memos, etc. are stored in my private office in a

locked filing cabinet whose key is available only to me. Any electronic information--video

recordings, transcripts, memos, documents, etc.--are stored in my personal Google Drive,

password protected and, again, accessible only by me. Following the study, co-researchers had

the opportunity to request the return of her created artifacts. My copies of everything will be

permanently destroyed after secure retention for three years. After that time elapses, hard copies

will be shredded; and electronic versions, permanently deleted.

Methodological Assumptions

According to Sultan (2020), heuristic inquiry is grounded in the epistemological

assumption that experiences of phenomena are lived and revealed through "rich dialogue

between preexisting knowledge of the topic and new information emerging from the research"

(p. 161). Bonner et al. (2021) pointed out that the ontological roots of heuristic inquiry lie in the

meaning-making that occurs through relational contexts between co-researchers. While validity

of raw data and its interpretation is ensured through repeated conference with co-researchers and

critical friends, heuristic inquiry is fundamentally grounded in an assumption of mutual trust

between researcher and participants that research will be conducted ethically and in ways that

preserve the rights and dignity of all parties. In addition, while the heuristic researcher seeks to

identify potential universal themes that typify the phenomenal experience, universality "does not

imply that all humans experience the same things in the same manner or that the construction of

meaning involves the same processes for everyone" (Sultan, 2020, p. 160). Instead, heuristic

inquiry situates universality humanistically, honoring the experiences of individuals within a

specific context, while gathering the threads of their unique experiences to craft a tapestry of a

"communal whole" (p. 160).

Chapter 4: Findings

According to the Moustakian (1990, 1994) tradition of phenomenological research, heuristic analysis "involves timeless immersion inside the data, with intervals of rest and return to the data until intimate knowledge is obtained" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 49). For this study, that process involved compiling all transcriptions, memos, artifacts, and personal documents for a lone participant, organizing them into a sequence that revealed that participant's story, gleaning all possible details from that story, and then setting that data aside to complete the task for the next participant. Over the course of more than six months, I repeated this process four additional times during the analysis of this data, until all five participants' stories had emerged. From this compilation process, I was able to construct a "composite depiction" that exemplified the experience of the phenomenon under study. This composite is made up of "profiles that are unique to the individual [co-researchers] yet characterize the group as a whole" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 50). Finally, I approached the final stage of heuristic analysis--creative synthesis--by crafting a first-person narrative from the perspective of a white, middle class educator experiencing participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse. Because it is both part and the representative whole of the generated research data, this narrative was shared with co-researchers and critical friends, "seeking their assessment for comprehensiveness and accuracy" (Moustakas, 1990, p. 34).

In this chapter, I will briefly summarize the data analysis process. Then, I will explore the data and explicate the emerging themes, before I discuss the application of the themes to address the research questions.

Data Analysis Process

Within the framework for heuristic inquiry described briefly above, individual participant data was analyzed utilizing Moustakas's Transcendental Phenomenal analysis method (discussed in Chapter 3). According to that analytic process, I began by first engaging the epoche, or bracketing, to reveal and set aside my own motives, biases, and preconceptions. Then, I compiled a single participant's data in a way that gave a comprehensive story of her experience. Within that data, horizons that exemplified the experience were identified using a combination of en vivo and a priori coding. Those horizons were then clustered into themes, which coalesced into a single depiction that provided both contextual and structural elements. After the depiction's accuracy and authenticity were confirmed by the participant, I was ready to set the data for that co-researcher aside and repeat the process with the remaining participants.

During this last phase of the analysis process with each participant, three of the four responded that no changes to the constructed depiction were necessary. For one participant, I recorded that she had been teaching for 18 years. She pointed out that she had actually been in the profession for 19. Although this was not the only time that I shared their data or my interpretation of it with them individually and collectively, all participants reported an appreciation for being able to revisit and relive the experience through the documented account that emerged from their data. Teri commented, "When you're in it, you don't understand the strides that you've made. Then you see them laid out and it's like 'wow, I've really changed'."

Raw Data and Thematic Investigation

The data under investigation were the lived experiences of five secondary teachers who participated in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse. In order to create a comprehensive depiction of our individual and collective experience, I analyzed more than 200 hours of meeting, classroom observation, and interview transcripts; 20 participant-created artifacts; and 20 reflective journal entries; in addition to descriptive and analytic memos. From the data, seven unique themes emerged:

1. Deficit Views of Student Non-Conformity

2. Growth Views of Students

3. Identity Self-Awareness

4. Awareness of Students' Identities

5. Impacts on Classroom Practice

6. Teacher Roles

7. What Now?

These themes not only typify the phenomenon of participation in a PLC focused on deficit discourse and identity, but also describe the pedagogical identity formation and reformation that teachers underwent as they engaged with the PLC. Themes 1-3, and 5-7 were represented in all five participants' data through interviews, PLC meetings, and/or classroom observation. The fourth theme was expressed by four of the five participants through interview responses, reflective journal entries, and PLC artifacts, and three of them engaged the topic at least four times over the course of the two-month data collection period, indicating that the experience

provoked this concern in a majority of the participants. Each theme emerged from its own

unique horizons that were typical of the experience (see Table 2). These invariant constituents

provide the backbone of the personal narrative into which I synthesized the data based on

Moustakas's (1990) recommendation for heuristic research (p. 52).

Table 2.

Themes with Associated Invariant Constituents of the Phenomenon

Themes	Invariant Constituents
Deficit Views of Students	Demands from administration
	Kids can't be motivated
	Kids don't know how to behave
Growth Views of Students	Put a face on a kid
	They can do good things
Identity Self-Awareness	Growing up educated, White, middle-class
	Blind and blissfully ignorant
	Beginning to conceptualize
	My privilege makes me complicit
Awareness of Students' Identities	My experience is not their experience
	Valid and valuable, though different from mine
Impacts on Classroom Practice	Incremental change for lasting effect
Teacher Roles	Salesman
	Enforcer
	Politician
	Hero
What Now?	I can never NOT know
	Feelings of helplessness
	Strive to be an ally

As Moustakas (1990) recommends, in the next sections, I will explore each theme, beginning with the creative synthesis of the experience as a first-person narrative and including examples of horizons and individual textural and structural depictions, as well as composite textural and structural depictions (p. 54). Following a thorough examination of each theme that emerged from the composite depiction, I will explain how the themes speak directly to the research questions under examination in this study.

Deficit Views of Students

Throughout the data collection period, participants expressed deficit views of students in interviews, meetings, and during classroom observations. Although the application of deficit discourse changed from individual students to groups of students, participants persisted in using deficit language to describe the students in their classrooms and other school spaces. Most of the deficit discourse centered on students' resistance to conform to school or classroom rules and protocols. Often interpreted as disrespectful or caused by a lack of motivation, noncompliance and reduced investment of effort was often conflated with a lack of ability to perform in the classroom. This theme was represented in data from each of the five participants (see Table 3).

Table 3.

Theme 1 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
Deficit Views of Students	Demands from administration	X	X		X	X
	Kids can't be motivated	X	X	X	X	X
	Kids don't know how to behave		X	X		

Synthesis as Narrative. I struggle to maintain an orderly and productive academic environment. I feel pressure on all sides--**demands from administration** for higher student achievement, daily lesson plans aligned to standards, incorporating SEL and mental health into my content area instruction, using technology, being innovative. What is more frustrating is that, when push comes to shove, these **kids** just **can't be motivated**. They **don't** even **know how to behave**. I really don't know how anyone expects me to force them to do better. They don't want to, and no one wants to make them--not the administration, not their parents--why should I?

Demands from Administration. Congruent with current research, the co-researchers often connected a lack of self-perceived teacher agency to a shift in "the responsibility for educational success [or failure] to the home environment" and students themselves (Clyq et al., 2014, p. 812). The teachers who taught state-assessed content were especially frustrated by what were perceived as high demands on themselves and low expectations for their students. According to Hannah, the principal "just wants these kids reading on grade-level. She doesn't really care how I do it. Magic potion? Wishful thinking? Because it's not going to happen any other way." During another PLC meeting, Cathy conveyed her exasperation with the expectations placed on teachers "especially during times of COVID and when we're all--teachers, students, everybody--just trying to survive." The seemingly dichotomous message between engaging self-care and increased mandates from district office staff regarding weekly lesson plans, regular email communications with parents, maintenance of online course materials, among other things was a lament shared by us all. Teri summed it up: "It's like we're just giving lip service to what we know we should do--taking care of ourselves and each other--and then being held accountable to the same standardized testing gods that always dictate

our lives." Especially at a time when student interest and parental support seemed to be inversely related to administrative demands, teachers' tendency to reflect frustration onto their students--expressed in the form of deficit discourse--was typical.

 Kids Can't Be Motivated. Student motivation seemed especially low during times of remote instruction. Helen, Teri, and Cathy frequently spoke about their experience with children joining class via Zoom only to fail to actively engage with the teacher or other students. Students were also not as diligent about homework completion as it seemed they may have previously been. Teri displayed rare vulnerability in a reflective journal entry:

> My own motivation is at an all-time low, as I deal with depression and anxiety made
>
> worse by COVID, lockdowns, and worrying about my health and the health of my
>
> husband, my kids, and my parents. How can I expect my students to be motivated to do
>
> school work when I can't even motivate myself?

Hannah relayed her frustration when she stated, "I have students who I'm just trying to get to [score] basic [on the state standardized tests]. And I can't just tell them to do it and expect them to do it. And they can't do it on their own anyway. They won't even try."

 Often, a child's lack of motivation, effort, or engagement was attributed to forces external to the classroom, over which the teacher had little or no control. At various times, Hannah, Helen, and Cathy indicated that students' suboptimal academic performance was a direct result of home conditions. Rightly, Cathy identified material deprivation as having an impact in the classroom: "If we have kids that we know are coming to us, without parents at home, without food, without, um, warm clothes, um, all of these things can be barriers to learning." Faced with the challenge of identifying which students faced such barriers, Helen remarked, "the idea is you

get rid of the system that's creating the differences, rather than addressing the individual

differences. It shouldn't matter which kids are low SES [socio-economic status]. If we take away

all the barriers, it shouldn't matter that we can identify them or not."   The co-researchers were

stymied, however, in how we might affect such change within our own classrooms, thus

perpetuating the lack of agency and subsequent transference of responsibility for failure to

students and their families.

　　　Kids Don't Know How to Behave.   More than once, participants indicated that behavior

was an issue in school classrooms, hallways, and the cafeteria. When speaking about students

behaving inappropriately within these areas external to the teachers' own classrooms, the reason

was often credited to students disobeying rules and flaunting protocols because they were trying

to "make trouble," as Helen put it. Interestingly, when the participants spoke about students

behaving inappropriately in their own classrooms, they spoke about how they--the teachers--had

worked with the student or group of students to mitigate the classroom conditions that might

have been contributing to the behavior. Hannah recounted that one of her students, Makayla[3],

never

> came to class prepared, which has always been one of my number one rules. She just
>
> couldn't seem to bring her book and pencil with her. I used to fight that battle. Now, I
>
> just said, how about you take this book home with you and leave it there. I'll put this one
>
> in the room and you use it while you're here. And here's a pencil. Leave it here--don't
>
> take it with you--and you'll have it every day.

---

[3] For anonymity and to make comments more readable, pseudonyms have been assigned to all
students referenced in this paper.

Although they were frustrated by students' behavior, teachers did feel that they could mitigate

the effects and remove some of the structural obstacles that prevented students from being able to

engage in learning. The teacher agency that was almost universally lacking with regard to

motivation was not as elusive when the issues were more a result of student behavior in teachers'

classrooms.

Growth Views of Students

Interestingly, teachers used deficit language to describe children only when describing

groups of students or contexts external but connected to the student (home, culture, etc.). When

discussing individual students, teachers tended to use language that revealed a growth-oriented

mindset, a phenomenon previously documented by Boucher and Helfenbein (2015), McKay and

Devlin (2016), and Weiner (2006). This theme is supported by data produced from all five

participants (see Table 4).

Table 4.

Theme 2 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
Growth Views of Students	Put a face on a kid	X		X	X	X
	They can do good things	X	X			X

Synthesis as Narrative. When I can **put a face on a kid**, I see him or her or them as a

person. I see their behavior, their actions, their academic performance, and all aspects of them

within the context of who they are. They may have labels, but I don't think of them that way. I

think of them as their name and their face. In that moment, I know that they want to do good

things and **they can do good things**. Regardless of what they bring into my classroom. Even

when they "break the rules."

  Put a Face on a Kid. Inevitably, when we began speaking of students, conversation

would turn to an individual student or small group of students. Although we purposely did not

use student names, the small school community in which we work meant that most of the

students were known to all of us. Hallway behavior observed by one was almost always

observed by everyone, so in almost all circumstances, everyone had a personal knowledge and

investment in the individuals discussed and could call to mind the face and name that

accompanied the behavior.

  Teri described her ways of handling Isaac, a particular Black student. Often, teachers

struggle with meeting this child's needs, resulting in the child acting out during class, as well as

subsequent discipline referrals and confrontations.

> I have Lilah, who everyone else has a hard time with, and my thing is that she needs to
>
> leave class twice a class. I don't know if you want to call it mental health. I don't know
>
> if you want to call it self-management emotional support. You call it whatever you want.
>
> That girl cannot sit for 80 minutes. She needs to leave. So she does. And we make it
>
> work because that allows her to focus when she comes back. We do what kids need us to
>
> do, whether it's something that I would need or not.

Not all growth-oriented discourse was in reference to specific students. When describing

our journeys from the beginning of our careers to their current context, each of us noted a

marked increase in our own flexibility and willingness to change our own expectations, rules,

procedures, and behavior so that individual and groups of students could experience greater

levels of success in our classrooms. I recounted my own experience with releasing controls in

my classroom:

> When I was a beginning teacher, I was pretty rigid. I like structure. I thrive in structure.
> I could usually get kids to where they needed to be academically because I worked really
> hard to develop good, productive relationships with them. Even though I was pretty
> easy-going, they still had to conform to my structures. Then, probably ten years into my
> career, I had Erick--that kid, the one my structures just didn't work for. But I did have a
> good relationship with him. So, we sat down--me, him, his mom--and we came up with a
> plan that would make my classroom work better for him. That's when I realized I had
> been making it all about me. It wasn't. It should never have been. It has to be about
> him.

Similarly, all co-researchers identified moments in our teaching careers at which work with a

particular student or group of students allowed us to humanize our expectations, classrooms, and

instruction because we had relationships with students. Knowing them personally allowed us to

view them as individuals with unique sets of strengths, talents, and needs, as opposed to the

group stereotypes that often perpetuate deficit views.

They Can Do Good Things. All five participants expressed that, coincident with a shift

from thinking of students as prototyped groups from a deficit stance to seeing our kids as

individuals in whom we could be personally invested, we realized the talent, potential, and value

that those students brought to our classrooms and curricula. Similarly, Comber and Kamler

(2005) called on educators to "engineer pedagogy redesigns" that allow students to connect with

their teacher, their content, and their classrooms in novel ways.

In one of our PLC meetings, a small portion of the dialogue centered on the stress that each of us and our students feel on a daily basis. Hannah shared how she had gotten frustrated with her technology not working correctly during class that day and spoke with the kids about how she

> has a lot of stress and anxiety with my technology not working. And I said, cause imagine when you're trying to do something and it goes wrong. You're not usually on camera where everyone's watching. And I'm like, so when I say, oh, I meant to open this video and it's not working. That's not just happening to me by myself. It's happening in front of all 30 of you and your parents. And I feel stupid and I feel embarrassed and I just want to crawl under my desk cause I feel humiliated. And a whole lot of kids were like, you feel that way? I'm like, yes, because everyone's watching. And sometimes administrators come into my classes and something like I'm on display for everyone to see me look stupid. It's horrible. And they're like, we feel that way too. And I'm like, so what I'm going to do right now is I'm going to take a minute, just a quiet minute. And then I'm going to try again. And if it doesn't work, I'll have to think of something else. Like that's, that's okay for the kids to know. Cause they were shocked. And then Mya said, "Mrs. _____, it's ok. Thank you for telling us. I kind of always feel like you think I'm stupid for not knowing algebra." And I told her, "You DO know algebra. You can do good things." Then, I said to all of the class, "All of you do good things."

Following this exchange, we engaged with a reflective journal prompt which asked us to reflect and write about what gave us the most joy in our professional lives. In her response, Cathy followed up about Jamal, of whom she had previously spoken as a potential troublemaker. After

that conversation, she had noticed that Jamal had taken under his wing several other boys who did not seem to have many friends or anyone to sit with during study hall. She recounted her interaction with him earlier in the week:

> I watched Jamal look for them and he befriended all of them. And all of a sudden they all have friend groups. And I didn't realize that they didn't have a friend. And he's a great leader. Clearly he is. It's a skill. Seeing that skill and being able to say to that student, "Dude, you're a great leader. You've got to funnel that energy into something awesome" is what gives me the most joy in my classroom.

By focusing on and verbalizing the assets that students bring to the classroom, teachers reinforced and perpetuated the growth views grounded in replacing stereotyped group characteristics with recognition of their students as individuals with unique talents, strengths, and needs.

Identity Self-Awareness

Each of the participants questioned what we had known or assumed about our own identities. We all described a complete lack of awareness and ignorance of our whiteness, which we attributed both to our in-home education from our parents as well as a product of our whiteness and the privilege conferred upon us by our membership within that dominant group. All participants expressed the horizons that clustered to form this theme (see Table 5).

Table 5.

Theme 3 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
Identity Self-Awareness	Growing up educated, white, middle-class	X	X	X	X	X
	Blind and blissfully ignorant	X	X	X	X	X
	Beginning to conceptualize		X	X	X	
	My privilege makes me complicit	X	X	X	X	X

Synthesis as Narrative. Growing up as a part of a family unit in the Judeo-Christian tradition, with **educated, middle-class, white** parents, and schooled within the US public educational institution, my experience was prototypical of the "normative" American experience. As I moved into adulthood and into the teaching profession, my White, middle-class values and lifestyle were implicitly and explicitly validated and reinforced by societal structures, including the ones in which I placed myself educationally and vocationally. I was comfortable. I was accepted. Life has not always been easy; I have faced challenges, but everyone does. I was **blind and blissfully ignorant** of anything and anyone different from me. When I think about people--especially my students--who are different from me, I know intellectually that their experiences have to be different than mine; but I am just now **beginning to conceptualize** what must be fundamentally different experiences than I can fathom in my everyday life. Through conversations that are becoming much more common since the George Floyd murder and Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, I am evermore aware that **my privilege makes me complicit** in a racist system built on white supremacy.

Growing up educated, white, middle-class. All five participants are white, middle-class female educators. All five come from what would be considered a "nuclear" middle class family headed by married parents, with at least one parent employed and college-educated. We agreed that our in-home experiences were pretty comparable, despite the fact that we grew up in three different states, with different sized families, and living in communities of different sizes and diverse ethnic compositions. Teri accurately captured the essence of our collective experience when she stated,

> There was never anything negative about diversity, at least not from my parents or my immediate circle of people... Like, I never heard any negative racist, um, white supremicist... I never heard anything like that. Even though I wasn't exposed to diversity. I didn't have any negative feelings about it either. And, um, socioeconomically, I did not know I was poor, until I went to college. My cultural shock was not racial. It was economic. That's an interesting answer. I never thought of that before.

Our common backgrounds and production of those origins within our classrooms provides evidence that the experiences of the majority of public school educators is likely incongruent with an ever-growing segment of our student population (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 2020; Will, 2020).

Blind and Blissfully Ignorant. Coming from a home that espoused white, middle class values and culture, and then moving through and into the very white, middle class structures of schooling meant that the whiteness that we were born with and grew into went with us as we left our parents' homes and established ourselves as educators. In one of our PLC meetings, I

commented about the fact that the institution of education and structures of schooling had

worked well for the white, middle class women that we are:

> because I'm a middle-class white girl and school worked well for me, uh, obviously it
>
> worked well for me. I'm continuing to stay in it, even when I have a choice to go
>
> somewhere else. Um, that doesn't mean that educational inequities don't have an impact.
>
> It just means that I was able to either ignore them or work around them or rise above
>
> them or not be affected by them as much as the people sitting next to me because of my
>
> positionality.

Helen commented that she

> was just blissfully unaware and ignorant of there being greater kind of issues with regard
>
> to racism and discrimination. I didn't feel that way. I didn't think other people felt that
>
> way. And I lived in this happy bubble and isn't that so nice. Right. And it wasn't an issue
>
> because it wasn't an issue.

Hannah indicated that her ignorance was and may continue to be willful. When speaking of

changes that she has seen in education--specifically the student demographic--during her 22-year

tenure, she reflected, "Perhaps there's been … an influx of more, um, well-to-do families, … but

I don't see that. … I know that actually exists, but … I see them as kids. I don't always see that

piece or choose to see that piece."

Because societal institutions so effectively and subconsciously validate and reinforce

white middle class values, educators tend to see any deviation from typical white behavior as

negative and needful of correction. Helen frequently discussed her struggles with Aaliyah, a

recent student immigrant from Yemen, who was rarely on time for synchronous class meetings

via Zoom. While she recognized that "time is very fluid in her culture," she simultaneously

maintained that Aaliyah's lack of "assimilation" was problematic and would be "for the rest of

her life here."

Our own ignorance of and complicity with systemic racism was difficult to acknowledge

and shocking to confront because our daily experiences as children and adults perpetuate the

very myths that keep us blissfully unaware.

Beginning to Conceptualize. None of the five participants were able to pinpoint a

moment where the awareness of their positionality and the privilege conferred upon them arose,

but all of us were able to recognize that such a transformation had occurred and continued to do

so. Since all of us were at or just past the midpoint of our tenures (our experience ranged from

12 to 22 years in the profession), there was a wealth of experience and history to consider. Helen

summed it up eloquently when she was speaking about the changes that she has noticed in

herself since she became a teacher in 2003.

> I remember speaking to my earlier sets of students, so going back about eight years, and I
>
> remember being very open and frank with them, our issues of race, something that you
>
> see here in this school district. And we had really in-depth conversations about it and
>
> their response at that time was pretty much now that the issues that we face are, um,
>
> economic, um, gender and sexuality, but race didn't seem to be a thing. Although, as we
>
> talked, the kids got a little bit more comfortable, um, they did start to open up and say
>
> that a lot of the issues they saw with race were in the way kids told jokes, that you would
>
> hear jokes in the hallway, jokes on the bus, where the punchline was an inappropriate

racial kind of slur and how they found that to be offensive. Um, and so I think as I grew, um, my awareness has just changed.

Likewise, over the course of our PLC meetings, all research participants frequently expressed the same "push and pull" documented by Boucher and Helfenbein (2015) that results from daily immersion within racist institutions and emerging recognition of implicit power dynamics.

My Privilege Makes Me Complicit. All participants at various times referenced the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmed Arbury as well as the Black Lives Matter Movement, and other recent events on the national and world stage that provoked critical conservation around race and class inequities. It was immensely surprising to me, then, that all four of the other participants were shocked when, in a PLC meeting, I asked the question, "So does my positionality and the resulting privilege conferred upon me make me a racist and white supremacist?" The faces of my co-researchers ranged from blank stares to mouths gaping in shock. When I reflected on my own thoughts and feelings after the meeting, I recorded,

> I know and believe that the answer to my question is yes. And until we can honestly confront the reality of that situation, we are condemned to remain complicit in this racist system. Based on the reactions of my colleagues, I fear that I will not see any substantive change in my lifetime.

During the next meeting, after some time to process the question and its implications, the other four participants discussed the question and articulated responses. Teri argued that awareness of privilege is the starting point, and to arrive at awareness

takes asking a question like you asked, Tracy, and the look of horror on my face. Right.

Because clearly everybody's first--well, maybe not everybody's--but I would hope most

people's first reaction would be no, of course I'm not a white supremacist. I'm not racist.

No, no, no, no, no. But that defensiveness is actually the barrier, right?

At that point, all five of us engaged an earnest, vulnerable conversation about how overcoming

that barrier may be the difference: Because of our whiteness, we may not be able to be

non-racist, but we can strive to be anti-racist.

Awareness of Students' Identities

With the increased awareness of teacher identity came also a recognition that our

students--especially those from outgroup populations--experience schooling differently than we

did and do. This theme was expressed by four of the five participants, and three of them engaged

the topic at least four times over the course of the two-month data collection period, indicating

that the experience provoked this response in a majority of the participants (Table 6).

Table 6.

Theme 4 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
Awareness of Students' Identities	My experience is not their experience	X	X		X	X
	Valid and valuable, though different from mine	X	X		X	X

Synthesis as Narrative. I am a teacher because I am inspired by kids. I love to see kids

learning. Seeing those lightbulb, "aha!" moments gives me the energy to get through today and

come back for more tomorrow. But sometimes, I do not really SEE my students, especially those

who do not share my white, middle class upbringing and lifestyle. I have to remind myself that

my experience is not their experience. They have their own cultures, their own traditions, their

own families, their own homes, their own traumas, and their own joys; and each of those is **valid**

and valuable, though different from mine.

      My Experience is Not Their Experience. One of our reflective journal prompts

referenced Frankenburg's (1993) findings that white women tend to see themselves as

"cultureless." In that writing and in the PLC meeting dialogue that followed, all participants

revealed the white tendency to see themselves as cultureless and, therefore, to assume that all

persons had the same white experience that we did. As she spoke about the experiences that she

had growing up in a predominantly white community, Hannah shared

> One of my best friends, Gianna, in high school was Black, and we would go out every
>
> weekend or so. I don't think she had a really different experience than I did. We did
>
> pretty much the same things. We would, you know, drive to a concert or something. We
>
> listened to the same music, wore the same clothes, had the same friends, there really
>
> wasn't any difference. Although…she used to ask me if I would pump gas when we
>
> would stop to fill up the car on like a Friday night or something. I never really thought
>
> about it and she never told me why. Hm… I wonder if that was because it was
>
> different… I guess I need to think about that some more.

Similarly, Teri recounted her experience working in a school with a majority Black population at

the beginning of her teaching career:

When kids told me that when we go in stores, people watch us. Cause they think we're

going to steal. And my reply was that's probably just because you're teenagers, I'm sure

they don't think that. And then they say, yeah, people are afraid of me because of the way,

you know, I'm Black and I wear baggy pants and blah, blah, blah. And people are afraid

of me. They walk to the other side of the street. I said, I'm sure that doesn't happen.

Although we would have all recognized that we continue to experience school differently than

many of our students do, we also demonstrated that we placed the reasons for those differences

firmly with the responsibility and control of the students, rather than recognizing the institutional

structures that form those experiences regardless of student intention or behavior.

   Valid and Valuable, though Different from Mine.   Acknowledgement of the forces that

shape experiences differently depending on race and class was the first step in recognizing not

just that reality, but the value inherent within and from those rich narratives. Needful and

arduous, this process produced a shared cognitive and emotional struggle. Hannah reported:

Recognizing that others' experience is different is a long way from appreciating how that

experience makes us truly different from one another. So you look at, uh, clothing and

the boys with the pants down here that people see that as disrespectful, that's

disrespectful. Is it disrespectful? I got to say, I don't personally love it."

Continuing to grapple with this issue, Cathy related an incident in which Juan, a Latino student,

would not refer to her using the prefix Doctor, but insisted on calling her "miss." To Cathy, the

refusal to call her by the name she asked to be called was initially perceived as a sign of

disrespect. Then I realized it was a cultural thing. He was being very respectful of me. I

just had to learn to accept his respect in the way he demonstrated it instead of demanding

that he give it in the way I wanted.

In addition to teaching middle school students, Teri also teaches evening and online classes at a

local community college. Speaking of that experience at a PLC meeting, she related,

To my young adult students, children are so valued and I don't mean that we don't value

them, but having children doesn't give me value. It gives me intrinsic value, but in their

culture, they brag, "I'm only 22 and I have four children already. And I'm going to try to

have two more, you know." Some of these kids are in their mid-twenties and have four

and five children already. And it's such a blessing, but they're on welfare, but it's such a

blessing. And that's a cultural thing because all the children are lovely. I would not

consider it a blessing if I couldn't afford the children that I had. And to me, not being able

to afford it, that means more than anything. It means educating and, you know, social

things and opportunity.

Hannah responded,

But in other countries, they provide healthcare, they provide paid maternity leaves. They

provide things like diapers or contraceptives, the amount of things, culturally in other

countries that are provided for people. It's our Americanness that we think that you have

to provide that all for yourself. Like, cause I agree with you--valid--as someone who

wanted more children, but couldn't have them. I have found myself in the last few years

getting very emotional when I hear of children that are being mistreated. When I'm

someone who wants a bigger family, couldn't have it. And I see that happen and I get

very personal about it. And um, so I, I totally get what you're saying. Um, but yeah, It's

definitely an American thing. A white American thing.

As we wrestled with our own biases and complicity in a racist system, PLC participants

continued to feel the pervasiveness of "whiteness" even as we tried to navigate our way to more

democratic enactments within our professional and personal lives. The push and pull between

what we "knew" from our life experience and that with which we were coming to terms within

this space and time was difficult to reconcile and often resulted in more questions than answers.

Impact on Classroom Practice

The manifestation of increased awareness of identity--of both teacher and students--may

have been accelerated and enhanced because the PLC under investigation met during the very

transformative time of COVID. Teachers had to adjust their pedagogies and classroom practices

to meet demands previously unconceived within K-12 classrooms (Fisher & Frey, 2020; Ge et

al., 2021; Zalaznick, 2021). For the teachers in the study, turning to more student-centered

teaching methods, as well as incorporating social-emotional learning and relationship-building

exercises into daily instruction were frequently reported and observed. Teachers also became

more conscious of the impact of our choices from our positions of power on their students. This

theme was supported by data created by each of the five participants (see Table 7).

Table 7.

Theme 5 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
Impact on Classroom Practice	Incremental change for lasting effect	X	X	X	X	X

Synthesis as Narrative. The impact of my increased awareness that the schooling that

worked for me as a product of a white, middle class family is not the same formula for success

for the majority of my students is most acutely seen and felt in my classroom. Combined with

the difficulties of a COVID shutdown, remote instruction, and at least a temporary redefinition of

what is most important in public education, I am increasingly led to alter what I present as value

to my students, as well as what I hold most dear for my teaching self. Although my classroom

and instruction must continue to conform to some existing institutional structures, I have

implemented **incremental change for** potential **lasting effect**.

Incremental Change for Lasting Effect. All five participants recounted changes to their

instructional practice as a direct result of the awareness of their own and their students' diverse

backgrounds. Classroom observation in co-researchers' classrooms provided concrete evidence

that participants made changes (1) from teacher- to student-centered approaches to presentation

of material, (2) actual content presented to center on more culturally relevant materials, and (3)

inclusion of SEL activities that gave all students voice in the classroom space. When describing

her shift from calling students out in front of classmates to private conferences around sensitive

information sharing, Teri recounted,

> I'm aware now that I don't want to out anyone and I have to be very sensitive and ask
>
> them privately, are you comfortable sharing that? And some are, but it's a very different,
>
> a huge shift there lately in my teaching.

Likewise, Hannah related a deeper consciousness of implications of how and what she engages

with her students in the classroom:

I do an attendance question, … and today I was trying to frame it. So it was more like,

what do you like to do in the summer? But it could be where do you like to go? Or where

would you like to go? And it occurred to me in the midst of the first class, I was like, this

is a socioec issue. I didn't think of it in terms of race, as much as socioeconomics in terms

of maybe it's none of my business. Um, I don't know, but you know, that's hard on kids. I

came from a family that had less, rather than more, and I should have known better.

Helen remarked,

Not only do we need to address differences in our students based on their race and gender

and sexuality, but their learning differences too. And we must accommodate kids how

they learn. And if you've got a kid that you need to cajole in certain ways, you gotta

figure out what makes them tick. And if that means you have to change how you deliver

instruction, it means you have to change how you deliver instruction.

In addition, all co-researchers were observed utilizing more learner-centered instructional

strategies--specifically, project-based (Teri) and flipped classroom (Hannah, Cathy, and Helen)

techniques--which they reported had not been part of their instructional repertoire prior to the

2020-21 school year.

Teacher Roles

As the participants navigated monitoring hallways and lunch duty, lesson planning,

delivering instruction, applying discipline, and engaging the other myriad duties of classroom

teacher, we all found ourselves at different times taking on different roles, especially as we

considered the impact of our experience on our perceived responsibility. All participants

produced data that supported this theme (see Table 8).

Table 8.

Theme 6 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
Teacher Roles	Salesman	X	X	X	X	X
	Enforcer	X		X	X	X
	Politician	X			X	X
	Hero	X	X	X		

Synthesis as Narrative. I have always worn many professional hats. Some years I would have to put some that I wore last year on the rack and pull others, dusty from the closet, to brush off for this year. Other times, I visited the department store because my duties required a hat that I had not yet acquired. This year? I find myself trying on hats that, even if I have worn them before, feel different somehow. Sometimes, I find that headgear that previously seemed pretty comfortable is actually rather ill-fitting. Instead of a teacher, I often feel like a **salesman**, trying to present things in the most attractive way so that my clients will perceive the need--academic, social, emotional, behavioral--that I see. Other times, beauty is meaningless because true need is irrelevant; students are here to do the work of school, and I am just the unfortunate **enforcer** to ensure that end. But that is my least favorite role to play and no one can always just brute-force his way through the day. Colleagues, administrators, parents, and my savvier students require a bit more finesse. For those constituents, I don my most dapper chapeau, put on my glad-hands, and become the consummate **politician**. There are many days, though, when I need a cape instead of a hat because some kids just need a **hero**.

Salesman. Especially in light of the instructional difficulties that pandemic teaching seemed to magnify including remote learning, levels of technology use heretofore unimagined, and a lack of motivation on the part of students and teachers, Teri, Helen, and Cathy agreed with Hannah when she expressed the feeling that she had to "sell my product" everyday to her students. Making academic content attractive and trying to "get them to buy what I'm selling" was sometimes a fun, rewarding exercise. She recounted,

> Yesterday I was throwing a ball in my classroom… So I was, I was daring these kids to try to shoot for the recycling bin [when they got a correct answer]. And I got one kid to get up and play with me. And I was so happy. I was just so happy. Cause we could play.

Often, however, it was laborious and futile. In a journal entry, Cathy commented, "I feel like I'm showing up. I'm making an effort. I'm trying to make everything pretty and tie it all up with a bow. They, however, don't care. They don't even look. 'Nope. I'd rather be on my phone.'"

The job of selling a curriculum or even the idea of school was one that was acutely felt and rarely appreciated by all of us. As we met consumer resistance, perceptions of a lack of motivation on the part of the student and a lack of agency on the part of the teacher worked against efforts to view students through a growth lens.

Enforcer. Similarly, teachers often felt that their primary role was to enforce compliance toward school norms. Helen lamented the times when she was unable to "let them [students] think and pursue and question and fail." Instead,

> all I did was watch kids take a CDT [benchmark assessment] today. That's all I did all day was watch them take the test cause they're not done. … And if you just leave them on their own, they won't do it. So I have to sit here and make sure they do it. That's all I did

today. So I became the enforcer. But usually I'm not, I make myself not the enforcer

because then they'll never come to me. They'll never want to be here. This won't be a

safe space.

During this PLC dialogue, Cathy and Teri stressed the importance of creating safe spaces but

found their roles--enforcing everything from appropriate hallway behavior to proper mask

wearing--to be counterproductive toward the goal of creating learning spaces where students felt

prepared and able to "think and pursue and question and fail." Indeed, all teachers expressed a

desire to create positive learning experiences for students, but felt stymied in those efforts by

varying levels of administrative demands, student motivation, and teacher agency.

Politician. The 2020-21 school year occurred within a national context charged on issues

ranging from systemic racism to mask mandates to climate change. Cathy was the first to give

voice to her concerns regarding her trepidation about opening up about the sensitive subjects we

explored and about how she could address colleagues in whose actions she saw inequities

enacted.

I just, um, I was really even cautious in our group [PLC]. I've been struggling with

watching that happen [other teachers disciplining a group of Latinx students for

"disrespectful" behavior] for the past month and it took me three sessions to bring it up in

our group cuz I was concerned I would be … how do you say I see another employee that

I can tell not on purpose and if I asked them, they would absolutely say I'm not being that

way. I'm not being racist. I'm not targeting, per se, but watching the process and working

with that person for 12 years and seeing it happening again and again with the same

group of teachers, but understanding these particular teachers, …, understanding that they

have a lot of kids, they see a lot of kids that they have this heightened sense of feeling in

control because they're in a different [environment], they don't form relationships like I

do because they don't see kids for as long as I do. So understanding their process of

management is different than mine, but still seeing like a racist element to it. How do you

even address that?

This archival data was from the transcript of a PLC meeting that took place in the early fall of

2020. After this conversation, the change in atmosphere within the group was palpable. All five

participants began to exhibit more vulnerability and a willingness to admit that we did not know

what the right answers were to many of the questions that we posed. Navigating the murky

waters led Teri to declare in a journal entry, "I feel like a true politician. I know that things are

broken. I know that I need to do something about it. But I feel like I'm just not going to have

the votes to push it through." Within our PLC, participants felt safe to explore newfound

territory, celebrating breakthroughs and learning from our frequent missteps. Outside that space,

however, we recognized landmines within our classrooms, school buildings, and personal lives

that made it necessary to act the part of the strategic politician.

 Hero. Sometimes, participants felt as if they did make a difference for that one kid or

group of students. Helen spoke about a rare discipline incident that had occurred in her

classroom which escalated to warrant a phone call home.

 So I called Elijah's mother and the rest of the team says, good luck with his mom. She

 won't listen to you. Her son … never does anything wrong. So I called her and I started

 the conversation with, "Hey, I just want to talk to you about your son. Um, is everything

 okay? I've been noticing some changes. And I just want to know if anything's, if anything

worrisome is going on" and I relayed, but I started with, you know, how he's been a great

kid all year. I started with all the positive and you know, I just noticed these changes and

he was just being silly and using the phone, I could tell something was wrong, you know?

So she was completely cooperative with me. She's like, yeah, he's this way at home. ….

And the whole story comes out. So disrespect, it's kind of the age group where these little

kids [6th grade students], I think, start finding that voice for the first time and they don't

necessarily know how to use it. That's part of our job.

Our desire to remove barriers for student learning was one of which we spoke frequently. At a

PLC meeting, Helen mentioned a blog that she read that warns against white saviorism in

education (Ludlow, 2021). We discussed how and when we participated in this trope as well as

how to avoid it. Ultimately, we decided that we must "ask ourselves what systems of oppression

have created the inequities we are seeing, and invest in a future without them," as Ludlow

advises in order to continue to be a hero to our students without simultaneously continuing to

oppress them and their families (para. 17).

What Now?

A prevailing question that we were never able to answer through months of PLC

meetings, hours of dialogue, and countless moments of reflection was "What do we do then?"

This question kept coming up as we identified issues within the educational institution and our

own classroom walls and related our own struggles to grapple with and meet them. This theme

emerged from the shared experience of all five participants (see Table 9).

Table 9.

Theme 7 with Invariant Constituents by Participant

Theme	Invariant Constituent	Participant				
		Cathy	Hannah	Helen	Teri	Tracy
What Now?	I can never NOT know	X	X		X	X
	Feelings of helplessness	X	X	X	X	X
	Strive to be antiracist		X	X	X	X

Synthesis as Narrative. Marginalized youth need role models who look, sound, and have experiences like them. They need teachers who can speak their language--literally and figuratively. Unfortunately, that experience is the one thing that my privilege will not afford me. I can never be that Black, Latinx teacher who grew up hungry and in poverty. In short, **I can never NOT know** the privilege that my White skin and middle class lifestyle confer upon me. What, then, shall I do? When the **feelings of helplessness** overwhelm and paralyze me, what then? Because of my privilege, I may not ever be able to escape my racism, but I can **strive to be antiracist**. I cannot unlearn what I now know. I cannot return to my state of blissful ignorance. Awareness is a burden, and it is one I choose to bear.

I can never NOT Know. At our final PLC meeting, all participants shared that, through this experience, we had had our eyes opened to things about ourselves, our students, and our profession to which we had previously been blind. Importantly, we recognized that the very act of knowing is one that cannot be undone.

"I know I won't do this right every time, but the guilt I feel when I mess it up will keep me trying to be better," wrote Cathy in a reflective journal entry toward the end of the data collection period. In an interview that occurred not long after she wrote this, I asked her to talk

more about "the guilt" that she referenced. She responded, "It's not really guilt, I guess. Just

that awareness that we keep talking about. I'm now aware. I can't ever be *un*aware [emphasis

added by speaker] again." She was reflecting on the uncertainty she experiences when

confronting her own potential discriminatory behavior:

> Spencer has a personality that he's, you know, they're all bumping fists and you know,
>
> we're trying to get them not to shake hands, you know? And in the class, in the hallway,
>
> in my immediate reaction, in the past, I would have realized …, oh, they're trouble. Well,
>
> there's a bunch of white boys who are doing the same thing down the hallway and I'm not
>
> looking at them the same way. You know, high-fiving, jumping up--same behaviors--but I
>
> was reacting differently. I was perceiving a threat and discipline issues. Now,
>
> unfortunately, that boy has done some things to push some things, … he does the same
>
> thing that some of our white students who are doing the same thing and … I get CC'd on
>
> every email and I'm going, so-and-so just walked down the hallway and did the same
>
> darn thing, you know, but then I've also seen all these boys and in the past I would have
>
> been yelling at them. Not even recognizing that they found a friend group and I see that
>
> they are smiling and happy and fist bumping and stuff. And now I'm like, why is it my
>
> feeling to break that up or to put negativity on it right away? And I've been struggling
>
> with that the last few weeks, because I've been looking at it a lot differently than I
>
> probably would a year ago, because we've been talking about that, about looking at things
>
> [in] a different way. I don't know if I'm right. I don't know if I have the right view on that
>
> or not.

Hannah expressed a similar sentiment when she stated, "You see a lot of that [discrimination] and it [talking in the PLC with colleagues] opens your eyes to a lot of that. I don't know that much about it. I just know that, um, once you've lifted the veil, you can't unsee it."

Although we will continue to grapple with the practical implications of and our responsibility to our new knowledge, we cannot continue to claim ignorance or deny ownership of that which we now understand.

Feelings of Helplessness.   Seeing and doing are two different things, however. At multiple points before, during and after the data collection period, all five participants expressed an intense desire to affect change within our local and larger educational contexts. The problem arose when we tried to articulate what action steps might be necessary. Most of the identified solution steps were certainly beyond the walls of our individual classrooms and likely well beyond our collective abilities. In an interview with Helen, I observed,

> I have noticed we are all very reluctant to speak about potential remedies outside the
>
> locus of our own very limited control. Um, when, when we extend into other people's
>
> classrooms, especially those who actually work with us, not, not a ubiquitous or you
>
> know, hypothetical system, but the one in which we actually find ourselves, we're very
>
> hesitant to speak, um, in any way, shape or form, not positive, not negative, not at all, um,
>
> about what our students experience in other people's classrooms.

In point of fact, Helen pointed out that, other than crafting curricula and instructional materials that did not "whitewash" our classrooms, one of the only large-scale remedies that we proposed was a change in hiring practices to diversify our faculty and staff to be more reflective of our changing student demographics. In the absence of this change--which depends on both

vacancies within existing classrooms as well as a pool of qualified applicants who wish to fill

those positions--we had not been particularly forthcoming with any remedies, either outside or

within our classrooms, beyond those strategies and behaviors in which we had already begun to

engage. As I reflected later in a journal entry, I wondered if we weaponize this helplessness to

absolve ourselves of the responsibility to affect change: "If I actually CANNOT [emphasis in the

original] do it, then no one can hold me accountable when it does not happen".

>   ***Strive to be Anti-Racist.*** Our responsibility demands, however, that we strive toward

solutions that do not simply lower barriers for the individual students who we happen to meet in

our classrooms, but that we work to reshape the system in which we have power so that barriers

are removed entirely.

>   During one of our first PLC meetings in the fall of 2020, we spoke about the difference

between not being racist and being anti-racist. Helen later reflected, "Before that conversation I

would have said that I was proud that no one would ever have cause to accuse me of being racist.

I'm just not. But is that enough?" Teri recounted a foray into anti-racist behavior when

confronted with a colleague's racist comments:

>> I … [told] a colleague, "I hope you don't say that in front of the kids. Cause that is
>>
>> absolutely racist." And I got a letter of apology. … Like a note, an email of apology that
>>
>> she did not think of what she was saying as being racist, but she was embarrassed that I
>>
>> thought that of her. I don't know if that changed her. I mean, you know, can't hurt … at
>>
>> least maybe you might be aware of how other people perceive it. You can disagree, but at
>>
>> least be aware that people perceive it that way.

Becoming anti-racist starts with dismantling the color-blindness that perpetuates the myth of

white superiority (Black, 2021; Crowley, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Singleton, 2015). During our

first interview (Week 2 of the data collection period), Hannah stated unequivocally that she tried

and was mostly successful at not seeing color when she viewed her students. At our final PLC

meeting (Week 8), she spoke about how her perceptions and beliefs had changed since the

beginning of our work together:

> I don't know that anybody is truly color blind. I think people just like to think they are. I
>
> know I did. But, I, I just, maybe I'm wrong. That's just how--I just don't know that that's
>
> a possibility. … I mean, you have to see it to control how you behave around it. At least
>
> that's how I see it now. I don't think, I mean, in making a connection with another human,
>
> it's a part of how you do that and to teach a child, you have to make that connection first.

As I reflected on the totality of my experience within this PLC, I wrote, "Our privilege is a

Sword of Damocles. But, unlike Damocles, we can't just let it hang over us; we have to wield

it."

Bauer (2021) urged white educators to take steps toward "problematizing the normative

nature of whiteness rather than problematizing the [BIPOC] communities they seek to serve" (p.

656). Participation in this PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse provided a first such

movement toward becoming the anti-racist educators scholars agree are necessary to meet our

students' needs (Black, 2021; Crowley, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Singleton, 2015).

Applying Themes to Research Questions

By applying Moustakas's transcendental phenomenal analysis situated within an heuristic inquiry framework, I not only clustered the horizons that typified the experience within the phenomenon into themes, but I also then applied those themes to the inquiry at hand. Specifically, the data and subsequent findings address the research questions:

1) How does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher perception of students' identities at the intersection of race, class, and perceived ability?

2) How does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher pedagogical identity?

In particular, the themes *Awareness of Students' Identities, Identity Self-Awareness, Deficit Views of Students, Growth Views of Students, Teacher Roles,* and *What Now?* speak to the impact of participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse on teacher perceptions of students' identities at the intersection of class, race, and perceived ability (RQ1). Meanwhile, all seven identified themes inform the realized impact of participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse on teacher pedagogical identity (RQ2) (see Table 10). Evidence--in the form of interview transcripts; PLC meeting artifacts, transcripts, and memos; reflective journal entries; and classroom observation transcripts, tally sheets, and memos--indicates that all five teachers underwent changes in both their perceptions of students' identities (RQ1) and their own pedagogical identities (RQ2) as a result of their participation in the PLC under investigation.

Table 10.

Themes aligned to Research Question by Number

RQ1	RQ2
Deficit Views of Student Non-Conformity	Deficit Views of Student Non-Conformity
Growth Views of Students	Growth Views of Students
Identity Self-Awareness	Identity Self-Awareness
Awareness of Students' Identities	Awareness of Students' Identities
Teacher Roles	Impact on Classroom Practice
What Now?	Teacher Roles
	What Now?

In the following sections, I will explicate these conclusions and provide connection between research findings, the theoretical basis for this study, and the body of existing literature augmented by this study.

RQ1: Teacher Perceptions of Students' Identities

The data present a promising picture of the impact of participation in a Professional Learning Community (PLC) focused on identity and deficit discourse on teachers' perceptions of their students at the intersection of class, race, and perceived ability. Specifically, research findings suggest that such participation results in White, middle-class teachers' increased awareness of privilege and power disparities between teachers and students as well as increased sensitivity to the mindsets that inform their discourse with and about students. According to Helen,

My awareness has changed. Hmmm. And as you know, the whole Black Lives Matter

movement has become, um, a major, um, presence in the news. Combined with this

experience, as we started hearing stories of the implicit biases that we have, the privilege

we have. And I look back now at the teacher that I was then, and I see--so clearly--now

what I may not have seen then, right?

Considering the participants' *Deficit* and *Growth Views of Students,* this study provides

evidence that removing labels from students and replacing them with names and faces leads

teachers to disengage from a typical deficit discourse (which is tied to and systemically

perpetuated by the use of labels) to think and speak of students from a growth mindset. Further,

participants were much more aware and respectful of the students' identities when considered as

individuals or small groups of students within the teacher's proximity. Grounded in social

identity theory, these findings are consistent with those of Varghese et al. (2005), who argued

that, with their ties to in- and out-group stereotypes, the use of labels to describe persons make it

difficult to separate individual children from the prototypical behaviors and characteristics

associated--often negatively--with the labels.

The teachers' changed perceptions and increased awareness of students' identities led to

an appreciation for their backgrounds, cultures, experiences, and perspectives. Understood

through a lens of standpoint theory, as the participants became more cognizant of their own

positionality and that of their students, they were able to engage critical reflection on their

positionalities, their conferred privilege, their classroom practice, and their perceptions of the

other members of their community--both within and beyond the classroom confines. These

reflections frequently prompted participants to consider their individual and collective next steps

(*What Now?)* as they grappled with the resulting disorienting dilemma. Through this transformative learning process, they began to identify strategies that enabled them to adopt their dominant standpoints within their classrooms, thereby allowing them to peek behind the veil and acknowledge the trappings of systemic oppression and their positioning within that system (Intemann, 2010; Williams & Melchiori, 2013). Sue et al. (2019) argued that only by becoming an antiracist ally and a traitor to their white, middle class standpoints can those from dominant social groups move from "a nonracist identity (interpersonal reconciliation with whiteness) to an antiracist identity (taking external actions against racism)" (p. 132). An antiracist identity is essential in order to prevent the tropes of sinking into "white guilt" or becoming a " white savior".

Crowley (2019) maintained that recognizing privilege, adoption of the dominant standpoint, and beginning to engage traitorous activities is "not an insignificant step, but it is only the beginning of a long process that will require constant vigilance" (p. 1480). Likewise, Sue et al. (2019) warned that allies' "do not view their work as a means to a measurable end but a constant dismantlement of the individual and institutional beliefs, practices, and policies that have impeded the social growth and wellbeing of persons of color" (p. 133). In a reflective journal entry, Cathy noted,

> I think now I realize that it's not enough to recognize how my students are different than me. I also realize that, while I have to work to make things better for them any way I can in my classroom, I also have to be brave and confront other people who don't have the same viewpoint. I have to work to change what makes things different instead of just always trying to make things more the same.

Among the participants, there were distinct moments like this when we owned our

Whiteness and made commitments to moving toward reducing our own complicity as a member

of the dominant group. The journey, however, was far from linear. Forward progress was

halting and often followed by moments of reverting to our previous privilege-laden practices. As

previously discussed, throughout the data collection period, there was a tendency among

participants to project themselves as "heroes," either aspirationally (identified horizon within

Teacher Roles theme) or practically (discussion of *Deficit Views of Students* theme) as they

worked to overcome barriers for students within their classrooms. As a participant and

researcher, one of my greatest struggles was and continues to be reconciling the "complexity of

personal congruence" noted by Chubbuck (2004) and exhibited among all participants as we

"demonstrated some disruption to Whiteness as well as some continued enactment of

Whiteness," despite our acknowledgement and stated commitment to dismantling oppression (p.

301). The evidence suggests that the participants under study were truly in the beginning stages

of this work, a limitation which I will discuss in greater detail in the next chapter.

RQ2: Teacher Pedagogical Identity

The participants' experiences provide useful information about the impact of

participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse on teachers' pedagogical

identities. Formed and reformed in a cyclical manner, pedagogical identities are fluid, flexible,

and immensely complex.

When Teri reflected on the transformation of her identity through our PLC experiences,

she commented,

I was told that all people are exactly the same on the inside and the color of their skin

doesn't matter, … based on [my parents'] presumption that inside we are all the same. I

did not understand that's where this white privilege comes from. I was insensitive to the

fact that they had a different experience than I did. But it's not a destination, it's a

journey. At the beginning of this journey, I would get annoyed with this group of

students who--they were Black--but they would call racism on everything. … My

intentions were good, but … they were pointing out my blind spots, but it's sorta like

having a little person sitting on your shoulder. Is it smacking you every day? I thought

they were extreme, but, on the other hand, if I'm getting smacked 40 times a day, maybe I

need to rethink. And maybe what I'm teaching and how I'm teaching it needs to change.

So now, that's what I'm trying to do.

Like Teri and the other co-researchers, all teachers enter the classroom bringing with

them their personal intersectionality (in this case as white, middle class educators). Those

identities undergo transformation through professional experiences informed by cognitive and

social influences, including learning opportunities like this PLC. In this case, awareness of

Student Identities, *Deficit* and *Growth Views of Students*, as well as teachers' *Self-Awareness of

Identity* coalesce to inform instructional and pedagogical classroom decisions (*Impact on

Classroom Practice*). Teachers also assume *Teacher Roles* that affect both their identities as well

as those decisions, which create, shape, and influence classroom experiences with students from

in- and out-group populations, curriculum, and instructional practice. Often teachers encounter,

grapple with, and internalize new awareness, information, and experiences subconsciously,

moving through the iterative process without acknowledging or even knowing that

transformation is occurring. Participation in the PLC, along with frequent reflection and

conversations that brought these teachers to an "edge of meaning" often leads to grappling with

the transformation by asking themselves and each other, "*Now What*?" Based on responses from

self and others to that question, the teacher continues to cycle through the identity transformation

process.

　　　　To represent this cycle of identity formation and reformation as a neat, sequential, smooth

process would be disingenuous. Instead, as teachers undergo this identity transformation, the

journey is iterative, with no clear entry or exit point. Individuals might go through an entire

cycle with no consciousness of their own engagement with one or more "steps" in the process.

Marked by sharp edges and swift turns followed by long periods of seeming idleness, this

journey is undertaken by all educators and yet consciously perceived by few. Figure 4 represents

an attempt to capture the essence of this experience graphically.

Figure 4.

Revised Pedagogical Identity (re)Formation Process

The process itself is very difficult to articulate. The very real and tangible impact on teacher pedagogical identity of participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse cannot, however, be disputed. Grounded in transformative learning theory, a PLC formed in this manner allows for "discussion of race, reflective journaling and critically engaged racial dialogue [that] provides a model for promoting [the] critical self-reflection" required for truly transformative adult learning to occur (Crowley, 2019, p. 1482). Bonczyk and de Rojas (2019) asserted that "it is the responsibility of white people to help other white people understand and act on topics of racial justice" (p. 44). Black (2021) was even more direct when she stated,

> it will benefit whites to seek out communal spaces with other whites in which we can educate ourselves and confront our racial dissonances with each other. This will place the burden of combating antiracism on ourselves as opposed to looking to people of color to solve the problem of racism in the United States.

These admonitions take on a particular urgency in light of the participants' inability/ unwillingness to articulate a solution to the problems within our own classrooms that did not depend upon adult Persons of Color assuming responsibility within those spaces.

For the co-researchers, dialogue in interviews and PLC meetings as we spoke about our experiences and recognized the enactment of race and class power structures within our classrooms gave a glimpse at the impact of this process on the participants. It was further evidenced in classroom observations as more student-centered and equity-minded practices became common. It was displayed most obviously, however, by comparing the initial Identity Maps that the participants created at the commencement of the PLC meetings in September 2020

with the terminal Identity Maps created at the PLC meeting during Week 8 of the data collection period.

In the initial Identity Maps, only two participants noted whiteness as part of their ethnic identity, one indicating also that she is Irish. The others described themselves as "American", "Irish", and having "No" ethnicity. (All participants were born in the US and have never lived outside the country.) Further, the participants identified neither their ethnic nor economic identities as important within the context of their professional lives. In contrast, on the Terminal Identity Maps that participants created as part of the final PLC meeting (Week 8 of the data collection period), all five participants noted whiteness as their only ethnic identity, and identified affiliations with white, middle class groups as two of the three most critical to their professional identities.

The initial Identity Maps were collected at the time of creation in September and not reshared with the co-researchers until after the completion of the data collection and analysis period. Upon comparing her Identity Maps, Helen commented,

> I feel ashamed of where I was. Honestly, I don't really remember feeling that way. This group brought me from that place where I didn't even know I had an ethnic identity. I know I still have a long way to go. I hope I can look back in another six months or a year and be ashamed of where I am today.

Although the pathway that defines a pedagogical identity is difficult to articulate likely because it is so personal and unique to the individual making the journey, this study indicates that the impact of a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse on that individual's identity is potentially profound.

Summary of Findings

In this study, data was collected from five middle class, white teachers participating in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse in order to investigate the impact of participation in such a PLC on (1) a white, middle class teacher's perception of her students at the intersection of class, race, and perceived identity, and (2) her own pedagogical identities. Using a Moustakian transcendental phenomenal methodology situated within a framework of heuristic inquiry, seven themes emerged to answer the research questions.

In short, teachers participating in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse experience increased awareness of their own identities and those of their students, thereby gaining appreciation for their students' unique cultures and backgrounds. In addition, as teachers become more aware of their own power and privilege, they also begin to recognize and adjust the lenses through which they view and perceive their students. By focusing on students as "faces" and individual persons as opposed to behavior and group stereotypes, teachers tend to engage in more growth-oriented discourses, replacing the all-too-common deficit discourse when speaking to and about students.

In addition, evidence suggests that a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse may provide the necessary disorienting dilemma, while offering time and space for critical self-reflection, for transformative learning to occur. Such PLCs, then, may well be appropriate and effective sites for development of teacher pedagogical identity. Envisioned as a very complex process that cannot be fully encapsulated by a neat, sequential cycle, the process of teacher pedagogical identity formation and reformation is nonetheless tangible, real, and

manifests itself in a teacher's instructional choices, teacher roles, professional discourses, and

personal adoption and enactment of her standpoint.

Chapter 5: Discussion

> …, come celebrate
>
> with me that everyday
>
> something has tried to kill me
>
> and has failed. (Clifton, 1993, p. 20)

Although I feel as if I have learned so much in the intervening time since I first read

Clifton's words for the first time, I marvel at my continuing level of ignorance and consequent

feeling of immensity of a problem I am unsure that I can never fully appreciate. I realized at our

last PLC meeting in May 2021 that, as five White, middle class educators, we can make a

difference, even if we have to start--and maybe even finish--on a relatively small scale. That

epiphany led me to observe:

> The collective us can make change, but the individual person can only make awakenings.
>
> I think the collective is where we need to attack it. I think we need to find that collective
>
> us to make sure that all the individuals are awakened to what it is. And you know, that's,
>
> that's easy to say and super hard to do. That moves us beyond just stating the problem
>
> without a calculus to figure it out.

In this chapter, I will discuss the results of this study in specific and then broader terms

and explore how the work begun within the confines of a PLC focused on identity and deficit

discourse can be moved into other, potentially larger spaces.

Summary of Study

The purpose of this study was an exploration of the living experience of teachers engaged in a PLC around identity and deficit discourse in the classroom. Review of the extant literature indicates that the underlying deficit mindset is a continuing threat to the educational prospects of non-white, non-middle class students who are increasingly members in our suburban classroom communities. Viewing the issue through a lens of feminist standpoint, critical whiteness, social identity, and transformative learning theories and from a critical-ideological perspective revealed a gap in the research around the impact of a white teacher blind to the enactment of privilege in which they engage each day. Further, this continues to be a very real and persistent problem of practice felt acutely within the local context. By recentering the focus to problematize teachers and persons rather than students and behavior on a local level, the researcher and co-researchers sought stimulus for and pathways toward change on a larger scale. Specifically, employing a heuristic phenomenological approach, this study sought answers to the following research questions:

1) How does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher perception of students' identities at the intersection of race, class, and perceived ability? (RQ1)

2) How does participation in a Professional Learning Community focused on identity and deficit discourse impact teacher pedagogical identity? (RQ2)

Conclusions

As noted in Chapter 4, analysis of the participants' experiential data reveals that

participation in a PLC focused on identity and deficit discourse results in white, middle-class

teachers' increased awareness of privilege and power disparities between teachers and students

as well as increased sensitivity to the mindsets that inform their discourse with and about

students. Such PLCs can also be sites in which white, middle class teachers can realize, adopt,

and enact their standpoints, thereby beginning deliberate moves from complicity within the

systems and institutions of white privilege to becoming a traitor to their power-positioned

identity and an ally to the oppressed. In order to be effective sites of this type of work, PLCs

must be safe spaces, guaranteeing participants the freedoms of "dignity safety" (Callan, 2016)

and intellectual bravery to "give up old ideas and to be willing to see things in new ways"

(Flensner & Von der Lippe, 2019, p. 283; see also Arao & Clemens, 2013; Boost Rom, 1998;

Greene, 1995).

Further, this study provides evidence that participation in a PLC focused on identity and

deficit discourse can also impact teachers' pedagogical identities. Increased awareness of their

own identities and those of their students, as well as the revelation of covert power dynamics,

influences the roles that teachers assume and the instructional decisions that they make, in

addition to the very mindset through which they view their students.

In the following sections, I will detail some of the implications that these results have on

classroom practice, local processes, and broader policy. Then, I will address the strengths of this

study, along with limitations which present rich opportunities for future inquiry.

Implications for Practice

With application for individual teachers at the classroom level, for schools and districts at a local level, and finally for educational policy and teacher training programs on a larger scale, the implications for practice from this study are numerous.

At the Classroom Level

One of the more subtle and yet powerful implications from this study is the reality that, in classrooms of students from increasingly diverse backgrounds, cultivating relationships between persons as opposed to viewing students as a collection of labels is imperative. Supported by evidence that directly speaks to how teachers perceive their students' identities and think of them via either a deficit or growth lens, this crucial finding is confirmed by other, similar research (Schauer, 2021; Varghese et al., 2005). One of the immediate steps that any classroom teacher can take independently is to build relationships and trust with her students.

While teacher-student relationships are tremendously impactful and have implications for the way that teachers see and hear their students, that is simply a starting point and one--albeit vital--piece of a much larger, complex puzzle. Indeed, the urgent need for critical self-reflection and dialogue with colleagues on topics of race and class--including our own privilege from and complicity with systemic racism--in a safe environment cannot be overstated. Especially in light of the increasingly diverse student populations that do and will continue to inhabit public school classrooms, we cannot wait to have these crucial conversations. Crowley (2019) maintained that the conversations themselves in which white educators "speak openly about White privilege [are] small acts of defiance [that] are important within the context of Whiteness" (p. 1482). But

Applebaum (2008), Ohito (2020), Schauer (2021), and Sue et al. (2019) admonished that white

persons must move beyond simply acknowledging their benefit from white privilege to

recognizing and actively combating their individual and collective contributions to the systemic

racism pervasive in our institutions. The challenge "is acknowledging our power as educators

and recognizing how our everyday actions and words either further the status quo or offer

opportunities for change--with our colleagues and children alike" (Bonczyk & de Rojas, 2019, p.

46).

At the Building/District Level

At the building or district level, the urgency to leverage PLCs created as safe spaces to

engage the power of transformative learning on the topics of race, class, and identity is immense.

As Palmer (1998) maintained, "good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching

comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher" (p.10). Based on the results of this study, I

drafted a plan to implement PLCs which investigate whiteness in the classroom as part of the

RSD's Differentiated Supervision Plan for the 2023-24 school year (see Appendix F). Teachers

will be organized into deliberate, thoughtful, safe PLC spaces in which they will study Picower's

(2021) *Reading, Writing, and Racism*. This work serves as an entry point for the district's

majority white faculty to begin to confront the daily enactment of racism in our classrooms. Two

thirds of the district's professional staff members must participate in a differentiated supervision

model each year. Therefore, this professional learning model provides a means to responsibly

meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student population and larger community.

Limiting this work to the teachers within the school district is not enough, however.

According to Chubbuck (2004), the only way that white educators can truly "disrupt whiteness"

within our societal structures is by becoming part of "a community of support and accountability … from both inside and outside of the school context, comprised of people of color as well as white people committed to their own growth in disrupting whiteness--colleagues, parents, students, and community leaders" (p. 330). It is imperative, then, to open the doors of the schoolhouse to the surrounding community and engage the increasingly diverse population not only in conversation about the enactment of whiteness within the district but in mutual accountability for interrupting those enactments where and when they occur.

At the Policy Level

One of the most potentially impactful implications from this study occurs at the level of educational policy. While disrupting whiteness and systemic racism locally is necessary and admirable, the overarching threat to systemic change is "how the creation of a white-centered professional culture disables race (or, more accurately, anti-racist) talk--and thereby disables the ability of educators to unlearn habits that impede the practice of just and equitable education" (Yoon, 2012, p. 589). At the policy level, then, structured, deliberate opportunities for critical reflection and dialogue on race and antiracist tenets must be provided so that inservice teachers can simultaneously *talk* about and *enact* the ideas within their professional settings (Cole-Malott et al., 2021; Crowley, 2019). Such opportunities as part of required and on-going teacher training would provide the long-term engagement which scholars agree is necessary to truly affect sustainable change (Cole-Malott et al., 2021; Crowley, 2019; Picower, 2009; Schauer, 2021; Sue et al., 2019; Yoon, 2012).

Strengths and Limitations

One of the greatest strengths of this study is the situation of the participants within the study site as five white, middle class educators within a suburban public school district with an increasingly diverse student population. The value here is twofold: First, extant literature regarding teacher identity formation and its impact in public K-12 classrooms is confined almost exclusively to preservice teachers, university faculty, or K-12 educators in urban settings (Black, 2021; Crowley, 2019; Gershenson et al., 2016; Glock, 2016; Gorski, 2008; Ullicci & Howard, 2015; Wentzel, 2009; Whitaker, 2020). In addition, scholars agree that challenging conversations--including those regarding race--must be undertaken in safe environments among individuals with established trust (Black, 2021; Crowley, 2019; DiAngelo, 2018; Singleton, 2015). Despite that recommendation, however, even within studies that involve inservice teachers, the researcher is typically a member of the academy--an outsider, "set apart from the participants" (Yoon, 2012, p. 595; see also Johnson, 2002; Schauer, 2021). In this study, not only are the participants white, middle class teachers, characteristic of the "average" public school educator (NCES, 2020), but the researcher is uniquely situated as an insider, who has worked closely with the other participants and has successfully established an environment that promotes the trust and safety required to facilitate the delicate work of "unlearning assumptions and norms associated with whiteness and other privilege" (Yoon, 2012, p. 588).

Considering the study methodologically, Sultan (2019) maintained that one of the greatest limitations to heuristic inquiry is the potential for a lack of generalizability due to small sample size. According to Groenewald (2004), two to ten participants are "sufficient to reach

saturation" and, for a phenomenological study, long interviews with up to ten participants provide the rich, thick description that is the objective of qualitative research (p. 46; see also Boyd, 2001; Creswell et al., 2007). Therefore, five participants, including the researcher-participant, may not be a guarantor of the ability to generalize the conclusion outside the study site, but it should increase the likelihood.

In addition to the relatively small sample size, another limitation of this study is the relatively short duration of the investigation. As I previously referenced, the participants were still in the beginning stages of transformation to their perceptions of their students' identities and their own identity development when this study concluded in April 2021. Although the PLC met for almost the duration of an entire school year, as Crowley (2019) and Sue et al. (2019) pointed out, this work is necessarily slow and long in order to be effective for sustainable change.

An additional limitation is the lack of engagement with the participants' gender and its role in teachers' identity development and perception of students. Bauer (2021) cautioned that the "act of individual heroism" is "one of the most persistent and dangerous tropes about teaching in the United States" (p. 641). She further stipulated that this trope is deeply rooted in "The Cult of White Womanhood" and described by a theory of benevolent whiteness (p. 646). From the outset of this study framed in class and race, the focus was intentionally placed on the participants' membership within dominant white, middle class groups. A lack of focus, however, should not imply that the intersection of these labels with the participants' gender (a non-dominant positionality) should not be examined; indeed, the previous discussion of the participants' adoption of the "Hero" mantle (*Teacher Roles* theme) indicates that this concern may be especially valid. Such an investigation, however, was beyond the scope of this study.

Implications For Future Research

In addition to answering the Research Questions as posed by this study and providing evidence with exciting implications for teachers and schools, the investigation also reveals a bevy of opportunities for further investigation.

Teacher Demographics

The homogeneity of subject is simultaneously a strength of this investigation and presents a need for additional study. Especially as pandemic teaching conditions have exacerbated a nation-wide teacher shortage that has been looming for the better part of a decade, the "look" of public educators is likely to change (Podolsky et al., 2016). Therefore, more work is necessary to determine if the identity formation process revealed from this data is descriptive of the experience of other groups of teachers, including beginning teachers, teachers from marginalized populations, teachers in urban or rural settings, etc.

In addition, in order for white educators to become truly antiracist, scholars stipulate that "the privileged must learn from others whose social locations on the borders of intelligibility equip them to precisely for dismantling the structures we may deplore but cannot ourselves see beyond" (Applebaum, 2008, p. 298; see also Sue et al., 2019; Schauer, 2021). Therefore, study within heterogeneous learning groups comprised of those who hold privilege alongside those who do not is required to better understand just how these conversations can be engaged most effectively.

Appropriate and Effective Sites for Identity Work

Evidence strongly indicates that PLCs created safe spaces which foster deep professional relationships, vulnerability, and sustained self- and group-reflection and are appropriate and effective sites for engaging identity work. Yoon (2012) cautioned that PLCs or other "teacher study groups" must be carefully and thoughtfully formed in order to create "rich sites for exploring race talk and other race-related equity issues in schooling and teaching" (p. 592). Without this attention to crafting environments conducive to challenging conversations, Louis and Marks (1998) warned that likely outcomes will be either a lack of conversational engagement and/or a disconnect between teacher discourse and classroom practice. Additional investigation of the structures and methods used to create, gain membership to, organize, and conduct PLCs to facilitate productive identity work is vital to inform the establishment of appropriate professional learning groups within diverse institutional contexts.

Identity Work and Classroom Practice

As previously mentioned, all co-researchers reported that, as a result of our PLC work, they had made changes in their instructional practices. Further, evidence in the form of classroom observations confirmed that they employed learner-centered practices, including project-based (Teri) and flipped classroom (Hannah, Cathy, and Helen) techniques, which they reported had not been part of their instructional repertoire prior to the 2020-21 school year. As previously noted, virtual and remote formats of teaching and learning prompted sweeping changes in instructional practices in classrooms all over the globe since the Spring 2020 shutdown (Fisher & Frey, 2020; Ge et al., 2021; Zalaznick, 2021). Were these teachers'

classroom practices the result of identity work within a PLC, the product of changing methods of engaging instruction previously unconceived, or a combination of those two factors as well as other, currently unknown influences? Given the literature that suggests a marked disconnect between teacher beliefs--especially around issues related to equity--and classroom practice (Louis & Marks, 1998; Schauer, 2021; Yoon, 2012), more research is needed to explore potential answers to this query. Further, longitudinal study is required to evaluate both the sustainability and the quality of such teaching practices as enacted as a response to identity work over time, including the technical supports necessary for teachers to be able to engage such manifestations of professional learning.

Challenging Conversations about Race

Despite extant literature which indicates that white teachers are reluctant to speak about race, choosing instead to focus conversations on poverty or gender (Bonczyk & de Rojas, 2019; Milner, 2013), participants in this study did not shy away from discussing race, class, gender, or any other marginalized population among their students. The evidence from participant data suggests that confronting issues of race, including white privilege, systemic racism, and the white supremacy underlying institutions such as the educational system became less threatening as participants engaged topics as a group and individually, only to subsequently encounter them in a broader context given the events taking place on the national and global stage during the tumultuous time of the summer 2020 through early spring of 2021. Cathy shared how she had come to terms with the shocking question about being racist and white supremacist by virtue of our white privilege:

I'm hearing a lot of undercurrents in the news about the topics that we've brought up. …

it's been interesting seeing it on the news, documentaries online. So I found this as

bringing, like I've been able to go in deeper because … we've touched the surface on a lot

of things. And honestly, isn't that my white supremacy, that I never noticed it.

Yoon (2012) cautioned that "safety for white people at the expense of racial dialogue is arguably

a form of indirect violence upon people of color" (p. 598). At the same time, engaging racial

dialogue within conditions that make the dialogue more productive and conducive for white

educators to acknowledge both white privilege and white complicity is valuable. The literature

requires further study of the tools and resources necessary to create such conditions.

Closing Comments

Moustakas (1990) recommended that heuristic researchers wrap up presentation of their

findings by writing "a brief, creative close that speaks to the essence of our study and its

significance to you and others" (p. 54). In keeping with the narrative tradition that I used to

synthesize the experience for me and my co-researchers, I will conclude employing similar

methods:

One of the most intriguing concepts that I investigated as part of this study was the idea

of pedagogical identity. I believe that my attention is captured so intensely because, as a teacher

who is entering the second half of my tenure, I often find myself bouncing between extremes in

my view of myself, my profession, and my practice.

One day, I feel fresh, young, and invigorated by an excitement that comes from

witnessing true learning and experiencing it myself, only to immediately be pulled down by an

overwhelming exhaustion that I imagine I would feel as an octogenarian. One day, I feel like I

am an expert in my field and have utter confidence in my abilities and competency, only to be

confronted by a situation, an issue, a problem of practice that makes me question not only my

depth of existing knowledge, but my capacity for success at the most mundane and rudimentary

of tasks. One day, I feel ready to be an antiracist teacher, a coach who provides safe spaces for

teachers to remove the blinders that prevent us from recognizing our own power and privilege, so

that we can work actively to dismantle from within the system that oppresses and reproduces

oppression, only to become discouraged by the enormity of even the smallest portion of that task.

I imagine that, if I can nail down what that process looks like, I can better understand my

own feelings as I experience these highs and lows that, by turns, edify and threaten my

conceptualization of my pedagogical--my teaching--self. To that end, I identified four tangible

characteristics and experiences that seemed to most inform and typify this identity formation. I

tried to encapsulate the process as a simple, four-step cycle. I quickly found that was not only

too simple, but insultingly so. Then, I envisioned my teaching self effectively dipping myself in

and out of four buckets that contain "what makes me who and what I am." That, too, fell short

of truly giving a true depiction of what this felt like.

So I began thinking. I envisioned myself as water. A lone molecule. A single atom of

oxygen held bound between twin orbs of hydrogen. Regardless of temperature or state, like my

positionality, the chemical composition of water is immutable. As long as it is water, it will

always be oxygen and hydrogen. At the same time, however, that one molecule simultaneously

experiences and causes significant change. Consider that one molecule--microscopic--as it joins

with others and becomes a river. Sometimes, it is still, slow, lazy. And then right around a sharp

corner, it rushes toward an end it cannot see. It flows between banks, over stones, through sand

and silt; and, while it operates within those confines, it also impacts them. Redefining edges,

smoothing stones, shifting sand, even as it gets shuffled, chuted along.

If the river is the classroom, the school district, the education system, not all changes that

impact a teacher's pedagogical identity occur within that setting. The water molecule can and

will evaporate. It will escape the river, rise into the air as a vapor. As it encounters temperatures

cold enough to freeze, it will bind together with others, forming rigid structures and rise, solid,

out of the river as a glacier. There, it will undergo more change, so that it is different in some

way--large or small--when it falls back into the river at another point.

As I continued to reflect on, question, and develop this metaphor of water as teacher

identity (re)formation, I journaled and drafted the following poem. For me, this is a more

complete representation of the process that I have experienced and which I witnessed among my

co-researchers than any other depiction that I have previously seen articulated or was able to

articulate myself. This depiction captures the essence and allows me to comprehend more of the

experience. Just as I cannot hold in my palm a single molecule of water, however, a complete

understanding of the experience remains as elusive to the human grasp as a mist of vapor.

Nonetheless, as I envision myself as a teacher, I am water.

> I am water.
> Oxygen, hydrogen
> in perfect ratio;
> Immutable, unchangeable.
> Water eternal.
>
> My life's work: a river,
> fluid, evolving, ever-changing.
> My path, guided by forces larger than me,

between dirt-formed banks contained,
molded into a snake, a trickle, a flood, a pool.
Still, sparkling like diamonds on earth,
basking in the sun's glow.
Slow, imperceptible, languid
like a lazy, summer afternoon float.
I fear stagnation I cannot feel,
only to find myself
running, rushing, hurtling;
Carving out, smoothing down,
over stone, over cliff,
free falling into a wild froth.
I create the river.

Clarified by silt, filtered of impurities,
shedding the form of the river,
I rise, a vapor.
Released from my landbound confines,
the air works on me;
and I, on it.
Carried along on a zephyr,
blown away on a dragon's breath.
Humid, heavy rain;
pounding, pelting, pouring;
Washing over, splashing down,
Creating ripples on the surface,
Gently pattering into a glass pool.
I become the river.

Frozen, moving, a wall of ice
My rigid structure
Rises above the surface.
I defy gravity.
A monster moving
with terrible inertia,
carried by my fluid self
until I melt.
Dripping, dropping, creeping,
sliding off, running down,

slipping into the dark blue,
Softly falling into the arctic waves.
I am the river.

Like two lovers intertwined:
I change them;
they change me.
Canyons lie in my wake.
Stones split
Pebbles and boulders tremble, shift.
Becoming muddy, brackish; clear, fresh;
my look, taste, smell transformed.
I am changed and ever-changing.

Yet I remain
Fundamentally, compositionally the same.
Oxygen, hydrogen
in perfect ratio;
Immutable, unchangeable.
Water eternal.

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Appendix A: Participation-Release Agreement

I agree to participate in a research study of teacher identity, deficit discourse, and perception of student identity at the intersection of class, race, and perceived ability. I understand the purpose and nature of this study and am participating voluntarily. I grant permission for the data to be used in the process of completing an Ed.D. degree, including a dissertation and any other future publication. I understand that my name and other information which might identify me will not be used.

I agree to meet via Zoom on a bi-weekly basis for regular PLC meetings with the Instructional Technology Coach and other members of the learning community. I also agree to participate in two semi-structured interviews (via Zoom) and one in-person classroom observation by the Instructional Technology Coach. I grant permission for recording PLC meetings, interviews, and classroom observations, recognizing that such digital records will be stored locally by the researcher and made available only to her, myself, and--where agreed--co-researchers. I understand that there may be minimal risk, as participation may lead to discomfort. There is no benefit from participation in this study. At any time, I reserve the right to remove myself and all of my information/data from the study without penalty or loss of any benefit to which I am entitled.

My signature below indicates that I have read the information described above and have received a copy of this information. I have asked questions I had regarding the research study and have received answers to my satisfaction. I am 18 years of age or older and voluntarily consent to participate in this study.

_____   _____

Research Participant   Primary Researcher

_____   _____

Date   Date

Appendix B: Discussion Prompts

The following are examples of thinking prompts utilized to stimulate and guide conversation during PLC meetings. They were adapted from Singleton's (2015) *Courageous Conversations about Race* and Solorzano and Perez Huber's (2020) *Racial Microaggressions*. Other probing questions will be utilized on an extemporaneous basis as unplanned circumstances arise from dialogue and experience.

All PLC meetings are and will continue to be conducted via the online Zoom platform and are recorded so that the researcher can fully participate in the meeting. Memoing will occur for the PLC meetings at least three days following each meeting so that the researcher may engage reflective journaling as a participant first, and gain objectivity through time and distance from the meeting itself before interacting with data from other participants. Following the data collection period, meeting memos will be coded and analyzed for themes.

Sample Discussion Prompts:

1. Consider the following statement and give voice to what this might look like in your classroom--for you and your students: Discrimination and inequity are not just problems for those discriminated against. They affect all of us.

2. To what degree do you and your colleagues believe race and class impact student achievement?

3. To what degree has race/class been investigated in your school system's effort to address achievement disparity?

4. Has the examination of race/class been an effort embraced by ALL educators--white

included?

5. Do you believe that the knowledge and skills to educate ALL students already exist in education?

6. To what degree do you feel that your school system has the will or passion to meet the needs of students of color and poverty?

7. Solorzano and Perez Huber (2020) defined "racial microaggressions" as the layered "verbal and nonverbal assaults directed toward People of Color, often carried out in subtle, automatic, or unconscious forms" whose individual and cumulative effects are to perpetuate and enact systemic racism and discrimination through everyday practices and interactions by ordinary operators within racist systems (p. 55). What do microaggressions look like in our classrooms, our hallways, our cafeterias? What is our response to microaggressions enacted by ourselves? Our colleagues?

Appendix C: Reflection Prompts

The following are examples of reflection prompts that the researcher and co-researchers will engage during their reflective journaling following PLC meetings. They were adapted from Singleton's (2015) *Courageous Conversations about Race* and Solorzano and Perez Huber's (2020) *Racial Microaggressions*. Other unplanned prompts will be utilized on an extemporaneous basis as topics and circumstances arise from dialogue and experience.

Each participant maintains a "PLC Journal" as a shared Google Doc between the researcher and participant. Just prior to each PLC meeting, the researcher adds reflection questions to the Journal based on the planned content for the meeting so that the participant may reflect on the conversation and prompts immediately following the meeting or at any time thereafter. Participants are also encouraged to journal at any time that their thinking around pertinent topics and experiences prompts them to do so. Journals are viewed by the researcher two days prior to each PLC meeting to guide conversation during the upcoming meeting. Following the data collection period, four entries from each participant's reflective journal will be selected at random for coding and analysis.

Sample Reflection Prompts:

1) What do you need to know and be able to do to narrow the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap?

2) How will you know when you are experiencing success in your efforts to narrow the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap?

3) What will you do when you discover what you don't yet know and are not yet able to do

to eliminate the racial and socioeconomic achievement gap?

4)   What actions have you taken to promote equity and/or to be anti-racist/classist in your

classroom?

5)   Define the following as you currently understand them.

     a)   Racism

     b)   Classism

     c)   Institutionalized Racism/Classism

     d)   Anti-racism/anti-classism

     e)   Equity

Appendix D: Interview Protocol

The following interview protocol will be utilized for two semi-structured interviews with each of the co-researchers. All interviews will take place via the online Zoom platform and will be recorded so that the interviewer may take minimal notes during the interview. Interview data will be coded and analyzed for themes by reviewing interview footage and transcripts following the data collection period.

Interview protocol:

"The purpose of this interview is to explore your experience with your own identities of race and class, as well as your thoughts, feelings and experiences with other racial and class identities. You have the right to answer in any manner in which you are comfortable or to abstain from answering anything you do not wish to answer. You may excuse yourself at any time. The interviewer may ask questions that were not part of the original interview question list. There is no time limit on your answers to individual questions, but the entire interview will last no longer than one hour. Do you have any questions before we begin?"

First Semi-Structured Interview:

The following interview questions will potentially be used for the first of two semi-structured interviews with participants. The interview questions were adapted from McIntyre's (1997) *Making Meaning of Whiteness*. The interview questions focus primarily on teacher perceptions of their own identities at the intersection of class and race and how those

impact their relationships with others, especially those who are non-white and non-middle class.

This interview will be used to gain insight on how the participants' understandings of

identity--their own, others, and their students--may have been developed and potentially changed

over the course of their lives. These questions may be asked in part, in full, or not at all

depending on the forward pathway that emerges from the interview's dialogue and experience.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Talk to me about why you became a teacher.

2. Tell me about the neighborhood(s) that you have lived in and the schools that you have
    attended/worked in during your lifetime--beginning with your childhood until now.

3. Do you remember the first time you noticed that somebody was different than you?

4. What does it mean for you to be White and middle class?

5. Please describe your interactions with individuals from other classes? From other racial
    groups?

6. Would you say that you typically share race and class identities with the friends with
    whom you typically choose to socialize?

7. Can you think of an experience within your own life of prejudice, racism, and/or
    discrimination? Tell me about it.

8. How would you define racism? Does this relate to the example you just described? In
    what ways?

9. How do students from different classes and races experience education differently in your
    classroom? In other classrooms (if different than in yours)?

Second Semi-Structured Interview:

The following interview questions will potentially be used for the second semi-structured interview with co-researchers (four weeks after the first interview). The interview questions were adapted from Settlage et al. (2009). The questions focus on teachers' perceptions of their students' identities and abilities impact their own pedagogical identities and the enactments of those identities in their classrooms. This interview will be used to better understand the experience of each teacher as she thinks about the connection between teacher/student identities outside the classroom and perceptions of those individuals within the walls of the schools. These questions may be asked in part, in full, or not at all depending on what emerges from the dialogue and experience that emerges from the interview.

Semi-Structured Interview Questions:

1. Talk to me about what a student who is successful in your classroom would bring with him, in terms of both material and non-material resources.

2. Describe for me a student who might be less successful in your classroom.

3. How successful do you feel teaching students of poverty? Students of color? What would make you feel more successful teaching them, if anything?

4. Do you feel that there is a particular group of students who tend to be particularly good at <<teacher's content area>>? Is there a particular group that tends to be particularly not good? What accounts for this?

Appendix E: Observation Protocol

The following Observation Protocol will be utilized to record contextual notes during classroom observations. The protocol was piloted in the two months preceding data collection and underwent 2 revisions before the final version was obtained. The final version of the protocol was used for three observations to test for effectiveness prior to being employed for data collection.

Classroom observations will be recorded using the Swivl recording device and platform so that the researcher may take minimal notes during the observation. Following the data collection period, recordings will be viewed and transcribed for data coding and analysis.

Original Protocol:

Participant Number:	
Date:	Period:
Grade Level:	Content Area:
Class Size	
Number of In-Person Learners:	At-Home Learners:
Time Frame **(5 minute intervals)**	**Tally of Verbal Interactions from Teacher**

Revision #1

| Participant Number:		
Date:	Period:	Grade Level:
Content Area:	Number of In-Person Learners:	At-Home Learners:
Time Frame (5 minute intervals)	**Tally of Verbal Interactions from Teacher**	**Type of Interaction** (teacher-to-student, teacher-to-group, or teacher-to-teacher)

Final Observation Protocol

Participant Number:			
Date:	Period:	Grade Level:	Content Area:
Number of In-Person Learners:		At-Home Learners:	
Time Frame (5 minute intervals)	**Learning Activity**	**Tally of Verbal Interactions from Teacher**	**Type of Interaction** (teacher-to-student, teacher-to-group, or teacher-to-teacher)

Appendix F: Identity Map

Co-researchers completed the Identity Map (Change, 2008, used with permission) below at the

initial PLC meeting in September 2020, and again at the last PLC meeting during the 8-week

data collection period in April 2021.
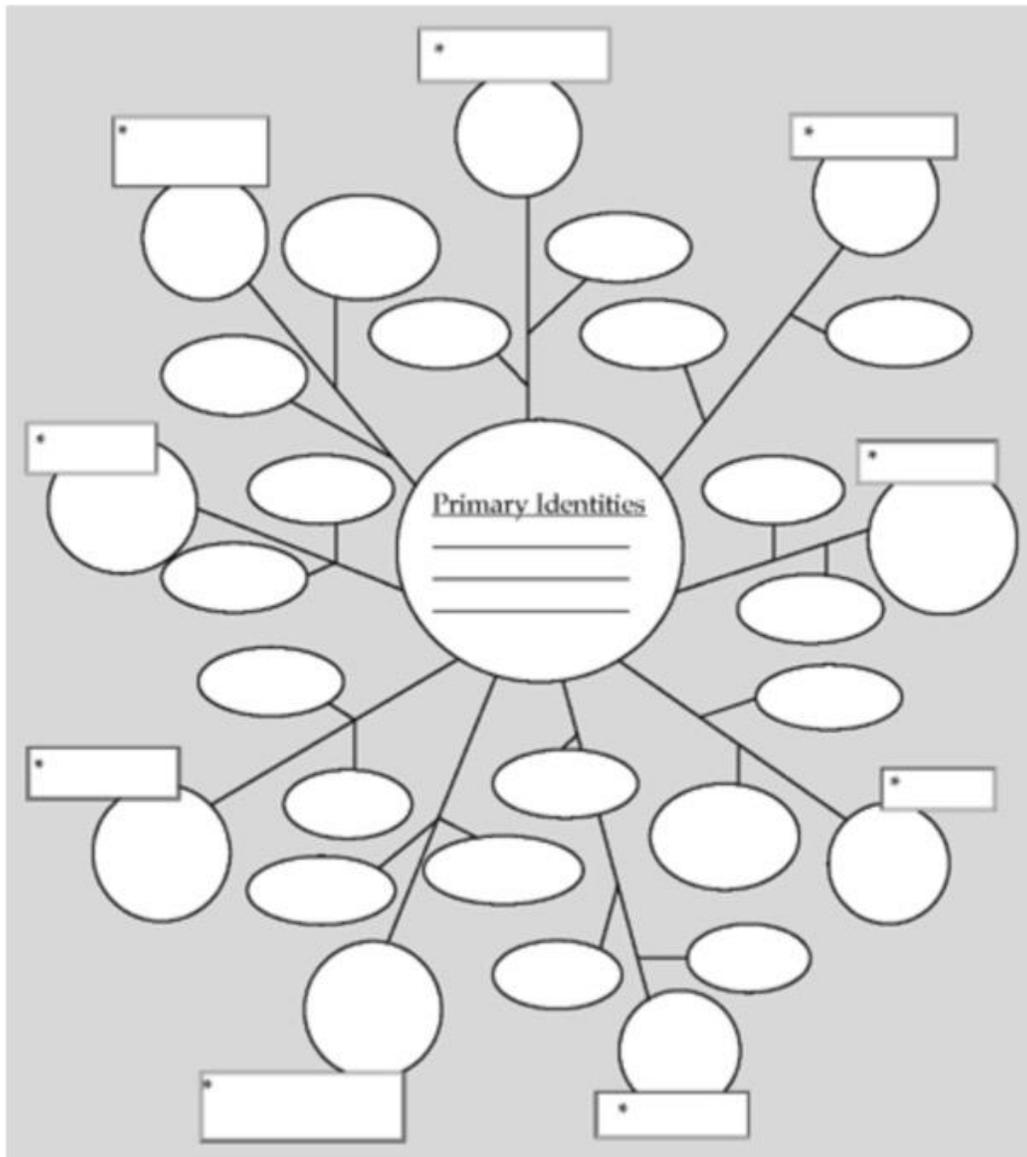
Appendix G: PLC Differentiated Supervision Plan

Rationale

Two-thirds of our 216 tenured professional staff members must engage in a Differentiated Supervision Plan each year. Anecdotally, past practice for the plan has been for each teacher to do something that requires little investment and from which there is generally no return, either for the individual teacher, the students, or the district. The purpose of engagement has historically been compliance. But, by failing to move teachers from a compliance model of professional learning, resources are wasted and opportunities for growth--both in individual teachers' practice and in the district's collective knowledge basis--are squandered. By harnessing the dynamic times in which we find ourselves and giving professional staff voice and choice as they engage a topic that is both timely and crucial for our continued success, we can better utilize the resources with which we have been entrusted and simultaneously provide opportunities for meaningful growth among all of our staff, ultimately for the benefit of our students and larger community.

Action Plan

Goals:

- Survey data will be collected at the beginning and end of the 2022-23 SY to identify teacher awareness of identity, including bias, privilege, and deficit mindsets in the classroom.

- Data will be used to inform Differentiated Supervision and Professional Learning Plans for the 2023-24 SY.

- Teachers will form PLCs as part of their required Differentiated Supervision Plan.

- PLCs will meet for at least one hour each month for a minimum of five months via Zoom or in person, as circumstances allow.

- PLCs will maintain Reflective Journals to detail their readings, reflections, and thoughts in the Blackboard LMS platform.

- PLCs will be facilitated by an Instructional Coach as "activator" (Fisher et al., 2020).

- Ongoing professional learning for Instructional Coaches will be provided via bi-weekly meetings designed and facilitated by the Lead Coach.

- PLC members will read *Reading, Writing, and Racism: Disrupting Whiteness in Teacher Education and in the Classroom* (Picower, 2021).

- PLC members will use the *Reading, Writing, and Racism Discussion Guide* to discuss themes and central ideas from the book (Maloney & Picower, 2021).

- PLCs will produce and publish narratives as learning resources for current and future teachers within the RSD.

Table 3.

Action Plan with Goals

Goal	Time Frame	Action Steps	Accountability Measure	Responsible Party
PLCs Formed	Aug-Oct 23	1. Principals and Instructional Coaches (ICs) attend informational session on PLCs (8/23) 2. Principals and ICs lead	Differentiated Supervision Proposal in Frontline	Building Principals Instructional Coaches

		informational session on PLCs at September faculty meetings 3. Teachers form PLCs and include PLC plan in Differentiated Supervision Proposal	Beginning-of-Year reflection and meeting with supervisor (Due 10/31/23)	Teachers
PLCs Engage Identity Work	Oct 23-March 24	1. Teachers create PLC schedules for 10/23-3/24 and share with IC. 2. ICs create Blackboard meeting spaces and Reflective Journal prompts (based on Discussion Guide) for PLCs 3. ICs attend and facilitate PLC meeting	PLC agendas and meeting notes Blackboard Reflection Journals Mid- and End-of-Year reflections in Frontline and meetings with supervisors	ICs Teachers
ICs engage ongoing professional learning	Oct 23-March 24	1. Lead Coach creates Blackboard meeting space and Reflective Journal prompts (based on Discussion Guide and other resources) for IC professional learning (9/23) 2. Lead Coach identifies articles, book chapters, and other resources to share with ICs 3. Lead Coach facilitates bi-weekly meetings with ICs to support and enhance their learning	Meeting agendas and notes Blackboard Reflection Journals	Lead Coach ICs
PLCs will publish narratives for future learning	March-June 24	1. Lead Coach creates internal Google Site for narrative accounts (2/24) 2. Teachers use Reflection Journal entries and other artifacts to craft a narrative (written, audio, visual) of their experiences 3. ICs curate narratives 4. Lead Coach and ICs publish	Google Site with published narratives	Lead Coach ICs Teachers

		narratives for future professional learning		
Data collection and analysis	Sept 23- May 24	1. Principals and ICs develop teacher identity survey during informational session (Aug 23) 2. Principals and ICs administer pre-PLC survey during first faculty meeting of the 23-24 SY (Sept 23) 3. Principals and ICs administer post-PLC surveys during final faculty meeting of the 23-24 SY (May 24) 4. Principals and IC analyze data from survey results to inform PLC formation/development for 2024-25 SY (Summer 24)	Survey Survey results PLCs as part of Differentiated Supervision and Professional Learning Plan for 2024-25 SY	Principals ICs

Resources

In order to fully implement the action plan and realize success, the following resources are

necessary:

- Blackboard LMS platform

- Bi-weekly meetings for the Instructional Coaching Team

- Articles, book chapters, and other resources for Lead Coach to facilitate ongoing

  professional learning for ICs

- PLC meetings for a minimum of one hour per month for at least five months

- Zoom web conferencing software

- Beginning- and End-of-Year Surveys for teacher identity awareness

- Picower's *Reading, Writing, and Racism* books for teachers

- *Reading, Writing, and Racism: Discussion Guides* for each PLC member and IC

Conclusion

Leveraging the transformational power of PLCs to engage identity work in the classroom as a combat to pervasive deficit thinking and discourse from teachers to their students is a plan that will require reevaluation at the end of the school year with an eye toward expansion. In addition, the belief that teachers' perceptions of their students is grounded in their own identities and awareness thereof requires that the impact of identity work be investigated not just as it is felt by teachers, but by how classroom practices are transformed as a result. Therefore, based on results from the initial year of PLC implementation, we look to include student-generated data during the second year of the plan as part of the evaluation both of the effectiveness of the PLCs and as well as future implications for the work.