

**Unabashed African American High School Students Discuss Race, Racism, and Politics***Irenea Walker**University of Northern Iowa***Abstract**

African American high school students' erudition of Black history, including the events and individuals who afforded them freedoms, enhances their informed decision making and impacts them as citizens. The purpose of this article is to detail how African American high school students engage in critical discourse regarding how historical events pertaining to African Americans serve as a conduit for developing into productive citizens. This study was conducted at Way to Go (WTG), a K-12 public charter school with a 100% Black student population located in a mid-large size urban city in the southeastern region. The study participants consisted of eight students in grades 9-12. The data collection included a 90-minute focus group interview with the participants. Each participant noted how African Americans, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President Barack Obama, Dr. Mamie Clark, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks, were individuals they aspired to be like. Each student's articulation of why they chose these individuals derive from the verity that these African American's tenacious, impactful selflessness helped to eradicate racial injustices and benefited future generations. The significance of this study demonstrates how African American high school students' historical knowledge prompts civic engagement facilitating change towards a racially justice society.

*Keywords:* race, racism, politics, African Americans, high school students

**Introduction**

To develop into responsible young citizens (Smith, 2003) and later responsible adult citizens, African American high school students must cultivate their knowledge about local community and broader societal occurrences (Hope et al., 2015; Lofton & Davis, 2015). Examining the ramifications of racial injustices not just in a single community, but rather how it collectively impacts society is pertinent when learning the history of how African Americans' civic engagement facilitated change. To teach African American history as independent of

American history allows for the sharing of authentic historical accounts; the utility of African American narratives promote voice to enact change (King, 2020). Specifically, African American high school students' erudition of Black history, including the events and individuals who afforded them freedoms, enhances their informed decision making and impacts them as citizens. Also, the informed decisions they make as high school students impact them when they become adult citizens (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004). In short, acquiring African American history benefits African American high school students as young and adult citizens as they analyze historical contexts (Diemer & Rapa, 2016) and employ critical discussions that will impact the trajectory of their civic engagement (Watts & Flanagan, 2007).

Critical discourse contextualizing the historical events pertaining to African Americans serves as a conduit for developing African American high school students into productive citizens (Godfrey & Grayman, 2014). These critical conversations allow African American high school students to utilize the classroom space and broach the topics of race, racism, and politics. Engagement in critical discussion prepares African American students to make informed decisions as adults and participate in the voting process to elect individuals who advocate for racial justice. Examining the historical contexts of race and racism (Nordgren, 2016) is salient for African American high school students' ability to utilize their voices (Bertrand, 2014) to identify ways of eradicating racial injustices (Howard, 2003; Wiggan & Watson-Vandiver, 2019). Examining the history of race, racism, and politics allows students to identify ways for establishing racial justice. These discussions promote civic engagement which positively impacts their development into productive youth and adult citizens (Anagnostopoulos et al., 2013; Howard, 2004; Seider et al., 2020).

United States Representative John Lewis, for example, historical orchestration as one of the original Freedom Riders and his critical discussions with other Civil Rights activists concerning racial equality impelled him to later become involved in politics seeking a reversal of racial injustices in America. Representative Lewis was a positive example for African American students; he demonstrated how they can integrate racial justice reform and politics to generate change. Representative Lewis used his platform in politics to obliterate systemic racism within structures such as the judicial system, housing, and education. However, his protests and advocacy for racial justice did not begin during his tenure as U.S. Representative; they began when he was 15 years of age listening to the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on the radio

(Wallenfeldt, 2020). “The greatest gift given to us by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. has been the belief in society to change and the power each of us has to affect that change... Today, we are better and better off than we were 50 years ago when Dr. King was taken from us... The legacy of his courageous acts and sacrifices filters into the world around us,” (Lewis, 2018).

Representative Lewis respected Dr. King and it was evident in his actions. One of Representative Lewis’s most renowned quotes is, “You must find a way to get in the way and get in good trouble, necessary trouble” (Lewis, 2016).

Learning about African American historical figures such as Representative Lewis is an important initial step for African American students to get involved with dismantling racial injustices and promoting equality through civic engagement. For instance, The Birmingham Children’s Crusade during the Civil Rights Movement involved numerous African American students who left school to participate in a peaceful march to the mayor’s office to discuss the segregation in their city. The children were arrested, released from jail, and arrested again the next day. Their tenacity in pursuit of racial justice provides African American students today with approaches to become involved in modern-day crusades such as the Black Lives Matter Movement. Involvement of young people will increase the likelihood of them becoming civically engaged adults who participate in civic duties (Preus et al., 2016), including voting for candidates who will change laws and policies that oppose racial equality.

African American students who engage in critical discussions on race, racism, and politics in their high school social studies classrooms ameliorate their decision making as youth as well as when they become adults. Additionally, this type of engagement contributes to them depositing good deeds into society (Bolgatz, 2005; Polite & Saenger, 2003). The aim of this study is to capture African American high school students’ understanding of race, racism, and politics through a 90 minute focus group interview. The purpose of this article is to detail how African American high school students who engage in critical discourse of historical events pertaining to African Americans serves as a conduit for development into productive citizens.

### **African Americans In the United States**

#### **Triumphs and Challenges**

African American men and women have contributed to societal progress throughout American history. For instance, Ida B. Wells was one of the most outspoken social activists against anti-lynching as well as an advocate for equality for women and African American rights

(Stuart, 2020). Men such as Benjamin O. Davis, Jr. broke major barriers; he was the first African American general and commander in the United States Air Force for the World War II Tuskegee Airmen (Asante, 2002; Ukpokodu, 2000). These icons represent merely two examples of African American individuals who have influenced American society across a broad spectrum.

Teaching about the myriad of influential African Americans who advocated for racial equality involves permitting students the opportunity to conduct in-depth research. For example, a study involving an American History high school class detailed the use of technology to learn about key African American leaders who preceded and succeeded Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The results yielded learning about people who were involved in the Freedom Rides, SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference), and sit-ins. The high school students spent an entire unit learning African American history while employing the internet to gain knowledge about the many challenges and successes of this group (Scheuerell & Jaeger, 2015). The resiliency of African Americans infrequently mentioned, for example, is detailed by Alexander (2007) who highlights the challenges and fortitude of the Kansas Afro-American Council following the brutal murder of Fred Alexander, a Black Spanish-American. Alexander was accused of raping and killing a White woman, thus, in retaliation a vicious White mob tied Alexander to a rail and covered his body with kerosene and set him on fire. In response, the Kansas Afro-American Council appealed to the governor to hold those responsible for Alexander's death, held a convention condemning the actions of the mob, and prepared for actions to take as a result of their protests against racial injustices. In innumerable areas, African Americans chose to rise above racial injustices (Williams & Williams-Morris, 2000) and establish a space to contribute during their era and for their descendants in future generations. They were exemplars on how to methodically resist racial injustices (Adams et al., 2018). Throughout the Civil Rights Movement, African Americans were savvy and engaged in peaceful protests to dismantle racism (Hatch, 2017).

Beginning in the 1950s, African Americans exerted peaceful marches to show solidarity and their determination to combat racial injustices exhibited towards African Americans (Joseph et al., 2016). Members of the community, including clergy, educators, parents, and children, marched for racial equality and policy change (Andrews & Gaby, 2015). Though not exhaustive, the racial injustices that African Americans experienced includes educational inequities (Howard & Navarro, 2016), discriminatory housing policies (Woods, 2018), and racial disparities in

healthcare (Bleich et al., 2019; Hausmann et al., 2008). Often, their peaceful marches were viciously encountered with police dogs, fire hoses, and batons prepared to stop them from marching.

Bloody Sunday, which occurred on March 7, 1965, is an example of African Americans who peacefully marched for their basic voting rights. Hundreds of African Americans and White Americans flooded the streets of Selma, Alabama, in an attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge to the state capital in Montgomery. As a result of their refusal to turn around when ordered by state troopers, violence ensued that injured many and killed some protesters. Cognate protests persisted as African Americans recognized the saliency of voting for candidates who would redress racial injustices and enact policies for racial equality for African Americans (Moss & Jackson, 2017).

### **Politics and Civic Engagement**

African Americans have always recognized the importance of exercising their voices to elicit change by participating in the voting process (Collins & Block, 2020). They realized that selecting candidates whose platform opposed racism would start the process of alleviating racial injustices and advocating for equality. While African Americans have always desired to participate in this basic democratic pursuit, they have continuously encountered opposition (Phillips & Deckard, 2016). Unfortunately, White supremacists' opposition of African Americans' right to vote did not start with The Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1900s. The Ocoee Massacre, which occurred on November 2, 1920, involved the horrific slayings of dozens of African Americans who attempted to vote yet were met with opposition (Moyer & Storey, 2020). White supremacists utilized intimidation and voter suppression, such as poll taxes, to eliminate the African American vote (Cascio & Washington, 2014) in Ocoee. Furthermore, members of the Ku Klux Klan, an American White supremacist terrorist hate group, set out to kill as many African American residents in Ocoee as possible, causing the Ocoee Massacre to be known as the bloodiest day in American political history. African Americans willingly risked their lives for the opportunity to utilize their voice to select political candidates who would abolish racial injustices and establish equality.

To continue this facilitation of change towards a racially equal society, African Americans must remain informed and use their voice to participate in the political process (Meier & Rutherford, 2014). Knowledge produces action, and action has the power to generate change

(McCoy, 2020). Persistent racial injustices in the 21st century necessitates the continual push for African American political engagement. Black political organizations have been created to provide the information needed to help African American individuals make informed decisions during the political and voting process (McMiller, 2000). These groups are created by everyday working citizens as well as celebrities. More Than A Vote (2020), a political organization founded by Black athletes and artists, was created to educate voters on various tactics of voter suppression and provide explanations of why their vote matters to end racial injustices (Busey, 2016).

It is imperative that Black political organizations move beyond simply encouraging individuals to get out and vote to expound upon why they should vote for particular candidates, laws, and policies (Griffin & Keane, 2006; Jackson et al., 2017; Jong, 2013). The Dream Defenders (2020) refer to this more in-depth knowledge as the Freedom Papers. This organization formulated seven freedoms to educate, empower, and augment voices for racial justice (Rosen, 2019). The Freedom Papers outline different ways to combat racial injustices. Contesting racial injustices starts with being informed, voting, and participating in the overall political process. These movements, historical and present, demand African Americans' continual advocacy for racial justice in America (Franklin, 2009, 2015).

### **Theoretical Framework**

#### **Critical Race Theory**

Racial injustice towards people of color has diluted the political system (Crenshaw, 1988). With the inconsistencies of racial equality within the judicial system, it was imperative to establish a network of individuals to decimate these injustices. Professor Derrick Bell along with Richard Delgado, Kimberle Williams Crenshaw, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams recognized systemic racism and pushed for radical reform within the judicial system (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). These scholars unapologetically addressed the racial hierarchy within the judicial system. The emergence of Critical Race Theory (CRT) established as a result of two common themes which first identified that White supremacy maintains power within the judicial system and secondly, transforming the relationship between law and racial power to create racial emancipation is essential.

Critical Race Theory commenced when these law professors recognized the need for a transformational change (Ortiz & Jani, 2010) in the judicial system (Bell, 1992). CRT is

comprised of five tenets used to expose the racial injustices within society and the systems that perpetuate these disparities (Hiraldo, 2010). Tenet one, *centrality and intersectionality of racism*, recognizes that America was built on racism, so racism is embedded in our institutions, systems, and culture. The second tenet, *challenges to dominant ideology*, rejects the actions of dominant groups when they are only concerned with their self-interest and only interested in the needs of Blacks if they (Whites) benefit from the cause. The third tenet, *centrality of experiential knowledge*, permits Blacks to share their lived experiences through counter-narratives, family history, scenarios, and other avenues. The fourth tenet, *a commitment to social justice*, focuses on eradicating racism through collaborative efforts of institutional systems to include education, healthcare, and politics. Finally, the tenet of *interdisciplinary perspective* integrates all disciplines to create discussion that generates ways to combat racial injustices.

Although CRT commenced as critical legal studies, it broadened to other professions. Expanding its scope, CRT was infused into the field of education (Ladson-Billings, 1998; Ledesma & Calderon, 2015). Critical Race Theory focuses on developing equal opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds, such as racial, ethnic, social-class, and cultural groups. Since educators are guided by pedagogy in making critical decisions regarding lessons and classroom activities, it is imperative that when planning they acknowledge the differences of all students (Closson et al., 2014). For this study on African American high school students, the third tenet of CRT (the centrality of experiential knowledge) is the focus. The narrations from participants in this study provide their experiences and realities of the oppressed (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Milner, 2007).

### **Counter-narratives to Teach History**

A counter-narrative is used to give voice to people of color which narrates their point of view that may not otherwise be considered. These narratives provide audiences with an alternative way of thinking about certain topics. For example, Stinson's (2008) study of African American male students' discourse of their positive experiences with mathematics provides an alternative to the fallacy that African American male students underperform in this subject. The participants in this study shared positive experiences in mathematics detailing how the subject provides self-empowerment that lends itself to overall success in other academic areas. Counter-narratives give voice to educate and empower African American high school students to make informed decisions about the political process and other forms of racial injustices (Tucker-

Raymond & Rosario, 2017). Employing counter-narratives to teach historical content provides African American high school students (Ladson-Billings, 2000) with an appreciation of and respect for the resiliency of those who advocated for and repudiated racial injustices (Cook, 2016; Godley & Loretto, 2013). It is pertinent that African American students analyze counter-narratives and engage in meaningful dialogue (King & Brown, 2014). Mungo's (2013) study of African American Civil Rights Generation students demonstrates that African American high school students who engage in counter-narratives about their racial experiences will appreciate them and oppose racial injustices with their voice (Wallace, 2020). The participants recounting of their racial experiences prepared them for life events, and later encouraged them to return to their community depositing positive contributions. African American students will become participatory agents in the most basic civic duty by voting and being active democratic citizens (Kahne & Sporte, 2008; Smith, 2003). These meaningful discussions and experiences will continue into their adult life, and they will not only share with others, but also seek ways to continue promoting racial justice through civic action. An example of high school students' civic participation involves Buffet's (2019) examination of New York City high school students who were socially and politically active in the Ocean Hill-Brownsville neighborhood. The New York City High School Student Union (HSSU) was created as a result of the Ocean Hill-Brownsville Teachers strike in which members of HSSU supported the African American community's rights for a community-controlled school board. The high school students networked, organized, and advocated for social and political causes that affected their lives.

School is a place where students can learn how to become active citizens through means such as voting. It is imperative that schools not only teach African American students about the importance of voting, but enact an environment of political socialization (Lee et al., 2012) where they are educated on how to research political issues and candidates, participate in voting campaigns in support of a particular political candidate, and get involved in the community to encourage others to vote (Flanagan et al., 2007; Preston-Grimes, 2007). Schools that foster an environment in which African American high school students will become politically socialized will encourage their participatory citizenship as young people and adults (Owen & Irion-Groth, 2020; Pinkney, 2016). The adult citizens who are least likely to vote are those with the least education about voting (Bernstein et al., 2001). Thus, failure to provide high caliber civic



education to African American students gives continual rise to institutional racism and the denial of utilizing their voices to engage civically (Levinson, 2012).

### **Methodology**

This study contextualizes how African American high school students discuss historical and present-day events in which they become civically engaged. The following research question was used in this study.

1. How does African American high school students' political socialization impact their views on race, racism, and politics?

This study was conducted at Way to Go, or WTG, (pseudonym), a K-12 public charter school with a 100% African American student population located in a mid-large size urban city in the southeastern region. I received administrative approval as well as parental consent to conduct this study.

### **Participants**

All participants in this study self-identified as African American high school students. The study included three girls and five boys in grades 9-12, for a total of eight participants. Pseudonyms were used for each participant.

### **Data Collection**

The data collection included a 90-minute focus group interview with the participants. The focus group interview was audio recorded. I identified significant statements and meanings during the focus group and then developed themes based on participants' responses during the focus group interview. I transcribed and analyzed 13 pages of data to further familiarize myself with the findings, following Creswell's (2013) recommendations to ensure adequate analysis of the data.

### **Data Analysis**

I employed a phenomenological coding process to extract in-depth information from the data (Miles et al., 2014). First, I transcribed as I listened to the audio recording of the participants. I listened carefully to capture exactly what and how the participants made their statements. I listened to the audio recording several times to notate exactness, including their hesitations as well as verbal, and nonverbal cues that were notated during the focus group interview. The participants were passionate about the topics being discussed; therefore, I

meticulously notated expressions of anger, disbelief, and empathy. I reviewed the field notes and summarized the significant statements.

I chunked the data into significant statements. From the 13 pages of transcripts, 37 significant statements were drawn. Next, I summarized each significant statement in a few words. Then, I coded each significant statement based on the description it matched. I utilized values coding, which explores cultural values, identity, appreciative inquiry, and oral history. I listed the words and phrases that summarized the significant statements. Some words and phrases were identified by only one code while others were identified by two or three codes. Three codes were used: *in vivo*, emotions, and values. After grouping the three codes, the words and phrases from the code groups were put into clusters. A total of 26 words and phrases were in the two clusters combined. Cluster one had the greatest number of words and phrases at 19, and cluster two had 7 phrases. Once these words and phrases were clustered, I reviewed each one with thoroughness to identify a theme. The following four themes emerged: (a) my Black history, (b) what's really real, (c) the Black vote, and (d) sugar coating. I describe each theme in detail in the next section.

### **Findings**

The students participated in a focus group where they discussed topics pertaining to race, racism, and politics. Prior to the focus group interview, the students completed a Black History project where they researched an historical African American individual who has impacted society. The following questions were used to guide the focus group.

1. How did the African American person that you researched impact their local community and/or the nation?
2. How did learning about these African Americans from history make you want to become more involved in the political process now and in the future?

For their Black history project, the participants were required to research and provide facts about a historical or present-day Black individual. Their Black history project was presented in the month of February and displayed on a tri-fold poster board. Mr. Godfrey, the social studies teacher who had been teaching the course for three years, informed me that he encouraged his students to select an individual not normally recognized in social studies' textbooks or discussed regularly in society. He wanted to increase students' knowledge and expose them to individuals who made a positive impact for Blacks. For the Black history project,

students researched historical people who had an impact on obliterating racial injustices, establishing equality, and encouraging African Americans to become civically engaged. The students learned about different historical events, people, and places that were impactful in African American life.

Mr. Godfrey was intentional in what he taught because he wanted students to be able to articulate what they learned in their Black history project. These counter narratives involved learning about people such as Mississippi native Medgar Evers, who organized voter registration drives to encourage African Americans to utilize their voice to elicit change. As a leader of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Evers' efforts included helping to end segregation in public institutions, including the University of Mississippi. Students also learned about the Ocoee Massacre, where scare tactics were implemented to prevent African Americans from voting. The teacher taught this event to educate students about the importance of African Americans voting while teaching them about two individuals, Julius "July" Perry and Mose Norman; two wealth African American men who lived in Ocoee. The aforementioned are examples of counter narratives because they provide the perspectives of African Americans who encountered racial injustices. Their teacher taught these counter narratives during most of the first half of the semester then students worked on their Black history projects. Each student had the autonomy to choose one of the individuals that Mr. Godfrey taught about, or they could select another person to conduct research for their Black history project.

I used Critical Race Theory counter-narratives (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002) to focus on how African American high school students employed counter-narratives to engage in critical dialogue about historical events and politics. The students not only engaged in a meaningful and dialogical way, but they also analyzed the historical content to articulate the importance of being informed about racism in America and conversed about ways they will utilize their voices to fulfil their civic duty through actions such as voting.

The data was based on the focus group which was a result of their Black history projects. Based on an analysis of the findings extracted from the data, four themes emerged that illustrate how African American high school students engage in critical discussion about race, racism, and politics. Those themes are: (a) My Black history, (b) What's Really Real, (c) The Black Vote, and (d) Sugar Coating. I describe each of them below.

## My Black History

The theme “My Black History” emerged when participants discussed learning Black history year-round and not just in February, which is Black history month. Each year, every student at WTG is required to research an historical or contemporary Black individual who has impacted society. The students are required to complete their Black history projects individually and have them ready for display during parent/teacher conferences. Some names the student participants researched for the Black history project included Benjamin O. Davis, Jr., Garrett Morgan, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and Carter G. Woodson. The students shared that the Black history project was their favorite school assignment as illustrated by their comments below.

**Darius:** I enjoy the Black history project because I can learn more about my people...my Black history.

**Researcher:** Why do you enjoy learning about Black history?

**Darius:** For one thing, I like it because it inspires me to go after my dreams, and I can do anything that I put my mind to if I work hard. For example, the person I had this year was Carter G. Woodson. Well, of course, I've heard about him, but when I completed this project, I learned more about what he did and how he overcame difficult times. Like he was a professor, and he was really good at what he did, but the American Historical Association, which put out what different professors wrote about, wouldn't put Carter G. Woodson's writing in its paper. He decided to start his own so African Americans would have somewhere to send what they write.

**Researcher:** You seemed to have learned a lot about Carter G. Woodson; would anyone else like to share their Black history project?

**Asia:** I researched Benjamin O. Davis, and he was the first African American general in the Air Force...He was also in charge of the Tuskegee Airmen; you know those were the African American pilots who fought in World War II.

African American high school students who learn about their history appreciate the cultural contributions (Thornhill, 2016), are inspired to accomplish their dreams in life, and are knowledgeable of African American struggles for racial progress.

**Researcher:** Is it important for you to learn African American history? Why or why not?

**Darius:** It's important to learn about African American history because it helps us understand the struggles they [African Americans] went through and the things that they contributed to help us have everything.

**Researcher:** What do you mean by have everything?

**Darius:** For example, African Americans are able to get an education anywhere that they want to because of people like Dr. King, Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, Harriet Tubman...all of those people. Honestly, I can't name them all; there are so many people who paved the way for us.

**Asia:** We also need to learn about African American history because it's inspiring to know that if they can be successful with all they had to deal with when it came to slavery, then we can do it...They became doctors, lawyers, teachers, scientists, and everything. It helps me believe that my dreams of becoming a pediatrician will happen because I have more opportunities.

Asia's response prompted me to pose the following question to the students: "If you could be one person from history, who would you be and why?" Each participant mentioned an African American politician, civil rights activists, or career professional. The names included Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., President Barack Obama, Dr. Mamie Clark, Malcolm X, and Rosa Parks. Each student's articulation of why they chose these individuals derived from the verity that these African Americans' tenacious, impactful selflessness helped to eradicate racial injustices and benefited future generations.

**Malik:** People like Dr. King and Ralph Abernathy are the real heroes, and we should want to be more like them...doing something to help everyone, not just doing something for money.

**Marquis:** Our friends want to be like these rappers...Lil Wayne, NBA YoungBoy, and the girls want to be like Nicki Minaj instead of saying that they want to be somebody from history like Vivien Thomas.

**Researcher:** What can you tell me about Vivien Thomas, and why is he someone that you would want to be from the past?

**Marquis:** He was a doctor, but technically he wasn't...What I mean is that he assisted a White doctor [Alfred Blalock] with all of his surgeries. He [Vivien Thomas] was so good that Dr. Blalock wanted him to be in the surgery room with him, and he trusted him as his

right-hand man. He [Dr. Blalock] didn't even want that man [Vivien Thomas] to go to college and get a medical degree of his own because he was afraid that if he left him, then he wouldn't be able to perform his research and make more money.

**Researcher:** How did Vivien Thomas inspire you to want to be like him?

**Marquis:** For one, I like the fact that he was so smart where he was able to work in the surgery room with the White doctors. He was pretty much a doctor; the only reason he wasn't official is because he didn't go to medical school. He didn't even have the education that Dr. Blalock and those other White doctors had, and he was, in my opinion, smarter than them because if he did go to college, he would have performed better surgeries than them.

**Nia:** That's probably why the White doctor didn't want him [Vivien Thomas] to go to college because he was afraid that he would do better than him and that he would get all of the praise.

**Marquis:** I also would want to be him because although Dr. Blalock didn't give him his props [meaning=recognition], he was still humble and did his best. They really became famous for treating something called the blue baby syndrome. Years later, Dr. Blalock and other people at Johns Hopkins Medical School made Vivien Thomas an instructor, and he was in charge of the surgeries. This man was great, and it's messed up how the White people, including Dr. Blalock, didn't give him the credit that he deserved.

**Jamarcus:** I would want to be Representative John Lewis because he marched with Dr. King and others, and all of his hard work paid off because he's one of the House of Representatives. It's like he's been fighting for justice all of his life, but now, he can really make a change because he's in a position where he makes and passes the laws.

The students' discussion of historical African Americans who impacted multiple generations demonstrates the priority that their social studies teacher, Mr. Godfrey, placed on learning African American history. African American high school students' awareness of how these historical Black individuals demanded racial equality is pertinent to their success in life. To present these possibilities, educators must refrain from teaching dominant narratives and provide students with counter-narratives that permeate their historical knowledge.

### What's Really Real?

The theme “What’s Really Real?” emerged from in vivo coding. One of the participants mentioned how Mr. Godfrey discusses “real” issues occurring in society. The other words and phrases that helped coin this theme included: everyone is not racist, Bernie Sanders, and Black Lives Matter. During the focus group, the participants discussed the reality that not everyone is racist, but some people are. During the focus group interview, the participants were candid regarding their feelings about race, racism, and politics. Their candor stemmed from having background knowledge and engaging in ongoing discussions pertaining to these topics during social studies class.

Mr. Godfrey used counter-narratives when teaching about African American history. The lessons Mr. Godfrey taught entailed perspectives from the African American voice opposed to the European’s perspective. The students shared that Mr. Godfrey taught a lesson in which they had to analyze an assortment of African American historical events and people then write and discuss the varying perspectives relating to each. An example included an examination of Malcolm X’s viewpoints and how he was perceived by White Americans. Mr. Godfrey’s intent was for his students to describe how African Americans’ methods, such as Malcolm X’s approach to eradicating racial injustices, were viewed as problematic to White Americans.

**Asia:** The purpose of Mr. Godfrey teaching us about Malcolm X is because he wanted us to understand that we can have a voice too, even if White people don’t agree with us.

**Researcher:** How was Malcolm X’s voice or approach to racial injustices different than White Americans?

**Asia:** He wasn’t afraid to fight back.

**Marquis:** Like when it came to voting, he told African Americans they needed to vote for the right person and use wisdom. He also told the White people that “hey....we have a right to vote for who want.” He told them that if you don’t treat us equally, pretty much it’s gonna be a problem. He told the government that and the KKK.

**Researcher:** Do you think Malcolm X was wrong for informing them there will be a problem if they are not treated equally? Why or why not?

**Michael:** Well, I say no because Malcolm X, he was probably tired of White people and felt like he had to let them know what time it is if they were not treated equally.

**Asia:** They [White people] were afraid that African Americans would fight them, and they would lose. That's why they thought Malcolm X was a trouble maker.

**Malik:** Like Mr. Godfrey said, it's not that he was trying to be violent; he just had to take a different approach. If they [Whites] were not treated equally, then they would do the same thing.

The teacher's incorporation of counter-narratives offers African American students an authenticated understanding of their history. The theme "What's Really Real" emerged from one participant, Malik, who stated, "Mr. Godfrey tells us what's really real...he doesn't sugar coat nothing."

**Malik:** He tells us that we learned their [White people] history for many years, so now, it's time for us to know the truth, and the truth sometimes hurt.

**Researcher:** What does he mean by the truth sometimes hurt?

**Malik:** Okay, so what I'm saying is that White people have treated us [African Americans] bad for so many years when it comes to racism, and it's time for us to learn the truth about what really happened from the people it really happened to.

The students shared that the counter narratives also played an integral part in how they viewed the political system, specifically the voting process. From their stance, if Whites provided a monolithic perspective about history, it is possible for them to be untruthful during the voting process.

### **The Black Vote**

The students understood the importance of voting and the impact it has on the Black community. Malik and other participants' beliefs are that the political system has many racist individuals who lack empathy and concern for the advancement of the African American community. Another participant, Nia, stated, "Why should I vote when they are going to cheat anyways?"

**Nia:** If White people lied about what happened to us [African Americans] in history, then why should we trust them to be honest about voting?

**Jamarcus:** That's what I'm saying. I don't know how I can even trust White people with my future when it comes to the government and politics...I mean at the end of the day, the person who is the president will determine different laws and policies that will affect us.



**Malik:** Not really Jamarcus...remember, it's Congress who make the laws like the House of Representative and Senate people, but it is important that we have a president who is for us though.

The participants were able to effectively articulate their feelings about the political system and share that while some individuals may oppose racial equality, this sentiment is not representative of everyone.

**Malik:** Listen, I understand how you all feel, but we still have to vote. My momma told me that if we don't vote, then we can't complain about stuff that happens.

**Michael:** That's true...we [African Americans] like to complain about what's going wrong, but the way we can change that is to use our voice and vote. We never know, if all of us vote, then they can only lie so much.

**Researcher:** What do you mean by, "They can only lie so much?"

**Michael:** If every African American person go and vote, then they can't change that because there will be so many of our votes. But if we don't go out and vote, we can't say anything like what Malik just said.

Mr. Godfrey understood the importance of teaching his high school students that voting gives them a voice. Furthermore, they understood the significance of voting and being informed about the candidates as well as the issues affecting society.

**Researcher:** Is it important for you to research and be informed about the candidates before voting?

**DeAndre:** Yes, Mr. Godfrey told us that we shouldn't just vote for someone because our family or friends voted for them, but we should vote for them because we agree with their viewpoints about different issues.

**Researcher:** In what ways can you find out about each candidate's viewpoints and their beliefs?

**DeAndre:** We can go on the internet and research about the different candidates and the issues, or we can attend those different events they have...I forgot what they're called, but it's where they let you know about the candidate you might vote for.

**Researcher:** It sounds like you're referring to a political organization.

**DeAndre:** Yes, a political organization. When you go to those events, they let you know about the different candidates and their beliefs.

The students understood the importance of voting and how they utilize this form of civic engagement to make changes regarding racialized matters, such as education, housing, and politics. While some students believed that the political system (primarily as it relates to voting) is flawed, the majority believed otherwise and grasped the concept that for them to witness a change, they had to get out and vote. Along with discussing influential African Americans they aspired to be like, the students also shared that their level of respect for these societal influencers is due to their relentless fight to ensure that African Americans could participate in the voting process without prejudice. The participants learned how disenfranchisement efforts to prevent African Americans from voting occurred not only during the Civil Rights era, but also during events prior to this movement. The students understood the pertinence of voting and how not participating in this basic freedom results in ramifications that fails to establish racial equality. The students at WTG were taught the challenges and successes that African Americans encountered when attempting to vote, as well as how other historical events impacted their lives.

### **Sugar Coating**

Since the students at WTG learn Black history year-round and not just in February, they were exposed to a great deal of historical facts relating to African Americans. The theme “Sugar Coating” was determined based on the participants acquiring the good and bad parts of African American history. Traditional history textbooks sugar coat events pertaining to African Americans providing only surface level narratives. These European narratives omit information of slavery and the contributions of African Americans in the United States. One participant, Malik, felt as though the traditional history textbooks failed to mention everything about African Americans. He stated that it is important to recognize known and unknown people and events that improved racial justice. Participants were asked to share historical events that impacted African Americans that people probably rarely heard of or superficial events. Jamarcus mentioned the Ocoee Massacre, and I asked him to explain further.

**Jamarcus:** It was basically where White people killed Black people. They would hang them because they didn't want them to vote. There were two wealthy African Americans who lived in Ocoee. Well, they started talking to other African Americans, trying to encourage them to vote.

**Researcher:** What happened when they encouraged African Americans to vote?

**Jamarcus:** The White people were upset, and they started killing many of the Blacks who lived in Ocoee.

**Malik:** It was really sad what they did to them...some people were able to escape though, and they went to places like Tampa and South Florida, and some of them even migrated up North to New York. My grandma told me about the Ocoee Massacre before Mr. Godfrey even taught us about this event. It's crazy because a lot of people never even heard about this.

**Asia:** What's even more messed up is that a lot of African Americans owned land in Ocoee, and the White man either killed them or forced them to leave so they couldn't claim their land. Their kids or grandchildren couldn't even claim it.

**Researcher:** What do you mean by, "They could not claim their land?"

**Asia:** They owned their homes so when they left, the White people just took them and that wasn't right because that wasn't their house. That's like if I bought a bag of chips, and I had to leave to go to the front office and somebody came and took my chips [students chuckled at Asia's example].

**Malik:** Asia, it's not quite the same thing, but I understand what you're trying to say.

**Michael:** Right...see a lot of people never even heard of the Ocoee Massacre. I know some grown people who have never heard of this event.

The students were able to share historical events relating to African Americans about disenfranchisement and discuss how they were not going to let the fight of those generations before them go in vain. Learning the truth about events such as the Ocoee Massacre exposed them to the authenticity of African American history. The participants shared that when they reached the appropriate age, they were going to vote. Furthermore, they discussed that learning about the Ocoee Massacre and other unknown events necessitates why African American history is important and how these occurrences are often neglected in traditional history textbooks.

**Malik:** History is good, but some of the stuff, like, that I noticed that they [White people] don't be telling the truth; they try to put sugar on top of it.

**Michael:** They basically sugar coat stuff about what happened during those times in history. They don't want people to know the truth because it, the truth hurts, and it will make them look bad.

**Malik:** Right...they want to keep that good image as if they are perfect, and we [African Americans] don't have it together. We have it together; we're just tired of things being kept a secret, and we're putting everything out there so we all can learn from it so that this country will be a better place.

Textbooks that provide accurate narratives opposed to surface level accounts, does not sugar coat the history of African Americans. Malik's statement is an example of the controversial 1619 Project, which reframes America's history by situating the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans as the focal of this nation's narrative (Hannah-Jones, 2019).

Mr. Godfrey taught his students that efforts to prevent African Americans from voting began many years ago. He knew the pertinence of teaching his students the history of African Americans attempting to vote in this country. Teaching students about the Ocoee Massacre demonstrated African Americans' tenacity to pursue their right to vote. It was important to Mr. Godfrey that his African American high school students did not take voting for granted so that when their time came to exercise their voice, they would get out and vote. Mr. Godfrey used the Ocoee Massacre to connect historical and current events detailing the importance of civic engagement, specifically voting, to end racial injustices. Their critical discussions about these topics create educational spaces that allow them to use history to make a change in the present.

The four themes noted in this study illustrate how these African American high school students engaged in critical dialogue connecting race, racism, and U.S. politics. Through their discussions, they were able to share how African Americans encountered racial injustices, yet persevered towards something greater: equality. The students' connection of racism in America to politics prompted them to discuss how they will utilize their voice to eliminate racial injustices by participating in their voluntary civic duty, voting. It was evident that learning about African Americans who were beaten, jailed, and/or killed played a major role in the students' desire to vote. Therefore, it is pertinent that social studies educators incorporate lessons about African American history, permitting students to not only gain knowledge about the past, but also to apply it to their lives for future success. Acquiring African American history and the historical efforts made by individuals to ensure participation in the voting process, will promote African American high school students' civic engagement and becoming productive citizens.

## **Limitations and Opportunities for Future Research**

### **Lack of Generalizability**

This study did present a limitation. Since the study was conducted at a charter school, it limited the number of students who were able to participate. Although focus groups are intended to capture the quality of the data opposed to the quantity, conducting several focus groups will benefit this study. With the need to encourage civic engagement in African American young people, expanding this study will allow researchers to identify other students' thoughts pertaining to race, racism, and politics on a larger scale. Conducting this study on a broader scope will allow African American high school students to engage in critical discussion and identify why it is important for them to become civically engaged, which will promote more African American students to use their voices by participating in the voting process. This expansion will create a wave of civic engagement for African American students. The more individuals who are civically responsible, the greater the chances of abolishing institutional racism in spaces such as education, politics, and healthcare. Schools that allow for these crucial conversations to occur within their classrooms promote students' utility of critical thinking and civic engagement.

### **Implications for Practice**

Exploring Critical Race Theory in high school classrooms allows students to engage in discourse that promotes awareness of the racial injustices within society. It is imperative that teachers incorporate lessons on counter narratives into high school social studies classrooms. Facilitating a discussion for students at WTG to share their thoughts and feelings about race and racism in the past permitted them to engage in critical conversations about politics and the unending racialized incidents that affect African Americans. Through the use of counter-narratives, this study allows educators to identify and effectively approach critical topics relating to race, racism, and politics with African American high school students. It is essential that educators are cognizant of the significance of engaging students in such critical conversations, which entails equipping them with ways to navigate effectively when confronted with racial injustices as well as providing them with the necessary skills to develop into productive, civically engaged adults in society.

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