

TRANSGENERATIONAL AND VICARIOUS RACE-BASED TRAUMA: THE  
CONNECTION TO ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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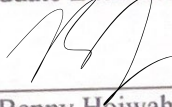
TRANSGENERATIONAL AND VICARIOUS RACE-BASED TRAUMA: THE  
CONNECTION TO ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES

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A Dissertation  
Presented to  
The Faculty of the Graduate Education Department  
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By

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## ABSTRACT

Vicarious racial trauma, a concept deeply embedded within the framework of Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory and supported by Porges' polyvagal theory, stands as a multifaceted and intricate phenomenon intimately interwoven with the pervasive nature of systemic racism. As Vygotsky's socio-cultural theory suggests, human development and experiences are profoundly influenced by the sociocultural context within which they occur. Vicarious racial trauma signifies the transgenerational transfer of trauma within marginalized communities, where, in line with Vygotsky's theory, individuals learn and internalize their responses to this trauma from their broader cultural milieu. Consequently, its causes are multifaceted, rooted deeply in the historical and ongoing racial injustices experienced by others, both within the community and across the world. The manifestations of vicarious racial trauma are as diverse as the sociocultural environments from which they emerge. This trauma creates a shared experience of racial injustice, prompting collective outrage and mobilization within communities.

This complex and evolving concept is profoundly rooted in the ongoing struggle against racial injustice, encompassing its causes and manifestations. By embracing a comprehensive approach informed by socio-cultural and polyvagal perspectives, we can strive for a more just and equitable future, where racial trauma yields to healing and empowerment.

## CHAPTER ONE

### INTRODUCTION

More than 50 years after the Civil Right Act (1964) and the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) court ruling, academic achievement gaps among Black and Brown high school students continue to be a persistent issue throughout the United States (MacFarland et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020). For this paper Black and Brown student referred to students who identify as part of the Black community. Substantial research and data associated with the persistent academic achievement gaps among Black and Brown students show those gaps are not closing (Smith et al., 2020; St. Mary et al., 2018). There is evidence due to the COVID-19 pandemic, achievement gaps are widening due to school closures and hybrid learning environments (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020; Cokley et al., 2021; Koumpilova, 2021).

The pandemic also revealed systemic racism is still evident and is part of the cultural fiber, creating continued racial trauma for young Black and Brown people (Adedoyin et al., 2019; Cokley et al., 2021). As noted by Ieva et al. (2021), a failure of equity leadership exists in our public-school systems to address racial trauma and persistent academic achievement gaps. However, these gaps must be recognized as more than just achievement gaps that occur within a school framework. A majority of research takes the deficit approach, that is seeking to find the deficiencies in the study group, instead of looking at how opportunity and access are distributed through the institutional structures of schools and society (Assari et al., 2021; Gorski, 2019; Vaughans, 2021). Research has identified transgenerational trauma as transmissible, creating distrust and a pervasive fear of danger within Black and Brown communities (Dalvie & Daskalakis,

2021; Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Yehuda et al., 2018). Research has consistently demonstrated that individuals who are part of untapped or stigmatized groups internalize mainstream society's message of inferiority (Adedoyin et al., 2019; R. Anderson, et al., 2019).

### **Theoretical Framework**

The major theoretical framework for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) social development theory. This seminal theory stresses the role of social and cultural interaction in developing cognitive ability, as well as community being instrumental in the process of making meaning of the world around us. According to Vygotsky, "learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function" (pp. 90). This means social learning comes before development and a child's development is dependent on social learning. Social and cultural interactions and experiences are embedded within an individual's development. The purpose of sociocultural theory was to understand how an individual's mental growth is connected to their culture, community, and history. According to Vygotsky's theory, social interaction causes ongoing changes in children's minds and behaviors, which might be substantially different between cultures (McLeod, 2018).

The Polyvagal theory was used as a secondary framework. The polyvagal theory is a concept developed by Dr. Stephen Porges that explains the physiological and psychological responses of the autonomic nervous system (ANS) to stress and trauma. This theory provides insight into the connection between the nervous system, emotions, and social interactions (Porges, 2009, 2011). According to the polyvagal theory, the ANS consists of three distinct but interconnected response systems, including the social

engagement system, the sympathetic flight-or-fight response. And the parasympathetic freeze or shutdown response. The polyvagal theory emphasizes the role of the vagus nerve in regulating these responses. The theory suggests that the vagus nerve plays a crucial role in modulating social engagement, physiological states, and emotional regulation (Porges, 2009).

### ***Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Theory***

Vygotsky emphasized how social and cultural relationships affect cognitive development (McLeod, 2018). When young people are constantly exposed to racism, directly or indirectly, racial trauma is experienced (Fairfax, 2020; Pickett, 2020; Zilanawala et al., 2019). It is possible academic experiences and outcomes are related to racial trauma based on Vygotsky's social cultural theory. Maurizio Meloni (2016), a social theorist, argued in his book, *Political Biology* that political and social factors are almost always present in human development theories, furthering the idea that racial trauma, firsthand or vicarious, is a barrier to academic experiences and outcomes for Black and Brown high school students. While Vygotsky's theory focuses on cultural and social impacts, a more recent theory describes the central nervous system's responses when the cultural and social interactions are traumatic.

### ***The Polyvagal Theory***

The polyvagal theory was introduced in 1994 by Dr. Stephen Porges to explain how the "autonomic nervous system controls the reactions and behaviors of individuals affected by a wide range of traumatic experiences" (Porges, 2021). The polyvagal theory connects mind-body relationships with three decades of research. This goes back to Darwin, who focused on facial expressions as defining emotions, theorizing there was

specific communication between brain structures that consisted of neural pathways. However, Darwin did not have access to current information about the brainstem or the neurophysiological function of the vagus nerve. Living organisms are not monofunctioning beings; instead, they are adaptive and interactive, yet interdependent physiological systems (Porges, 1995). According to Porges (1995) former theorists and researchers failed to take several factors into account, such as the parasympathetic process, central regulatory structures, and the adaptive and dynamic nature of the automatic nervous system. New theories such as the polyvagal take into consideration the ever-changing and interactive components that connect central brain structures with organs of the central nervous system (Porges, 1995). The feeling of safety prompts the nervous system to promote steady health and growth, thus developing the ability to form healthy connections with others without the feelings of risk or threat. The feeling of safety is a basic ongoing human need (Porges, 2022).

Considering brain development in relationship to social and cultural experiences, the polyvagal theory provided an explanation for how the vagal nerve sparks responses when trauma is or has been present. Transmissible, transgenerational, and vicarious trauma can create distrust and a pervasive fear of danger within Black and Brown communities (Dalvie & Daskalakis, 2021; Heard-Garris et al., 2018; Yehuda et al., 2018). This is a scenario in which Black and Brown students' brain response to racial trauma, whether personal or vicarious, can prompt a flight, fight, or shut down response or result in disassociation (Dalvie & Daskalakis, 2021; Fox-Williams, 2018; Mekawi et al., 2021).

The socio-cultural theory provided valuable insights and contributed to the literature by exploring the social and cultural context, emphasizing the significance of

social and cultural factors in shaping individuals' experiences. This theory highlighted how societal structures, power dynamics, and cultural beliefs influence the experience and impact of trauma. It recognized that vicarious and transgenerational trauma is not only an individual experience, but also occurs within broader social and cultural contexts. The polyvagal theory contributed to the literature by helping explain the physiological and psychological responses associated with vicarious and transgenerational trauma, including the activation of the sympathetic nervous system, emotions, and social interactions in the context of race-based trauma.

Through the literature review in Chapter Two, this narrative qualitative study explored the gap in literature between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The literature review uncovered how race-based barriers impact the health and academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The theoretical underpinning of the study, social-cultural theory, coupled with the polyvagal theory, reframed academic outcomes through a racial trauma lens. The literature review also uncovered how primary racial trauma affects educational outcomes of Black and Brown youth and how primary and secondary racial trauma affects the health of Black and Brown people. Furthermore, this study identified interventions and policies schools should consider implementing to ensure the academic experiences and success of Black and Brown high students is in line with their White counterparts. Chapter Three included the research methods, design, and instrumentation used for this study, and Chapter Four presented the findings through the qualitative methodology conducted. Chapter Five

concluded with the summary analysis of data and recommendations for systemic change, as well as potential future research related to this topic.

### **Problem Statement**

The problem is, Black and Brown high school students are not benefiting from K-12 public education in the same way as their White counterparts (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015). The academic achievement gap continues to be a persistent issue throughout the United States, even though years of data and research address the issue (Bohrnstedt et al., 2015; Bonilla, 2017). Research showed that family background and the role of the family are directly linked to academic success. A family's educational background is a catalyst for academic and life successes of future generations (Assari et al., 2021; Hung et al., 2020). This research supports the socio-cultural theory that a child's early experiences and exposure can influence how they learn and see the world around them. However, family educational background cannot be altered or used as an excuse to disregard the reality that many public schools are failing Black and Brown students. Public schools have a moral obligation to ensure students from every background, race, and ethnicity are provided with an equitable opportunity to succeed academically (Ermisch & Francesconi, 2001; A.R. Fields, 2014). School leaders struggle to implement effective inclusion practice and understand how to address the effects of racial trauma and how it connects to the school experience, ultimately affecting educational outcomes (Ainscow, 2020; Caldera et al., 2020; Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). The identified gap in the literature regarding the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the high school experience for Black and Brown students presents an opportunity to bridge the missing knowledge and understanding. By addressing this gap, the research aims to shed light on

the experiences and challenges faced by Black and Brown students in the context of racial trauma, with a specific focus on the high school setting.

The selected design for this study aligned with the narrative qualitative approach. The use of qualitative research allowed for an in-depth exploration and understanding of the lived experiences, perceptions, and narratives of individuals. This aligned with the intention of the study to focus on the stories and experiences of Black and Brown students, aimed to capture their unique perspectives and insights. Through qualitative research methods such as interviews and thematic analysis, the study sought to uncover the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the high school experience, as well as identify potential interventions and practices to address these issues.

In summary, the study aimed to bridge the gap in literature regarding the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the high school experience for Black and Brown students. Through qualitative methods, the study sought to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issue and contribute to the development of effective interventions and practices in the educational context.

### **Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri Schools. At this stage in the research transgenerational trauma will be as defined as the subconscious transmission of traumatic experiences and their psychological and emotional impacts across generations. Vicarious trauma will be defined as the emotional and psychological impact that can occur as a result of indirect exposure to traumatic experiences. This narrative qualitative study was different from

other studies due to the dual-framework approach and the focus on secondhand trauma as a barrier that specifically affects the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The study used the socio-cultural theory as the primary framework and the polyvagal theory to support the idea of brain-body reaction to trauma, to determine how transgenerational trauma and other vicarious trauma may be connected to Black and Brown high school students' academic experiences and ultimately academic outcomes.

In addition, the researcher used the theoretical underpinning and brain research to determine how sociopolitical factors cause barriers to learning in a traditional school setting and academic achievement specific to Black and Brown high school students. The study recommended policies, procedures, and interventions school and district leaders could consider implementing to create equity and access to overcome the race-based trauma barriers that impact the academic achievement of Black and Brown high school students.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher proposed by studying secondary trauma, connections could be made between academic success and trauma experiences. It is believed that there may be a connection between academic success and racial trauma experienced by Black and Brown high school students in the state of Missouri. The following were research questions to elicit responses from participants in the study.

1. How do Black and Brown high school students in Missouri describe their experiences with racial issues in their schools, and how do these experiences shape their academic journeys?

2. How do participants perceive the connections between their high school experiences and their academic outcomes, and what meaning do they make of these connections?
3. How do interviewees imagine public schools' policies, procedures, and interventions could create equity and access for Black and Brown students in Missouri?

### **Significance of the Study**

The significance of this study was to explore the lived experiences of Black and Brown people attending public high school in Missouri. The qualitative study was designed to provide insight on the influence of transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma through a social-cultural lens, using the polyvagal theory as the research on the effects of trauma on the brain-body. The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri Schools. The narratives from Black and Brown high school graduates explored the research questions in the areas of how transgenerational and other secondary racial trauma might have shaped the educational experiences of Black and Brown people.

In addition, this narrative qualitative study will add to current literature and address the gap in literature regarding secondary racial-trauma's connection to school experiences. The research was designed to capture the connections between vicarious race-based traumas, real and perceived, on the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. Current research is limited to the effects of firsthand racial trauma on the effects of academic outcomes and the health effects of first-

and secondhand racial trauma. This research study examined the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma on academic outcomes and the implications. This study also provided a unique view to consider when analyzing the continued academic gap in Black and Brown high school students. By combining a sociocultural view with brain response research, it is possible to design policies, programming, and This study also recognized academic outcomes are influenced by a variety of cultural and social factors, not necessarily within the school framework. K-12 public schools are instrumental in finding outlets to ensure opportunities for equitable education is available to all students. Literature on the role of academic institutions indicates K-12 public schools are ill-equipped to provide the mental health and curricular needs of Black and Brown high school students who are affected by secondhand racial trauma (Ieva et al., 2021).

### **Definitions of Key Terms**

Key terms and definitions were provided to deepen the understanding of the study. For the purpose of this study the following terms will be defined as follows:

**Achievement Gap.** In education this refers to the disparity in academic performance between groups of students. The achievement gap shows up in grades, standardized-test scores, course selection, dropout rates, and college-completion rates, among other success measures (Ansell, 2011).

**Black and Brown students.** Students who identify as being part of the Black community at large (F.J. Davis, 2010).

**Deficit Approach.** Blames untapped populations for the barriers, challenges, and inequalities they face in education (Davis & Museus, 2019).

**Dissociation.** Losing a sense of presence resulting in experiencing a disconnection and lack of continuity between thoughts, memories, surroundings, and actions (Porges, 2017).

**Equity.** Quality education for all citizens, seeking to develop individual, social, intellectual, cultural, and emotional capacities, within a framework of effective equality of opportunity; the shared effort of the entire education community in caring for the diversity of students (Juradro de Los Santos, et.al., 2020).

**Opportunity Gap.** The disparity in access to quality schools and the resources needed for all children to be academically successful (Gorski, 2017).

**Race-Related Stress.** The mental and emotional distress and tension of individuals or groups, caused by frequent encounters and exposures to varying forms (e.g., individual, cultural, institutional) of racist stimuli; resulting in a threat to well-being (Harrell, 2000; Utsey & Ponterotto, 1996).

**Transgenerational trauma.** Exposure to adverse events can affect individuals so greatly that their children incur their parents' trauma via narrative or messaging. Also, the effect of the trauma is “passed” down through nongenomic possibly “epigenetic mechanisms” (Yehuda et al., 2018).

**Untapped Communities.** The presence of undiscovered invaluable resources of latent potency. Used instead of the term “marginalized” that alludes to insufficiency and inadequacy (Ukaegbu, 2017).

**Vicarious trauma.** Indirect exposure to a traumatic event by hearing through firsthand accounts, seeing racist acts committed against other members of one’s race, or witnessing racist acts either personally or on the news (Heard-Garris, 2018).

## **Limitations**

The limitations in this study were as follows:

- Researcher and participant biases were a possibility in a qualitative study.
- Results of the interviews may have been limited by participants' personal and professional biases.
- This study was qualitative in nature and used little quantitative data to build on the narrative. Future research may combine the information collected in this study with quantitative data.
- Given the research design of interviews, and roundtable discussions, a limitation on the scope of information was possible.
- Research may have been limited by the researcher's experience as an interviewer.

## **Delimitations**

The delimitations that were identified for this study were as follows:

- Study was delimited to participants within the Black community.
- Participants were excluded if they had not attended a public school within the state of Missouri.
- Transgenerational and vicarious trauma were the focus of the study.
- The researcher chose to use Zoom as the interview platform.
- The quantity of interview questions was delimited by the researcher to focus only on transgenerational and vicarious trauma.

## **Assumptions**

Assumptions for this study were as follows:

1. It was assumed the study group could be generalizable to Black and Brown high schools graduates who attended 4 years of high school and graduated in Missouri within the last 8 years.
2. It was assumed participants gave honest and open responses.
3. It was assumed participants willingly participated throughout the entirety of the study.

### **Design Controls**

A narrative qualitative study approach was used for the study. The study was conducted in three phases with the same participants. Phase I was a reflective questionnaire filled out by 30 Black American adults residing in the State of Missouri, between the ages of 18-30, male and female. Phase II focused on one-on-one interviews between the researcher and the participants chosen from the questionnaire responses, and Phase III was a roundtable discussion between the participants with the researcher's primary role as a listener and observer. The researcher clarified questions when necessary, to enable participants to fully understand the questions, but otherwise the researcher was a bystander, journaling as the participants spoke freely to one another during the roundtable discussions.

The interactive process of this study sought to gain an integrated perspective, from the Black community, on the effects of vicarious race-based trauma on the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high students. The researcher listened to the suggestions for interventions, and policy changes that need to occur within school frameworks. The information gained through the interviews, roundtable discussions,

journaling, and archival data was triangulated to increase the reliability and credibility of the study.

This study met the criteria of validity in qualitative research, which requires the constant and careful attention to the way the data were collected. Through data collection from the participants, archival data, and methodical analysis of literature, the study met the criteria for validity and the control of personal bias. Limitations for the study were also identified to ensure the study was valid. It is acknowledged that the findings were from a qualitative lens, focusing on the human narrative that may arise when conducting research from a qualitative lens. Delimitations of the study were identified as academic experiences and achievement associated with Black and Brown Missouri high school students.

The researcher selected a narrative qualitative study to understand the lived experiences of Black and Brown people as it related to race-based traumas, firsthand transgenerational, and vicarious. Using a qualitative narrative study allowed the researcher to answer the question, how does vicarious racial trauma affect the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown Missouri high school students? The researcher analyzed the perceptions of the connection between racial trauma, first- and secondhand, on the school experiences of those participants interviewed. This provided the researcher a meaningful reality of how racial trauma is connected to the academic experiences of Black and Brown high school students. In this qualitative narrative study, 12 participants were interviewed and were part of a roundtable discussion. The study's sample size met the criterium of eight to 15 participants. The study included participants in urban and suburban Missouri. The varied locations provided an opportunity to find

similarities and differences between the shared experiences of the participants representing different dynamics throughout the state of Missouri.

Participants were sent a request to interview with the researcher and each participant willingly accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Each participant was interviewed via Zoom and the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The transcriptions were coded to provide confidentiality of participants, as well as to identify consistent themes identified during the interviews. To provide for limitations and delimitations, the researcher used open-ended questions about experiences related to race-based trauma and what policies and interventions are necessary to bring sustainable change to Missouri schools.

The researcher attempted to add reliability to the study by triangulating data through the interviews, roundtable discussions, and academic data archived in the Missouri Department of Education, and United States Department of Education, as well as archived survey data on the effects of race-based trauma on Black Americans using the Race-Based Traumatic Stress Symptom Scale (RBTSSS). The interactive process of this study sought to gain an integrated perspective on race-based trauma from the Black community and the connection between achievement gaps in Black and Brown high school students. The data gained through interviews, roundtable discussions, and archival data were triangulated to increase the reliability and credibility of the study.

The researcher sought to further strengthen reliability and validity through review of the interview session recordings, and concept mapping, attempting to provide a state-wide perspective. The researcher assumed participants provided honest responses that accurately described their experiences as related to race-based trauma. Additionally, the

researcher assumed participants volunteered for the study and would participate throughout the entirety of the research. They were also informed they could drop out of the study at any time.

This study met the criteria of validity in qualitative research, which requires constant and careful attention to the way the data were collected. Through data collection from the participants and analysis of literature, the study met criteria for validity and the control of personal bias (Alam, 2021). Limitations for the study were also identified to ensure the study was valid. It is acknowledged that the findings were from a qualitative lens, focusing on the human narrative that may arise when conducting research from a qualitative lens. Delimitations of the study were identified to academic experiences and achievement associated with Black and Brown people.

The researcher's role at the time of the study was a coordinator of site interventions in a large Missouri school district with diverse student demographics. Researcher bias is a factor to consider when conducting a study. The researcher set aside personal opinion and judgment and based the study on research on the topic.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri Schools. Through the literature review it was determined traumatic experiences directly impact the health and well-being of those affected. This study explored the gap in research on racial vicarious or transgenerational trauma and its connection to academic experiences for Black and Brown high school students. The socio-cultural theory provided insight into current

literature on the connections between trauma, health, and educational experiences. The polyvagal theory supported the socio-cultural theory with brain research as it relates to trauma. These two theories were used to explore the connections between vicarious and transgenerational trauma and the school experiences of Black and Brown students.

Chapter Two consisted of the literature review conducted to deepen the understanding of the theoretical framework used to guide and support this study. Through the literature review this study looked critically at current research regarding race-based trauma, primary, transgenerational, and vicarious trauma as barriers to health and academic outcomes of Black and Brown Americans. The review of literature supported the foundational framework for this study and uncovered brain research that supports the theory that racial trauma is connected to the school experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown students. Chapter Three included the qualitative research methods and instrumentation used for this study, and Chapter Four presented the researcher's conclusions based on the interviews and roundtable discussions. Chapter Five concluded with the summary analysis of data and recommendations for change, as well as potential future research related to this topic.

## CHAPTER TWO

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

#### **Introduction**

In the rich tapestry of educational experiences, the stories of Black and Brown high school students have often been overshadowed, their voices silenced amidst the prevailing inequities. Within the complex web of factors that shape their journey, the impact of transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma remains a hidden thread, weaving its way through the corridors of their educational lives.

This narrative qualitative study set out to unravel the intricacies of the connections, to illuminate the untold narratives and shed light on the profound influence that racial trauma exerts on the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. By diving deep into their stories, perspectives, and lived realities, this research sought to unearth the underlying dynamics, challenge the status quo, and pave the way for transformative change. Step into this journal, where the echoes of the past collide with the aspirations of the future, as we embark on a quest to unveil the intricate tapestry that intertwines transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma with the educational pathways of Black and Brown high school students.

This narrative qualitative study was conducted within the context of the K-12 public education system in the United States, specifically focused on the experiences of Black and Brown high school students. The research problem arose from the persistent disparities and inequities that exist in educational outcomes between different racial and ethnic groups. Despite efforts to address these issues, the academic achievement gap continues to be a pressing concern, particularly for Black and Brown students. The study acknowledged the historical and systemic factors that have contributed to these

disparities, including racial discrimination, socioeconomic disparities, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. Within this context, the research problem is further exacerbated by the impact of transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma, which has received limited attention in the existing literature. By exploring the connections between racial trauma and educational experiences, this study sought to shed light on the unique challenges faced by Black and Brown high school students and contribute to the ongoing efforts to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments.

The significance of this study was in its response to critical issues and debates surrounding the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students in the context of racial trauma. Despite decades of research on educational disparities and the achievement gap, the specific impact of transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma on these students remains largely unexplored and under-addressed in the literature.

Understanding the experiences of Black and Brown high school students is crucial in dismantling systemic inequities and creating inclusive educational environments. By examining the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and educational outcomes, this study sought to bring clarity and resolution to an issue that has profound implications for students' well-being, academic success, and future prospects. The findings of this research will contribute to the broader discussions on racial injustice in education, providing insights into the ways in which racial trauma connects to the high school experiences of Black and Brown students. It will shed light on the specific challenges they face, such as racial discrimination, stereotype threat, and cultural dissonance. The findings will also offer a platform for their voices to be heard.

The literature review for this study consisted of four sections: The first section focused on trauma responses in general, firsthand race-based trauma, and the connection between academic experiences and overall health of the focus group. The second section explored secondary racial trauma, cultural, transgenerational, and vicarious, and the implications on the health and education of Black and Brown students. The third section addressed other deficit-based barriers that affect the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The final section focused on interventions, programs, and policies that have been implemented in school districts and state legislation, to address racial trauma within a school framework. As a result of this review of literature, with the subsequent research and data, the study determined the possible connection of secondary trauma on academic outcomes of Black and Brown high school students, and the best practices of districts to be agents of equity leadership to make true enduring change that no longer focuses of the deficit approach.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri Schools. At this stage in the research transgenerational trauma will be as defined as the subconscious transmission of traumatic experiences and their psychological and emotional impacts across generations. Vicarious trauma will be defined as the emotional and psychological impact that can occur because of indirect exposure to traumatic experiences. This narrative qualitative study was different from other studies due to the dual-framework approach and the focus on secondhand trauma as a barrier that specifically affects the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and

Brown high school students. The study used the socio-cultural theory as the primary framework and the polyvagal theory to support the idea of brain-body reaction to trauma, to determine how transgenerational trauma and other vicarious trauma may be connected to Black and Brown high school students' academic experiences and ultimately academic outcomes.

In addition, the researcher used the theoretical underpinning and brain research to determine how sociopolitical factors cause barriers to learning in a traditional school setting and academic achievement specific to Black and Brown high school students. The study recommended policies, procedures, and interventions school and district leaders could consider implementing to create equity and access to overcome the race-based trauma barriers that impact the academic achievement of Black and Brown high school students.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The major theoretical framework used for this study was Vygotsky's (1978) Socio-Cultural Perspective. The socio-cultural framework addressed the importance of social interactions between children and others within their cultural communities. These interactions shape their mental abilities, educational perspectives, and how they respond to social situations (McLeod, 2018). Vygotsky's theory focused on the socialization of various social interactions within a person's early life. Cultural factors were a key aspect in analyzing the cognitive development of children. In addition, Vygotsky believed language plays an imperative role in cognitive development. If a child hears negative language, such as racism or discrimination, firsthand or vicariously, research shows it adversely affects health, therefore it could also adversely affect their cognitive

development and educational experiences and outcomes (Anderson, R.; Huguley, J., 2019, & Saleem, et al., 2020). Whole child development is directly impacted by external stimuli. Without these external influences a child is likely not to reach their full learning potential. Vygotsky identified these interactions as the Zone of Proximal Development. There are concepts that children learn easily, but more complex concepts require guidance by adults in their life (Vygotsky, 1978). Viewing the achievement gap through a trauma lens, the socio-cultural framework guided this study through the understanding of how social interactions and cultural beliefs affect development and how someone views the world around them (Carpendale & Lewis, 2004).

Reframing education through the lens of the generational trauma of injustice and other vicarious trauma provided insight into the views of untapped communities regarding the institutional culture of academic systems. The relational connection between generational injustice, vicarious traumas, and academic outcomes aligns with the long-standing achievement gaps that persist within the K-12 public school system (Iruka et al., 2022). Because of the brain-body connections, a supporting theory was used to explain the physiological and psychological response to trauma and the potential connection to the academic experiences and outcomes for Black and Brown high school students.

Dr. Stephen Porges, a scientist at Indiana University, is the founding director of the Traumatic Stress Research Consortium. Dr. Porges' (1994) polyvagal theory emphasizes that a person's physiological state is connected to their behavioral and mental states. Including brain function and learning accessibility as well as their emotional state and socialization. When a person is exposed to trauma their brain goes into a primitive

state of protection. That can be a flight, fight, or freeze mode, but also a dissociative state is common if the trauma is consistent and ongoing. When a person feels safe their central nervous system can react to others without feeling a sense of threat or vulnerability, neutralizing a defensive mechanism. However, a person who has experienced trauma is unable to regulate and utilize their higher brain, and instead the primitive brain functions automatically engage (Porges, 2022).

There is a common understanding that trauma and stress cause neuroreceptor responses. Most people are familiar with stress and have a common understanding that stress negatively affects an individual's physical and mental health (Porges, 2017). It is not widely understood that trauma responses manifest differently than stress responses. Trauma responses are not limited to the fight or flight, but also include immobilization, behavior shutdown, and dissociation that can lead to life altering biological changes (Porges, 2017; Yehuda et al., 2018).

Healthy human growth and development are directly related to feeling safe (Porges, 2022; Stern et al., 2022). According to Porges (2017) humans possess more than one defense mechanism, but the brain involuntarily picks which one to use when in a perceived dangerous or threatening situation. Trauma victims may be in a defensive mode, shutdown, or even disassociate; in this state they are unable to detect safety cues, facial expressions may be emotionless, and their voice may lack prosody or a certain rhythm or intonation. In addition to body language responses, the lasting effects of trauma trigger social responses such as sweating, increased heart rate, and heart palpitations (Porges, 2017). Humans are equipped with a newer vagal circuit that calms and regulates during social interaction situations; however, trauma survivors' newer

vagal circuit is compromised, causing the primitive defensive mechanisms to take over and can possibly cause immobilization and dissociation.

Dr. Porges (1995) pointed out face-to-face interactions, or in-person human connection can minimize these side effects. Trauma affects awareness and can reduce cognitive resources. The polyvagal theory proposes humans rely upon social connectedness and this connectedness is an integral part of feeling safe. A person's Social Engagement System works within the mammalian or higher brain to receive safety cues and downregulate threat reactions (Porges, 2022). Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory suggests that social interactions with family and community are how children learn and develop. The Zone of Proximal development focuses on the area within what a person can do without guidance and what the person cannot do without another's assistance. Vygotsky proposed that without external guidance a child cannot reach their full potential, known as Zone of Proximal Development (Podolskiy, 2012). Considering these two theories in relationship to the importance of social interactions and relationships, one may theorize that when a child experiences trauma their central nervous system does not develop in the same way a non-traumatized child's central nervous system develops. This may cause long-term response changes in the child who experienced the trauma, whether firsthand or vicariously.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, personal distancing, virtual learning, and masking may have created a situation where trauma victims were in a constant state of disassociation or shutdown, intensifying trauma responses. Neuroception is how risk is unconsciously evaluated (Porges, 2017). If trauma victims are unable to find safety in facial expressions, or by vocalization, the nervous system will respond by collapsing into

a protective state. If a trauma victim is stuck in a state that minimizes or eliminates social interactions or they do not have a sense of safety, their nervous system may detect risk, when in fact there is no risk. If this state is prolonged the victim may conceptualize not being loved or accepted, eroding their trust in the safety of others (Porges, 2017).

Based on the socio-cultural perspective and the polyvagal theory research, it is understood that neural conductors create social contexts and when neuroceptors are triggered the health of the trauma victim is affected. It was reasonable to conclude that generational and vicarious trauma victims are connected in the same way. Racial trauma creates feelings of low self-worth, isolation, shame, avoidance, and imposter syndrome. These feelings result in a brain-body shutdown and even disassociation and immobilization (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019; Mekawi, et al., 2021; Roberson & Carter, 2022; Saleem et al., 2020)

Trauma event responses are stored like muscle memory and can be triggered if the victim senses danger. Even if no real danger exists, a trauma victim may still have a trauma response if they perceive danger (Porges, 2017). Generational and vicarious trauma are not usually isolated events; often they are ongoing over a period of time (McCrary et al., 2022). Exposure to racial injustice through media and cultural and systemic racism affect brain responses ultimately affecting the health and learning outcomes of Black and Brown students if not addressed (Bernard et al., 2021; Houston & Spialek, 2018).

### ***Racism***

It is imperative to identify definitions of racism that have evolved over time. The traditional perspective of racism is associated with hostility, discrimination, and

prejudices against a certain race of people. Jewish people faced racism on a national level in Germany, ending in the slaughter of millions of Jews. Albanians endured widespread destruction and death in Kosovo based on race. There have also been race-based conflicts in the Balkans, Rwanda, Chechnya, to name a few.

Racism, first- or secondhand, is a primary cause of stress and trauma in the lives of Black and Brown students; research has shown this erodes the psychological structure of young minds and strips away dignity and self-efficacy (Grinage, 2019; Saleem et al., 2020; Yehuda et al., 2018). There are glaring statistical accounts of unequal treatment towards Black and Brown people within the judicial system and law enforcement, which in turn leads to racial trauma ending in a lack of self-esteem, connectedness to community, decreased levels of achievement, and increased stress (Legewie & Fagan, 2019; Krieger, 2020; Mekawi, et al, 2021; Torrats-Espinosa, 2020).

Vygotsky (1978) theorized that individuals' overall development, including their cognitive development, is connected to their culture, community, and history. Social interactions cause ongoing changes in children's minds and behaviors, which might be substantially different between cultures (McLeod, 2018).

Vygotsky emphasized how social and cultural relationships and interactions affect cognitive development (McLeod, 2018). When young people are constantly exposed to racism, directly or indirectly, racial trauma is experienced (Fairfax, 2020; McIntosh, 2019; Pickett, 2020). Racism against Black Americans is embedded into the historical and cultural fiber of America (Salter et al., 2018). Racism is not just blatant discrimination and prejudices, however. Racism is elevating opportunity for one and oppressing the opportunity for others, known as opportunity gaps. When racism is present

within a social context, this becomes part of the community fabric Black and Brown children recognize as part of their culture and history, creating possible generational trauma.

During the 2017-2018 school year, only 2% of Black students were enrolled in advanced placement courses and the curricula throughout most K-12 public schools are Eurocentric. This further creates disinterest and distrust in school for Black and Brown students and families. In addition, Black males are more likely to be labeled as educable mentally impaired or learning disabled and are expelled from school more frequently than White males (A. Anderson, et al., 2020; Vaughans, 2021).

Race-related discussions are uncomfortable for many teachers, so they inadvertently silence the voices of students who want and need to talk about racial experiences (R. Anderson, et al., 2019; Grinage, 2019). Racism has a detrimental impact on the health of those exposed to it, both firsthand and vicariously. Racial trauma has a mental health impact, as well as biological and physical implications. The polyvagal theory explains how the automatic nervous system responds when there is a perceived danger. When no danger is present, or past trauma, higher brain structures are able to regulate and defense mechanisms are not necessary (Porges, 2017). This concept supports the socio-cultural theory through understanding the importance of social contexts and how safe situations allow the central nervous system to respond naturally. On the other hand, if a person has not been in safe situations and has experiences trauma, social cues and normal behavior responses are compromised. People exposed to secondary trauma may also experience elevated central nervous systems responses.

## ***Racial Trauma***

Historically, trauma has been defined as exposure to stressful life events, resulting in negative overall quality of life, whether it be physical, emotional, or mental health effects. Understanding the socio-cultural theory's explanation of how children grow and develop, combined with the polyvagal theory's brain research on trauma, when children experience racial trauma, there is a central nervous system response that affects the way they respond to situations, and the way they perceive the world around them.

Trauma has become mainstream in American society, and it is estimated that 70% of people worldwide will be exposed to one traumatic event in their life (Hamby et al., 2021). In a study conducted in 2021, 70% of participants surveyed responded they were exposed to a trauma of some kind (Dalvie & Daskalakis, 2021). The trauma exposure researched in the aforementioned study included various traumas and the participants were from diverse races, nationalities, and genders. Trauma is widely researched and being treated on a large scale. When defining adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), PTSD and other traumas, including race-based trauma, have been excluded. However, research shows that people exposed to racism show signs of trauma, such as anxiety, sleep disorders, anger issues, depression, lack of focus, low self-esteem, and other PTSD-type symptoms (Bryant-Davis, 2019; Heissel, et al, 2018; Roberson & Carter, 2022; M. Williams, I. Metzger, et al., 2018)

Racial trauma impacts cognitive growth and development, as well as changes brain response to stimuli. Experiences or exposure to racism can change the brain's physical structure (Fani et al., 2021). The Fani et al. study conducted in 2021 found that the 55 Black women studied who were associated with discrimination had more brain

response activity in the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with vigilance, a person's ability to respond to emergencies or watch for threats. The study concluded that racism had a trauma effect on the health of Black women in the United States. Race-based trauma has been widely researched and the health implications are clearly detrimental, including heart disease, depression, Alzheimer's and dementia, sleep disorders, PTSD, and other serious long-term health issues (Alzheimer's Association, 2017; S. Carter, et al., 2021; Heissel et al., 2018; D.R. Williams, 2018). The polyvagal theory explains how the central nervous system responds when trauma is experienced or has been experienced, although this research has not looked at the effects of racial trauma. Using the theoretical framework of the socio-cultural theory, if racial trauma is present within the community or family unit, it is possible the development of the children within those communities will be affected. There is little research on the effects of race-based trauma, specifically transgenerational and vicarious, on the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students.

According to the Alzheimer's Association (2017) study out of Wisconsin found that, on average, African Americans experience trauma 60% more than non-Hispanic Whites. This trauma exposure puts African Americans at a greater risk for depression, dementia, Alzheimer's, and other health-related problems. ACEs have been proven to affect absenteeism, engagement, and overall academic success (Crouch et al., 2019). If ACEs have this effect on students, then the adverse effects of racism could have the same effect on academic experiences and outcomes (Alvarez, 2020). Racial trauma or race-based trauma is not currently under the ACE's umbrella. Some have the opinion that racial traumas should remain separated from other types of traumas, due to the frequency

component and cycle of discrimination and systemic racism, which differentiates it from other traumatic events (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019; Hargons et al, 2022). Black and Brown Americans have suffered 400 years of racial trauma, creating patterns of trauma and a sense of collective identify traumas that affect whole communities (Diepold, 2020; Fairfax, 2020).

Racism influences an entire culture of untapped communities, creating a sense of hopelessness, fear of early death, and hypervigilance within these communities (DeVylder et al., 2020; First et al., 2020). A 2018 study conducted by Bor et al. found that media exposure to the police killings of Black men had an impact on the mental health of Black people who lived in the vicinity of where the killings took place. Another study found that PTSD symptoms were more profound in those who watched the media coverage on the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri (Galovski et al., 2016; Hawkins, 2021; Staggers-Hakim, 2016).

The literature reviewed provided evidence that trauma impacts brain responses and can be long lasting, therefore racial trauma also impacts brain responses directly, influencing the academic path of Black and Brown high school students (Roberson & Carter, 2022; Saleem et al., 2020). The research is unwavering in showing that individuals who are part of an untapped group, internalize societies message of inferiority (A.R. Fields, 2014). In Vygotsky'(1978) socio-cultural theory, social interactions and cultural beliefs guide individual development and may vary greatly from culture to culture. When those social interactions are traumatic the central nervous system is trained to respond defensively to any threat of danger, even if no danger is present and only perceived (Porges, 2017).

Systemic racism is embedded in the fabric of our nation, in historical and cultural contexts; systemic racism causes cultural and transgenerational racial trauma. Porges (2017) pointed out that humans need to connect with other human beings. These interactions allow people to balance each other and build relationships that create a sense of safety and belonging. If a person is unable to make these connections due to trauma exposure, it may affect their long-term development and the brain's ability to kick-start the new vagal circuit (Porges, 2017). Viewing racism through the sociocultural lens, racism is a barrier that is connected to the academic experiences and success of Black and Brown high school students due to the real and/or perceived hostile culture (Bonilla, 2017, Salter et al., 2018; Vygotsky, 1978). Vaughans (2021) proposed that cultural interjection creates fears and anxieties in Black Americans due to historical and cultural racism, without them recognizing it. Cultural introjection is when people of one culture accept the expectations and projection of others through verbal and nonverbal communication. This includes stereotypes, social structures, expectation bias, and other racialized beliefs. Because of these expectations, projections, and historically derogatory terms, such as "boy". Black boys are often stripped of their childhood. Black boys are often misidentified as 4 years older than their true age and held accountable as being older as well versus their White counterparts (Vaughans, 2021). The socio-cultural theory supports these findings by concluding that early interactions and perceptions develop cognitive understanding and development.

The generational trauma associated with racism can cause unconscious trauma responses. The person displaying the trauma responses may not be aware they have racial trauma (Hargons et al., 2022; Howard, 2019; Vaughans, 2021). The psychological factors

associated with racism negatively affect the academic experiences and overall academic outcomes of Black and Brown high school students (Anyaka, 2017). Experiences of racism correlate with other forms of trauma, such as rape and domestic violence, substantially impacting self-image and self-worth, creating a sense of shame and voicelessness (R.T. Carter, et al., 2020; Roberson & Carter, 2022; Saleem et al., 2020). The experiences of discrimination and racism put Black and Brown people at a greater risk for depression and other mental health issues. There was a clear connection between racism, first- and second-hand and psychological distress (Crouch et al., 2019; Nadal et al., 2019). Furthermore, many high school students suffer from depression and mental illness and the impact of the COVID-19 is not yet known, but current research indicates the pandemic worsened these statistics (Liu & Modir, 2020). Due to the aforementioned barriers, Black and Brown young people, especially males, are less likely to seek professional help and therefore are not finding outlets for healing from racial trauma (Dyson, 2020). The term “racial trauma” or “race-based trauma” is not widely known as other types of traumas, furthering the likelihood Black and Brown people will not seek the help they need to heal and cope with the psychological stress of racism (Comas-Diaz et al., 2019; Hargons et al., 2022). The result is the automatic nervous system, which is related to social contexts, may not be able to regulate itself due to being in a constant state of survival mode, causing physical, emotional, and mental responses that may be misunderstood (Porges, 2017).

### ***Transgenerational, Cultural, and Vicarious Trauma***

Trauma does not have to be firsthand to have a major long-term effect on people; vicarious traumas affect mental health as well (L. Jones, 2018; S.C. Jones, et al., 2020).

Potential barriers to the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students uncovered during the research process were transgenerational, cultural-trauma, and vicarious trauma experienced throughout untapped communities. These secondary traumas lead to increased stress, diminished self-esteem, and lack of focus, and negatively affect levels of achievement, including academic achievement (McIntosh, 2019). Transgenerational trauma is characterized as past trauma that biologically and psychologically transfers to future generations (Tang et al., 2021; Vaughans, 2021).

The socio-cultural theory is based on the belief that human development and learning occurs through social interactions. These social interactions involve both the immediate family unit and the community. Children learn behaviors and improve their cognitive abilities within their own culture and overall social currency when healthy social interactions are experienced (Vygotsky, 1978). In addition, the polyvagal theory emphasizes the importance of growing up feeling safe and accepted within your community and society (Porges, 2022). A safe environment, with social and cultural interactions, is necessary for healthy growth and development. Accepting help and learning social cooperation are dependent on a central nervous system that has the capacity to downregulate threat reactions. This allows for the proximity necessary for cooperative behaviors and co-regulation. In mammals, this is neuroanatomically and neurophysiologically occurring in the circuits originating in brainstem areas that regulate the autonomic nervous system. This response system enables feelings of safety to happen simultaneously, with social cues and adaptability (Porges, 1997). When children grow up within communities that have continued exposure to trauma, their central nervous system functions can be adversely affected. Potential barriers to the academic experiences and

outcomes of Black and Brown high school students uncovered during the research process were transgenerational, cultural-trauma, and vicarious trauma experienced throughout untapped communities. These secondary traumas lead to increased stress, diminished self-esteem, and lack of focus, and negatively affect levels of achievement, including academic achievement (McIntosh, 2019).

Studies have been conducted on the effects of trauma and how it can leave a chemical marker on a person's genes; this is called epigenetics (Chaby et al., 2020; O'Sullivan & Monk, 2020; Tang et al., 2021). Dr. Porges (2017) theorized when someone is exposed to trauma the executive functions of the nervous system unconsciously respond by evaluating risk, then the brain reverts to the primitive or ancient vagal functions. If the brain is the control center of the nervous system, then it is reasonable to conclude many biological systems are affected when a person is exposed to trauma (Tang et al., 2021; Yehuda et al., 2018). In 2018, Yehuda et al. studied the adult children of Holocaust survivors and found evidence of "neuroendocrine alterations of the HPA axis" (p.3) proving that biological systems are affected by trauma exposure. The collective trauma of Holocaust survivors has continued to impact generations of offspring. It has been proven that exposure to trauma elicits long-term health effects, and it is passed down through generations.

If this is the case, not only does trauma affect health outcomes, but also academic experiences and outcomes of generations of people. Throughout history Black and Brown people have been dehumanized and murdered -from slavery, apartheid, and segregation to ongoing institutionalized racism - creating a collective trauma similar to those who survived the Holocaust. This trauma has continued to affect generations of people

(Fairfax, 2020). Due to PTSD associated with racial trauma exposure and collective community trauma, there is a relationship between unconscious nervous systems responses and acute behavior responses within the Black community (M. Williams, et al., 2018).

According to the sociocultural theory, society and social interactions influence individual development (Vygotsky, 1978). Over time, Black culture has adapted behaviors to navigate a society they perceive to be dangerous, such as passivity and disengagement. This is passed on to generations in order to keep them safe and avoid rejection but is often misunderstood by White communities and in the school environment in particular (Bowman et al., 2018). This leads to deficit thinking, blaming the marginalized students for the lack of academic success. Educators may blame a student's lack of success on attitude, family educational background, and community mindset, creating a sense of hopelessness (Davis & Museus, 2019; Palemer & Witanapatirana, 2020). Deficit thinking creates misperceptions such as, Black and Brown students are more defiant than White or Asian students, when in reality there may be conflicting social and cultural norms. Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) is diagnosed when a student shows a pattern of irritability, anger, and argumentative behavior lasting over a 6-month period. However, when one analyzes the similarities between the behaviors of ODD and those exposed to racial trauma there are parallels, which could account for the discrepancies in school discipline (Baker, 2019; Palemer & Witanapatirana, 2020).

School structures provoke the brain reactions of Black and Brown students by lowering expectations, viewing race through a lens of colorblindness, and at the same

time suspending Black students, primarily Black males, at a significantly higher rate than other races (Seider et al., 2022; Vaughans, 2021). School systems are often concerned with the internal deficits of students, what needs to be fixed mindset, instead of the “why can’t they.” A system paradigm shift must take place. What are the cultural and internal strengths of the student and what barriers exist within the school that keep these untapped strengths from being recognized (Latta, 2019)? Latta (2019) used Moll et al’s (1992) funds of knowledge to question how teachers view good writing, which can translate to learning in general.

Vygotsky’s (1978) socio-cultural theory addressed how people develop a sense of self, belonging, and foundational knowledge based on interactions with those around them. Funds of knowledge support this theory, in that students carry within them historical and cultural knowledge. For Black and Brown students their funds of knowledge may be in conflict with school culture, or their knowledge base is not recognized or valued. This is a deficit approach to teaching and learning, instead of connecting the student’s funds of knowledge with the assignment or concepts being taught (Latta, 2019). This deficit approach compounds the central nervous system’s response to negative stimuli based on the polyvagal theory (Porges, 2022).

Copious research shows firsthand trauma exposure affects health and academic outcomes; however, it is also evidenced in the research that vicarious trauma experiences cause health issues, with long-term effects (L. Jones, 2018; Trent et al., 2019; D.R. Williams, 2018; M.T. Williams, D.M. Printz, et al., 2018). Vicarious, or secondhand trauma, can affect an individual or be collective in nature, affecting communities of people (Diepold, 2020; Fairfax, 2020; Vaughans, 2021).

Collective trauma has been more profound over the past 25 years due to visual accessibility through media. Televised police brutality leading to the deaths of African American males - including Michael Brown, Rayshard Brooks, Stephon Clark, Botham Jean, Philando Castile, Alton Sterling, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice, and most recently George Floyd - as a traumatizing effect on Black communities (Alang et al., 2017; Chae et al., 2021; First et al., 2020). Due to social media platforms and mainstream media, adolescents also have more access to information and visual exposure than ever before (First et al., 2020; Houston & Spialek, 2018; Lenhart et al., 2010; Tynes et al., 2019). The more recent killings of Black men by police and the constant media exposure have created wide-spread, collective trauma within Black communities (Curtis et al., 2021; Hawkins, 2021; Lin et al., 2022). When considering the polyvagal theory, the importance of growing up feeling safe and accepted within your community and society is imperative for healthy central nervous system responses (Porges, 2022). In addition, the socio-cultural theory addressed how people develop a sense of self, belonging, and foundational knowledge based on interactions with those around them. Funds of knowledge support this theory, in that students carry within them historical and cultural knowledge. Community and transgenerational racial trauma exposure creates a sense of danger and fear that resonates throughout Black communities (Courington, 2021). The result of this vicarious racial trauma has compounded the vulnerability of an already stigmatized group (McIntosh, 2019; M. Williams, I. Metzger, et al., 2018).

There is glaring statistical evidence of unequal treatment by law enforcement and the judicial system as a whole. Aggressive policing and police brutality are not new

trends within the African American community (DeVylder et al., 2020; Hawkins, 2021; Legewie & Fagan, 2019). Black and Brown adolescents experience substantially higher contact with law enforcement than White adolescents (Development Services Group, Inc, 2018). This exposure leads to withdrawal, system avoidance, and a reduction in test scores, among other trauma-type responses (Segundo, 2017). The socio-cultural theory suggests identities are formed through our surroundings, experiences, and the people in our lives. Adolescents care about how others see them. The world happening around them matters and helps form their identities. Feeling connected and having a sense of belonging are key components to academic success (Boston & Warren, 2017). Adolescents suffer collective traumatic experiences when exposed to racism via social media platforms and other media (Segundo, 2017; Tynes et al., 2019). In an article written by Koumpilova (2021), *Boys of Color Were Hit Hard by the Pandemic: What Do They Need Now*, several educational and nonprofit leaders were interviewed, and programs were discussed, but the most profound words came from a young Afro-Latino man. The most important thing you can give young men of color is an outlet,” said Nathaniel Martinez. “They don’t really get an outlet that’s healthy.” (Koumpilova, 2021). The article went on to discuss how young Black and Latino boys felt when they experienced vicarious tragedies of police shootings in the last few years and how the Covid-19 pandemic has widened the academic gaps for Black and Brown high school students.

School Resource Officers (SROs) compound the police brutality trauma experienced by Black and Brown high school students; schools are microcosms of the real world (Javdani, 2019; Lynch, 2017). Over the past few years, SROs have become

more involved in the discipline of students. Behaviors that were once dealt with by school administrators are now being criminalized by the presence and involvement of SROs. This school culture reverberates the message “you are unworthy of an education” to Black and Brown students (Lynch, 2017). There are no national or federal guidelines outlining how SROs should operate or function within a school setting, creating questions about accountability. The research showed training is provided to SROs, but there is no accountability other than what the schools and districts provide. If school administration is not monitoring the interactions between SROs and students the results could be catastrophic for the student(s) (Javdani, 2019; Lynch, 2017). Dr. Porges (2022) theorized when the brain senses danger it shuts down or dissociates, reverting to a primitive defense response. When a person has an adverse history or trauma exposure their automatic nervous system may be in a locked constant state of defense, rendering them unable to adjust back to a safe space (Porges, 2022). Black and Brown students who have experienced firsthand racial trauma display trauma responses. Therefore, if they have experienced racial trauma vicariously their brain may also respond in a similar way.

### **Other Barriers to the Academic Experiences and Outcomes**

#### ***Expectation Bias***

While evidence was consistent that racial trauma, transgenerational, and other vicarious exposure, are directly connected to the health and academic experiences of Black and Brown high school students, there are other barriers that could affect the academic experiences of Black and Brown students, as well. The socio-cultural theory suggests development occurs within social systems, family as well as community. Children begin attending school at 5 years old, associating school as an important

community for the child's overall development. The sense of belonging and feeling worthy are connected to academic success among all groups of adolescents (Alcover et al., 2020). Due to deficit thinking, Black and Brown students are often viewed as less capable and are undervalued in many classroom settings (Bonilla, 2017; Boston & Warren, 2017). Teachers often have erroneous views of Black and Brown students, especially males. This means teachers expect less from these students and interact with them less than their White counterparts (Andrews, et al., 2019; Hawkins-Jones & Reeves, 2020). When teachers set expectations lower for Black and Brown students, the student begins to internalize the lower expectations, creating feelings of worthlessness, causing them to be less confident in their ability to succeed academically. Ultimately this bias erodes their attitudes toward themselves and their social group. The implications of the expectation bias go far deeper than the classroom. In fact, motivation to succeed is directly related to the Black and Brown males' perception of their academic success leading to a positive life outcome (Bonilla, 2017; A.R. Fields, 2014). When the central nervous system senses danger, perceived or real, the brain responds by retracting into a primitive state of survival. Young children fear rejection, therefore if a teacher is creating a sense of rejection or neglect a child's brain may respond by disassociating or reacting with a flight or fight -response (Porges, 2022).

There was well documented evidence that low expectations have negative effects on performance and achievement of untapped groups (Anyaka, 2017). In other words, the expectation bias has a profound influence on academic outcomes and life-long implications for Black and Brown people. Recently, states have eliminated reading, writing, and math proficiency requirements to graduate high school, citing inequity for

minority groups. Oregon's "Senate Bill 744" eliminates graduation testing requirements for 3 years. Marc Siegel (2021) with the Oregon Department of Education stated, that the bill advocates for equitable graduation standards, and supports the process toward developing new graduation requirements. Research showed this type of policy has a negative impact on minority groups (Coleman, 2022).

### ***Poverty***

There was significant research and data on the effects of poverty on academic outcomes. Opportunity gaps create academic barriers for children living in poverty (Garó et al., 2018; O'Brien et al., 2021; Ruiz et al., 2018). Students living in poverty often live in areas where high crime levels exist, financial concerns cause frequent fighting, housing is overcrowded, and other chronic stressors associated with poverty exist. According to the socio-cultural theory children's cognitive development and social response cues are development via interactions with family and community. Children growing up in poverty may not have the community engagement or connections necessary for proximal development. Developmental delays are often seen in children from low-income families due to lack of cognitive stimulation and disproportionate brain development (K. Jones, et al., 2018; McKenzie, 2019). Poverty is one of the 10 ACEs considered in childhood trauma. Dr. Porges (2017) explained how when trauma is present or has been present a person may lack the ability to interact with others and as a result be lacking the ability to connect with others to build relationships and create a sense of safety. The socio-cultural theory suggests the ability to build relationships is a vital component to cognitive development, so if children living in poverty are unable to do this, it could be connected to their learning experiences and outcomes. A 2018 study looked at academic gaps based

on race and poverty over a 20-year period. The researchers found that over this 20-year period racial academic gaps are slowly closing, while the academic gaps for those living in poverty are increasing (Paschall et al., 2018). There was a direct correlation between students from high socioeconomic backgrounds and higher achievement. These students may have a different outlook on their education or have a more satisfying academic experience than those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. There was also evidence these students have more access to academic resources than those from lower SES (Destin et al., 2019). Vygotsky (1978) theorized that early social interactions and connections support healthy cognitive development. Current research supports this theory, in that children from higher SES have more successful outcomes than those students in lower SES. The polyvagal theory rejects the idea, “I think therefore I am” and instead embraces the idea that internal feeling(s) drives the way we exist (Porges, 2022). Black students often feel inferior, unsupported, and misunderstood within the public-school framework. These feelings, based on the polyvagal theory, create a sense of disconnect, and imposter syndrome when in the learning environment (Porges, 2017).

## **Intervention, Policies, and Procedures**

### ***Racial Socialization and Identity***

It’s like I’m trying to climb a mountain, but I’ve got one fool trying to shove me down so I won’t be on his level, and another fool tugging at my leg, trying to pull me to the ground he refuses to leave... I know that when I head to Yale next fall (because I AM going there), I’m gonna be paranoid about people looking at me and wondering if I’m qualified to be there. How do I work against this, Martin?

Getting real with you, I feel a little defeated.

— Nic Stone, *Dear Martin* (2017)

Many Black and Brown Americans suffer from imposter syndrome within educational institutions. They feel they do not belong in certain aspects of the world or do not deserve success. Teenagers, in general, are vulnerable to a variety of stressors in life. Many parents work with their children on coping skills and stress management to navigate these life stressors (R. Anderson, et al., 2019; S.C. Jones, et al., 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic magnified these stressors, creating more anxiety and mental health issues for young people and creating a need for more assistance outside the home (Bacher-Hicks et al., 2020; Chae et al., 2021; Cokley et al., 2021). In addition to everyday cross-cultural stressors, Black and Brown people have racial stressors and/or racial trauma that creates a need for critical conversations. Black and Brown youth often internalize discrimination and racism as a coping mechanism, which may change their self-perception, mental health, and overall health. According to the polyvagal theory, these coping mechanisms may manifest in the form of disconnectedness, anxiety in social interactions, and depression (Porges, 2017). The way with which their parents cope with racial stressors can have a direct influence on how the child responds and copes (Hope et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2020).

Racial socialization is one strategy that has been found to assist young Black and Brown people coping somewhat successfully with racism and discrimination. Racial socialization involves intentional parental conversations about race, the meaning of race, and racism with their children and is intergenerational (R. Anderson, S. Jones, et al., 2019; Paasch-Anderson et al., 2019). The conversations are not always intentional;

behaviors and actions also equate to racial socialization. Parents and other family members discussing race and building racial identity can help Black and Brown youth prepare for negative racial encounters and cope with other generalized life stressors (Banales, et al., 2020; Huguley et al., 2019). The socio-cultural theory emphasizes the importance of community in a person's cognitive development; with this in mind racial socialization may be an effective way to overcome transgenerational and other vicarious trauma.

While racial socialization comes primarily from parental messaging and behaviors, racial identity can come from community and school as well. There is a delicate balance between racial identity and race centrality, however. A 2021 study by Bernard et al. found two relational patterns. First, promoting a sense of belonging to a race and racial identity deterred Black youths more likely to encounter racial discrimination from substance abuse. However, that study also determined that in communities less likely to be subjected to racial discrimination the promotion of racial identity or pride in one's race saw an increase in substance abuse. This could be caused by racial centering and taking the focus off personal identity and being in control of their own destiny. Gorski (2019) claimed while building the cultural framework to include diversity and inclusion, schools are silent on the opportunity gaps and inequalities found within their school structures. Equity should be the outcome focus instead of a culture focus. Implementing culture is a misguided plan that undermines the need for social justice reform. Many studies show school leaders have the intent to reduce and eliminate inequity and racism in the school setting, although Gorski disagreed.

School leaders implement culturally responsive programming, alongside multi-cultural curriculum, and events to alleviate the inequities that persist in the school background. To rectify the disparities in education and combat the pervasive systemic racism entrenched within academic institutions, it is imperative for principals to adopt a resolute stance against injustice and intolerance. They must proactively develop policies and procedures that facilitate comprehensive restructuring of the existing systems that persistently marginalize and oppress adolescent males from Black and Brown communities. While these culture and climate efforts may initially be undertaken with a genuine commitment to promoting cultural awareness and transforming the experiences of marginalized groups, it is crucial to recognize that without careful consideration, they can inadvertently perpetuate the systemic racism they aim to dismantle. Not only does this perpetuate systemic racism through a deficit lens, but it also takes the focus off the serious mental health needs of Black and Brown high school students.

On the other hand, there is research that finds embedding culture and racial pride within school structures creates a sense of belonging and racial identity that elevates students to success by improving academic experiences and outcomes (Tichavakunda, 2021). Students carry lived and learned social and cultural experiences with them into the learning environment. When teachers take time to discover students' cultural, family, and community knowledge they recognize the value of the students' fund of knowledge, in essence using cultural and racial pride to make education relevant to all students (Latta, 2019; Yarnell & Bohrnstedt, 2018). This conflicting evidence provides an opportunity for further research on the academic effects of racial socialization and racial identity.

### ***Mental Health Interventions***

There was evidence that while cultural identity and racial socialization can benefit students of color, there was also evidence that the mental health needs of Black and Brown students are not being met within the school framework (Gorski, 2019). Many school administrators, teachers, and counselors are ill-equipped to address racial trauma or even understand it (H. Fields, 2021). Although most schools have comprehensive school counseling programs, principals are not knowledgeable on the roles and responsibilities of school counselors, nor are the counselors trained on how racial trauma manifests, or how to address it within the school framework (Lowery et. al., 2018). School counselors are provided in-service trainings on trauma informed practices, but it is not highly effective in working with students who have experienced racism or cultural trauma (Powers & Neira, 2018). The result was the needs of Black and Brown students, and their families are not being met, creating more distrust in academic institutions (Lowery et al., 2018). Research showed there is little to no focus on implementing mental health interventions to help students cope with racial trauma and what is being attempted is not making a big enough impact (Post et al., 2020; Powers & Neira, 2018).

Building authentic relationships is one key element to trauma informed care (Dutil, 2020; Ginwright, 2018). Victims of trauma may respond with behavior cues that suggest distrust and feeling unsafe. These behaviors are often misinterpreted by teachers and administrators who do not understand adverse experiences or trauma responses and misunderstand the responses as defiant or detached, and even lazy. When relationships are forged between students and school staff and faculty, students gain trust and a sense of safety that allows them to let down their defenses and become part of the school

community (Reardon & Leonard, 2020). Racial trauma elicits similar responses, but also dissociation and hypervigilance. It is widely misunderstood that all trauma triggers and responses are the same. Porges was emphatic that the event itself is not the important piece of understanding the trauma. Instead, the trauma response is the critical piece to understand to treat the trauma patient (Porges, 2017)

The idea of building relationships and trust is also relevant when viewing trauma through a racial lens. Reardon and Leonard (2020) shared their experiences developing trauma-informed partnerships within an urban high school in the Boston Massachusetts area in his book, *Alleviating the Educational Impact of Adverse Childhood Experiences: School-University-Community Collaboration*. Although the focus of the book was on ACEs, the interventions implemented would also be beneficial to students who are victims of racial trauma. The theoretical framework for his work was Bronfenbrenner's (1981) ecological systems theory of child development. Bronfenbrenner's theory suggests children develop in layers, with the innermost layer being close relationships, like familial. This supports Porges's (2017) theory that if a person did not feel safe with family or caregivers during early life, they might have different trauma responses (Porges, 2017)

The next layer included relationships such as work or school and the outer layers would be secondary interactions, such as a teacher talking to a parent. Basically, environmental factors influence student experiences and outcomes (Leonard, 2020). This was similar to Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and how children developed based on cultural and social interactions. Both Bronfenbrenner and Vygotsky focused less on individual relationships and more on a community of relationships or network of

relationships. The polyvagal theory supports this idea as well, in that social engagement helps regulate the central nervous system and create feelings of safety and belonging (Porges, 2017)

Based on these child development theories, one intervention that may support racial trauma victims is a focus on microsystems, instead of traditional whole school improvement plans. School leaders should develop procedures that intentionally connect teachers, community, and families on an ongoing basis (Caldera et al., 2020). At-risk students often have multiple traumas, including transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma. School connections with families and community can foster a positive school climate that evokes focuses on what resources are needed and improves the overall school experiences for these at-risk students (Vides, 2021).

Muti-tiered systems of support, such as Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS), are also pieces to a complex puzzle of working with victims of trauma within a school framework (Rosanbalm et al., 2020). The research focuses mainly on ACEs, but it is important not to neglect the transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma experienced by many students. Developing the support systems needed begins with creating a Resilience Team, which would comprise a core group of committed adults that would develop the intervention. Once the team is developed and understands the initiative, it will eliminate deficit thinking and focus on systemic school practices that need to be implemented to help Black and Brown students achieve at high levels, then a mission and vision plan should be created. This team will also develop the teacher training vital to implementing this initiative (Lipscomb et al., 2019).

### ***Not for Profits***

The very essence of not-for-profit organizations is to improve circumstances and quality of life for others. Not-for-profit organizations are crucial to the health of communities, as well as educational systems, interconnecting resources and citizens (Molloy et al., 2020). Communities rich with not-for-profits organization see more abundant resources and access to those resources, which in turn reduces opportunity gaps in those communities. Schools and not-for-profit organizations working together can ensure students and families have access to needed resources (Coram et al., 2022). Using the socio-cultural framework as an underpinning for the importance of social and community connections, nonprofit organizations and community resources play an integral role in healing transgenerational trauma and other vicarious racial traumas, building trust between Black communities and their schools. Ultimately, this supports Black and Brown students' academic experiences and overall academic growth.

### ***Every School Healthy Campaign***

The “Every School Healthy Campaign” focuses on developing the whole child and recognizes that human beings are complex. Their approach correlates with the socio-cultural perspective, in that young people grow and develop based on the people in their lives and the places in which they find themselves. Eliminating the deficit thinking approach, Every School Healthy designed a youth system that focuses on the child’s individual strengths and then uses appropriate resources to support those strengths, including human resources. “Every School Healthy” offers a “seat at the table to those who have not historically had a voice” and works to change the mindset from “what is wrong with you to what or who do you need”, eliminating deficit thinking (Every School

Healthy Website). Brain research is a large component of Every School Healthy and they offer a free trauma awareness course once a month, in addition to their leadership support and peer-led support spaces (Anwar-McHenry et al., 2016)

### ***Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB)***

Student African American Brotherhood (SAAB) is a not-for-profit organization that focuses on supporting men of color academically, socially, and professionally. SAAB is networked in over 300 campuses in 40 states and has created a blueprint for educational institutions who desire to create an equitable community (2020). SAAB begins at the collegiate level to build pride and confidence in Black and Brown men. It has expanded to high school campuses across the United States. The program is transforming the mindset of Black and Brown students, increasing graduation rates and the overall experience of these students (Heaven, 2015).

### ***A Girl Like Me Network (AGLMN)***

A Girl Like Me Network (AGLMN) is a remarkable non-profit organization with a mission deeply rooted in empowerment and providing essential resources and support to girls. Their primary goal is to ensure that girls have the access and opportunities they need to thrive and succeed in all aspects of life. AGLMN recognizes the unique challenges that girls may face, particularly in a world where gender disparities still exist.

One of the fundamental aspects of AGLMN's work is providing girls with the tools, knowledge, and guidance to navigate these challenges successfully. They offer various resources and support systems that cater to the specific needs of young girls, helping them build essential life skills, boost their self-confidence, and shape their identities in a positive and empowering way. AGLMN is dedicated to breaking down

barriers and stereotypes that can limit girls' potential. Through their programs and initiatives, they create safe spaces for girls to express themselves, explore their interests, and develop their talents. By fostering an environment where girls are encouraged to be authentic and unapologetically themselves, AGLMN helps them overcome societal expectations and limitations.

Furthermore, AGLMN actively engages in mentoring and guidance programs that pair girls with role models who can inspire and empower them. These mentorship relationships are invaluable, as they offer girls the opportunity to learn from those who have faced similar challenges and triumphed over them. This support system plays a pivotal role in boosting girls' self-esteem and encouraging them to pursue their dreams with determination and confidence. AGLMN's commitment to empowerment extends beyond personal development. They also advocate for equal opportunities and work towards dismantling systemic barriers that disproportionately affect girls. By raising awareness, pushing for policy changes, and championing gender equality, AGLMN strives to create a more inclusive world where girls can thrive without limitations.

In essence, A Girl Like Me Network is an incredible force for change, equipping girls with the resources and support they need to overcome challenges, break down barriers, and achieve their dreams. Their dedication to empowerment, education, and advocacy makes a significant difference in the lives of countless girls and young women, ensuring they have every opportunity to succeed.

## **Summary**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown

high school students in Missouri Schools. At this stage in the research transgenerational trauma will be as defined as the subconscious transmission of traumatic experiences and their psychological and emotional impacts across generations. Vicarious trauma will be defined as the emotional and psychological impact that can occur as a result of indirect exposure to traumatic experiences. This narrative qualitative study was different from other studies due to the dual-framework approach and the focus on secondhand trauma as a barrier that specifically affects the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The study used the socio-cultural theory as the primary framework and the polyvagal theory to support the idea of brain-body reaction to trauma, to determine how transgenerational trauma and other vicarious trauma may be connected to Black and Brown high school students' academic experiences and ultimately academic outcomes. In addition, the researcher used the theoretical underpinning and brain research to determine how sociopolitical factors cause barriers to learning in a traditional school setting and academic achievement specific to Black and Brown high school students. The study recommended policies, procedures, and interventions school and district leaders could consider implementing to create equity and access to overcome the race-based trauma barriers that impact the academic achievement of Black and Brown high school students.

The problem statement highlights the persistent academic achievement gap between Black and Brown high school students and their White counterparts in K-12 public education. Despite years of research and data on this issue, the gap remains, with family background and the role of the family playing a significant role in academic success. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that family educational background

cannot excuse the failure of many public schools in providing equitable opportunities for Black and Brown students. Public schools have a moral obligation to ensure academic success for students of every background, race, and ethnicity. Addressing the gap in the literature regarding the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the high school experience for Black and Brown students presents an opportunity to enhance our understanding and knowledge. By shedding light on these experiences and challenges, particularly within the context of racial trauma, this research aims to contribute to the development of inclusive and effective practices that support the educational outcomes of Black and Brown students in high school.

Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory was designed to explore the cognitive development of children. The theory connected social and cultural interactions and connections to the healthy development of children. Viewing educational barriers through the socio-cultural lens provides insight into how early social interactions and culture experiences play a role in the success of students within an academic framework. When early development is disrupted by trauma, firsthand or secondary, healthy relationships, trust, and overall health can be affected (Vygotsky, 1978; Porges, 2022). The mind-body relationship is directly affected by these early trauma experiences. Humans need to feel safe, and if safety has been jeopardized the central nervous systems will revert to a reptilian state of protection. If the trauma is ongoing, the person may remain in that state with no way to reinstate the higher brain functions (Porges, 1995).

Transgenerational and other vicarious trauma all lead to institutional distrust, a lack of motivation to succeed, and a perception of school as a waste of time (Best, et al., 2021). The research revealed persistent barriers and generational traumas that go much

deeper than academic achievement. The opportunity gaps within and outside the academic landscape continue to plague untapped communities. Few policies and interventions have been implemented that show promise for improving the academic outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. However, many, if not the majority of the policies and interventions within a school framework, focus on the deficiencies of the untapped group and fail to address the opportunity gaps and the racial inequities within society and school structures. There are few policies and interventions being implemented to eradicate the barriers for Black and Brown high school students.

Building upon the literature's recognition of the persistent academic achievement gap and the impact of racial trauma, the first research question intended to explore how Black and Brown students in Missouri described their experiences with racial issues in their schools and how these experiences shaped their academic journeys. By examining their firsthand accounts, this research sought to add depth and nuance to the understanding of the specific challenges and barriers faced by these students within the educational system. The second research question aligned with the literature's emphasis on the connections between high school experiences and academic outcomes. By investigating how participants perceived the connections between their own high school experiences and their academic journeys, this research aimed to uncover the subjective meanings and interpretations they ascribed to these connections. This qualitative exploration can provide insights into the ways in which racial issues and traumas impacted their academic trajectories and shaped their perspective on educational attainment. The final research question related to the literature's call for effective policies, procedures, and interventions to address racial disparities in education. By

exploring the perspectives of interviewees on how public schools' policies, procedures, and interventions could create equity and access for Black and Brown students in Missouri, this research set out to gather their insights and suggestions. The findings can contribute to the development of more inclusive and impactful strategies to address the identified gaps and challenges within the educational system.

Overall, by connecting the research questions to the literature review, this research sought to bridge the missing knowledge and understanding regarding the experiences of Black and Brown high school students in the context of racial trauma. It aimed to shed light on their perspectives, challenges, and aspirations, ultimately informing the development of interventions and policies that promote equity, inclusivity, and academic success for these students in Missouri schools.

Given what we know about race-based transgenerational and vicarious trauma we can conclude that the problem is a deeply rooted and complex issue that affects individuals, families, and communities across generations. The enduring impact of historical and ongoing racial injustices, discrimination, and systemic inequalities has contributed to the perpetuation of trauma within untapped communities. It manifests in various forms, including emotional distress, psychological symptoms, physical health disparities, and disrupted social connections. Recognizing and addressing race-based transgenerational and vicarious trauma requires a multifaceted approach that includes healing-centered practices, systemic change, and fostering resilience within affected individuals and communities.

In Chapter Three the study's framework and methodology will be explained. Procedures and participants will be identified, and the collection of data explained.

Chapter Four will present the findings through the interviews and focus groups conducted. Chapter Five will conclude with the summary analysis of data and recommendations for change, as well as potential future research related to this topic.

## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **METHODOLOGY**

#### **Introduction**

Building upon the foundation established in Chapter Two, which provided a comprehensive review of the literature pertaining to racial trauma and educational disparities, this narrative qualitative study delved into the lived experiences of Black and Brown high school students. By transitioning from the theoretical underpinnings presented in Chapter Two to the firsthand narratives that were explored in this study, the research moved from a scholarly exploration of the issue to a deep personal exploration of the realities faced by Black and Brown students. The research aimed to bridge the gap between theory and practice, giving voice to the experiences of those directly impacted by racial trauma and shed light on the connection between their lived realities and educational outcomes.

The narrative qualitative approach is a way for researchers to learn from the lived experiences from those interviewed (Creswell, 2018). The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the possible relationship between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri Schools. The study used the socio-cultural theory as the primary framework and the polyvagal theory to support the idea of brain-body reaction to trauma, to determine how transgenerational trauma and other vicarious trauma may be connected to Black and Brown high school students' academic experiences and ultimately academic outcomes.

Chapter Three of this research study included a detailed description of the research methodology, including the purpose of the study, the participants, the research setting, and the research design. Chapter Three also included the data collection

instruments and the data analysis methods. This information helped to provide context for the study and to explain how the data were collected and analyzed. Chapter Four will present the findings through the interviews and focus groups conducted. Chapter Five will conclude with the summary analysis of data and recommendations for change, as well as potential future research related to this topic.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the possible connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri schools. This narrative qualitative study was different from other studies due to the dual-framework approach and the focus on secondhand trauma as a barrier that specifically affects the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students.

The study filled a critical gap in research by focusing specifically on the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. While there is a growing body of literature on racial trauma and its impact on individuals, there is a lack of in-depth exploration of how racial trauma is interconnected to the academic journey of students. By addressing this gap, the study provided much-needed insights into the unique challenges and barriers faced by Black and Brown students, offering a deeper understanding of the intricate interplay between racial trauma and educational outcomes.

This research is crucial for informing the development of effective interventions, policies, and practices that can create more equitable and inclusive educational environments and support the academic success of this student population. This study

used the socio-cultural theory as the primary framework and the polyvagal theory to support the idea of brain-body reaction to trauma, to determine how transgenerational trauma and other vicarious trauma may be connected to Black and Brown high school students' academic experiences and ultimately academic outcomes.

In addition, the research used the theoretical underpinning and brain research to determine how sociopolitical factors cause barriers to learning in a traditional school setting and academic achievement specific to Black and Brown high school students. The study recommended policies, procedures, and interventions school and district leaders could consider implementing to create equity and access to overcome the race-based trauma barriers that are connected to the academic achievement of Black and Brown high school students.

### **Research Questions**

The researcher proposed by studying secondary trauma, connections could be made between academic success and trauma experiences. It is believed that there may be a connection between academic success and racial trauma experienced by Black and Brown high school students in the state of Missouri. The following were research questions to elicit responses from participants in the study.

1. How do Black and Brown high school students in Missouri describe their experiences with racial issues in their schools, and how do these experiences shape their academic journeys?
2. How do participants perceive the connections between their high school experiences and their academic outcomes, and what meaning do they make of these connections?

3. How do interviewees imagine public schools' policies, procedures, and interventions could create equity and access for Black and Brown students in Missouri?

### **Participants**

The purpose of the survey was to gather information from potential participants regarding transgenerational and vicarious race-based trauma and the role of K -12 public schools to elevate the influence of race-based traumas on the school experiences and outcomes of K-12 Black and Brown students. The participants in this study were Black and Brown Missouri residents who were educated in K-12 public schools in the state of Missouri or had children educated in the state of Missouri. The participants were from Southwest, Northeast, and Northwest urban areas of Missouri. Participants were selected by contacting Black and Brown leaders in the various regions, as well as Black and Brown focused non-profits, for names and recommendations. The researcher studied the surveys and determined which participants met the requirements for Phase II, interview, and Phase III, roundtable discussion. The survey participants who met the criteria were contacted and a request for interview participation was made. The requests for participation are located in Appendix A. One-on-one interviews were conducted to dig deeper into the participants' knowledge base about racial trauma and to design a roundtable framework. The roundtable discussions were conducted for a collaborative interaction among participants, with ideas from participants promoting additional thoughts and responses from other participants. Interviewees remained anonymous throughout the study using a coding system.

In accordance with the guidelines of Southwest Baptist University regarding the protection of human participants, a request for review was submitted to the Research Review Board (RRB) for approval to interview the appropriate participants for this study. Upon receiving RRB approval, participant recruitment and data collection began. Participant consent was given through participation in the interview process. There were no known risks to participants in this study. All participants were granted confidentiality and were able to remove themselves from this study at any point. Participant names were not used in this study. Participants were sent a request to interview with the researcher and each participant willingly accepted the invitation to participate in the study. Each participant was interviewed via Zoom and the interviews were recorded and then transcribed. The roundtable discussion was also conducted via Zoom and was recorded and transcribed.

### **Research Setting**

At that time of the research, schools in Missouri were two full school years post COVID-19 pandemic. The research setting for this study consisted of three geographic regions in the state of Missouri, the Southwest, Northwest, Central and Northeast. These regions were chosen to provide an opportunity to find similarities and differences between the shared experiences of the participants representing different dynamics throughout the state of Missouri. A preliminary questionnaire was sent to 30 potential participants to ensure a diverse sample of participants. Twenty participants were selected for the research based on preliminary questionnaire responses. Once one-on-one interviews were completed a survey was then sent out to Subgroup 2 participants to find a date and time that worked for everyone participating in the roundtable discussion. In

addition, the roundtable discussion was held via Zoom to create a safe setting, where more participants could be a meaningful part of the research being conducted. Eight of the 10 participated in the roundtable discussion.

The rationale for hosting a virtual setting instead of in-person was to involve participants throughout the state of Missouri. In addition, using a virtual platform, such as Zoom, the researcher was able to create a setting in which participants could have meaningful dialogue and collaboration, without travel constrictions. This setting choice allowed more participants to be involved in the research, further validating the findings. The use of preliminary questionnaire is a hallmark of qualitative research, as it helps to ensure a diverse sample of participants. The use of a survey to schedule the roundtable discussion is also a common practice in qualitative research, as it allows for the convenience of the participants and helps to increase participation (Creswell, 2018). The use of a virtual platform, such as Zoom, is becoming more common in qualitative research due to its accessibility and convenience for participants. It is also important to note that the researcher chose a virtual platform to create a safe setting for participants, which is an ethical consideration in qualitative research. Finally, the rationale for choosing a virtual setting is also important to consider, as it demonstrates the researcher's thought process and reasoning for the research methods chosen. Overall, the use of these methods in research design helps to ensure a diverse and representative sample, increase participation, and create a safe and convenient setting for participants.

### **Researcher's Role**

The presence of implicit bias within the researcher may have influenced the study's outcomes and interpretations. Implicit biases, which are unconscious and

automatic, can inadvertently shape the research process, including the selection of research questions, the design of methodologies, and the interpretation of findings. These biases may lead to unintentional favoritisms, subjective judgements, or the overlooking of important perspectives or data. It is important for researchers to acknowledge the potential impact of their own implicit biases and take proactive steps to minimize their influence. The researcher has engaged in self-reflection, sought diverse perspectives, and employed rigorous research methodologies. By addressing and mitigating the effects of implicit bias, the researcher strived to enhance the credibility, validity, and fairness of the study, ultimately contributing to more inclusive and accurate knowledge production.

### **Research Design**

This research was a narrative qualitative study that focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of participants in a research study that focused on understanding the experiences and perceptions of participants in a research setting. The study was inductive and comparative, and the researcher aimed to identify themes or categories that emerged from the data (Creswell, 2018). The goal was to understand how racial trauma may be connected to academic experiences and to identify interventions and practices that schools can implement to support those who have experienced racial trauma.

A narrative qualitative research design was chosen to focus on the stories of the individuals and to document their lived experiences. The researcher's role was to understand how people make sense of the world around them and to document their perceptions and experiences. Overall, the research highlighted the importance of

qualitative research in understanding complex phenomena such as the connections between transgenerational and vicarious trauma and education (Creswell, 2018).

The study focused on the experiences and perceptions of individual participants who had experienced transgenerational or other vicarious racial trauma and the connections to their high school experiences. One-on-one interviews were conducted with the participants to collect rich data and gain a deeper understanding of their experiences. The researcher paid attention to the details of the individual's story, including their words, tone, and body language, to gain a nuanced understanding of their experience. The researcher interpreted the individual's story and tried to understand the meaning of the story and how it fit into the individual's life. Thematic analysis was used to identify themes that emerged from the data, helping to organize and understand the experiences of the participants. A variety of methods were used to ensure credibility, including triangulation, member checking, and peer review, helping to establish the reliability and validity of the study. The study emphasized the context in which the individual's story took place, including the social, cultural, and historical factors that may have influenced their experiences. The research involved an in-depth exploration of the individual's story, with follow-up questions asked to clarify and understand the individual's story and the individual's experiences. An inductive approach was followed, meaning that the findings were developed from the data collected from the participants, rather than starting with preconceived hypotheses or theories. The study aimed to collect rich data, including personal reflections and insights from the participants, to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences (Creswell, 2018). The study emphasized the narrative structure of the individual's story, paying attention to the participants, setting,

and themes to understand the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and education.

Participants were identified based on racial trauma understanding and knowledge of the K-12 public school system in Missouri. The requests for participation are in Appendix A. One-on-one interviews were conducted. Roundtable discussions were conducted to encourage more interaction among participants, and ideas from participants promoted additional thoughts and responses from other participants. The participants chosen to be included in the interview process were selected from those that voluntarily provided contact information, and who met the criteria established in this study. The total time between contacting participants to data collection was 4 months. Data triangulation occurred to ensure reliability and validity through peer reviews. The validity of this study was addressed by examining the data through various lenses of data analysis. The researcher triangulated various sources of data from interviews, roundtable discussions, and archival sources to establish patterns to increase credibility and trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020). In addition, the researcher utilized member checking to ensure accuracy. Audio recordings were listened to multiple times and transcripts were reviewed by the researcher and participants for clarification of specific points. Review of recordings and transcripts provided instances to triangulate information among interviewees. Transcripts were reviewed by the participants, who were asked for a confirmation of accuracy (Birt et al., 2016).

### **Instrumentation**

The researcher was the instrument and key component in this narrative qualitative research study. The researcher played a major role in data collection and interpretation

(Creswell, 2018; Denzin et al., 2023) Qualitative research outcomes can be impacted by the researcher's identities and culture (Yoon & Uliassi, 2022). The researcher's identities and knowledge were a consideration for a more accurate interpretation of the findings in the study. Because the researcher had individual views and experiences it was important to triangulate various points of data to increase the validity of the study.

The following steps were taken to conduct interviews: (a) sent questionnaires to 30 potential participants and requested that they participate in an individual interview process; (b) used adequate recording procedures when conducting one-on-one interviews; (c) designed and used an interview protocol; and d) obtained consent from the interviewees to participate in the study. The interviews were recorded via Zoom or tape recorder and responses were transcribed and analyzed. Data from the interviews were collected and used to answer research questions. The interview consisted of seven big idea questions and follow-up questions designed by the researcher. The instrument was designed to collect responses that would answer the research questions put forth in this study.

The researcher estimated that interviews would last approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were conducted with participants who had consented to be a part of the study and met the criteria for participation. The researcher assumed that the information provided by the participants would be valuable to the study. The interview data that was collected consisted of Zoom recordings, tape recorded interviews, and transcriptions. The one-on-one interviews took place over a 1-month time period. The roundtable participants first participated in the one-on-one interviews, agreed to be part of the roundtable discussion, and met the criteria established for participation.

The interview questions, found in Appendix B, were developed using the research questions, as well as the themes that were uncovered through review of the literature. After the one-on-one interviews were conducted, the roundtable discussion took place. The process of analyzing the data started after the first interview and continued through the roundtable discussion. Coding included a process of referencing words or short phrases throughout all interviews. This process allowed the researcher to proceed in an unbiased manner, ensuring the study was grounded in the personal experiences and ideas of the participants, driven by the research questions. The interview protocol provided direction for gathering data and analysis of findings (Hunter, 2012). The interviews and roundtable discussion were recorded via Zoom or tape recorded, then transcribed by a transcription program. Recording the interviews using Zoom, video conferencing software and a tape recorder, reduced the risk of the researcher's bias or opinion and eliminated spatial barriers, allowing more participants to engage in the study (Gray et al., 2020).

The analysis of the data occurred simultaneously with the data collection. Data triangulation was achieved by examining the data through various lenses of data analysis to ensure a complete picture was being represented, and cross-checking throughout the study (Hunter, 2012). Data were analyzed using key words or phrases for common categories or patterns. Interview transcripts were sent to the participants of the study with the opportunity to clarify previous statements and offer additional comments. Member checking added trustworthiness and validity to the study. If the participants responded with clarifications or additional comments the researcher adjusted the transcribed interview. The process of open coding, also known as category construction, allowed the

researcher to turn concepts and ideas into meaningful data. The basic research questions were utilized to analyze information to develop codes and themes related to identifying and investigating the issues relating to transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the connection to educational experiences.

The researcher took the challenge of presenting valid and reliable data very seriously. Careful examination of each interview occurred. Each of the interviews was first read in its entirety, with overall themes summarized by the researcher. Each interview was then reviewed individually with a reading of the question followed by the response while notes were paraphrased. As new themes emerged through this process, the notes were written into the printed interview. Then the final process included typing handwritten notes. This process ensured that responses were viewed multiple times and in multiple formats. The instrumentation included a questionnaire, one-on-one interviews, and a roundtable discussion with the same participants throughout the study. Informed consent was obtained from every participant prior to the distribution of the initial questionnaire.

### **Data Analysis**

The focus of qualitative studies is how people create meaning out of lived experiences and events (Forward & Levin, 2021). By interviewing Black and Brown urban Missouri residents to gain insight into their lived experiences regarding vicarious racial trauma, the researcher gained a greater perspective. By interviewing participants who identified as being a part of the African American community, the researcher was able to identify themes and patterns that affected the academic experiences of those interviewed. (Gray et al., 2020).

The narrative thematic analysis process used consisted of four stages: (a) organization and understanding of the data, (b) the coding process, (c) categories or themes, and (d) interpretation of the data. The organization and understanding of the data stage began with transcribing interviews immediately or shortly after the interview. While transcribing the transcripts from the interviews, any patterns or themes were noted in the transcript margins. The transcripts were compiled into one document for each participant; non-narrative lines, such as casual conversation, were deleted; participants were assigned fictitious names; and any participant identifiers (e.g., names, locations) were replaced or removed. The coding process was the next stage in which the data was coded electronically using ATLAS.ti, a qualitative analysis software program. The analysis of the data occurred simultaneously with the data collection. Data triangulation occurred to ensure reliability and validity. The validity of this study was addressed by examining the data through various lenses of data analysis. The researcher triangulated various sources of data from interviews, roundtable discussions, and archival sources to establish patterns to increase credibility and trustworthiness (Stahl & King, 2020).

Interview transcripts were available to the participants of the study with the opportunity to clarify previous statements and offer additional comments. If the participants responded with clarifications or additional comments the researcher adjusted the transcribed interview. The researcher conducted a semi-structured roundtable discussion with Subgroup 2 participants, and those interviews were transcribed. The researcher captured themes and key words based on initial transcripts of the interviews. The research questions were utilized to analyze information to develop themes related to transgenerational and vicarious trauma and the connection to the school experiences of

Black and Brown students. Key words or phrases were identified to assist the researcher in categorizing the recurring themes that were stated in multiple interviews by multiple participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher took the challenge of presenting valid and reliable data very seriously.

Careful examination of each interview occurred. Each of the interviews was first read in its entirety, with overall themes summarized by the researcher. Each interview was then reviewed individually with a reading of the question followed by the response while notes were paraphrased. New themes emerged through this process, and the notes were written into the printed interview. All handwritten notes were typed. This process transpired to ensure that responses were viewed multiple times and in multiple formats. Notes were merged and paraphrased to begin identifying themes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

### **Summary**

The study focused on the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The research addressed a gap in the existing literature, which lacks in-depth exploration of how vicarious racial traumas specifically impacts the academic journey of these students. By examining the lived experiences of Black and Brown students, the study aimed to shed light on the unique challenges and barriers they face in the educational system. The findings of this study will contribute to the development of effective interventions, policies, and practices that can promote more equitable and inclusive educational environments for these students. Ultimately, this research sought to empower educators, policymakers, and stakeholders to create a supportive and

transformative educational experience that enables Black and Brown students to thrive academically and beyond. By keeping these key points in mind, readers gained a deeper understanding of the significance and implications of this study in addressing the educational disparities faced by Black and Brown high school students and working towards a more just and equitable educational system.

The research design followed a narrative qualitative approach, focusing on the stories and experiences of individual participants. Thematic analysis was used to identify emerging themes from data. Triangulation, member checking, and peer review were employed to enhance the study's credibility and validity. The researcher acted as the main instrument in the study, and steps were taken to assure validity and credibility. Interviews were conducted using a predefined interview protocol, and data were analyzed concurrently with data collection. Coding and thematic analysis were used to identify patterns and categories in the data. Member checking was employed to validate the accuracy of the transcriptions.

Chapter One provided the background of the study, the problem statement, the framework lens that drove the research, and the limitations of the study. Chapter Two, the literature review, revealed that the majority of research focused on the cultural disparities of the focus group, which influences educational outcomes. Only a few researchers in the literature reviewed focused on the inequitable access of opportunity within institutional structures, including public K-12 academic institutions. All the literature validated the need for further investigation into the educational disparities of Black and Brown male adolescents. Chapter Three described the methodology, including the participants, and instrumentation used for the study. Chapter Four presented the

findings through the interviews, focus groups, and roundtable discussions conducted. The study concluded with the Chapter Five summary analysis of data and recommendations for change, as well as potential future research related to this topic.

Overall, this narrative qualitative study aimed to shed light on the connections between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students. The research findings can inform the development of interventions, policies, and practices to create more equitable and inclusive educational environments for these students.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### RESULTS

#### **Introduction**

In the intricate tapestry of human experience, the interplay between race, trust, diversity, and trauma weaves a complex narrative that shapes interactions and perceptions. Chapter Four presents the results of the interview data gathered. This narrative qualitative study embarked on a multifaceted exploration of these themes, exploring the transformation from distrust to recognition of diversity within racial groups. Additionally, it examined the influence of vicarious trauma on high school students' educational experiences, weaving together the threads of personal growth, social dynamics, and resilience. This study aimed to uncover the transformative potential of empathy, dialogue, and understanding while also shedding light on the connection between vicarious trauma on the educational journeys of Black and Brown high school students.

The researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with 10 Missouri community leaders and 10 Missouri high school graduates. Participants were from five regions of Missouri, Kansas City, St. Louis, Springfield, Columbia, and Mexico. Participation in this study was at their discretion and based upon their willingness to participate. This chapter embodies the participants' responses in the interviews to examine their experiences with racial trauma and the connection they perceived to their educational experiences.

The research was theoretically grounded in Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and supported by Porges' (1995) polyvagal theory. Vygotsky's socio-cultural

theory emphasizes the profound impact of social interactions, cultural contexts, and shared experiences on cognitive development and learning. In the context of the research, the themes of vicarious trauma, racial identity, and educational experiences align with Vygotsky's framework. The participants' narratives revealed the pivotal role of interactions within schools, peer support, and safe spaces in shaping their emotional responses and coping mechanisms. These insights resonate with Vygotsky's notion that learning and emotional development are intrinsically tied to the social and cultural environments in which individuals are immersed. The participants' engagement in educational resilience, empathy, and advocacy activities also aligns with Vygotsky's emphasis on the role of education in fostering higher mental functions and empowering individuals to transcend challenges.

Porges' (1995) polyvagal theory, on the other hand, offers insights into the physiological responses underlying emotional experiences. The participants' vivid descriptions of distress, anger, and helplessness in the face of vicarious trauma align with Porges' theory, which highlights the autonomic nervous system's role in regulating emotions and responses to stressors. The narratives of heightened emotional reactions in response to contemporary instances of racial discrimination reflect the theory's concept of the "fight-or-flight" response. Moreover, the exploration of peer support, creative outlets, and safe spaces as coping mechanisms resonates with Porges' notion of social engagement as a crucial element for regulating autonomic responses and fostering emotional regulation.

The narratives further demonstrate how the interplay of emotional experiences and physiological responses can contribute to the participants' overall well-being and

capacity to navigate their high school experiences. The themes and findings uncovered during the research study align with both Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory and Porges' (1995) polyvagal theory. The participants' narratives reflect the intricate interplay between social interactions, cultural contexts, emotional experiences, and physiological responses, underscoring the significance of these theories in understanding the complex dynamics of vicarious trauma, racial identity, and resilience within the high school context.

The interviews for this study were conducted 3 years post COVID-19 pandemic. To ensure each participant felt comfortable they were offered an in-person option or a Zoom option. Eight participants chose to participate in the Zoom interview, while the other 12 chose in-person interviews. The analysis of the data was separated into four different sections with the first section identifying the participants of the study, which included ten Missouri community leaders that either attended a Missouri high school and/or had children attend a Missouri high school and 10 Missouri high school graduates, 18-25 years old. The second section described the process used to verify the methods and the trustworthiness of the research. Subsequently, the third section explored the categories and themes that evolved from the interviews, document mining, and observations. Finally, the fourth section discussed the data regarding the research questions.

Three overarching research questions were used for this basic narrative qualitative study:

- RQ1. How do Black and Brown high school students in Missouri describe their experiences with racial issues in their schools, and how do these experiences shape their academic journeys?
- RQ1. How do participants perceive the connections between their high school experiences and their academic outcomes, and what meaning do they make of these connections?
- RQ3. How do interviewees imagine public schools' policies, procedures, and interventions could create equity and access for Black and Brown students in Missouri?

### **Participants**

Interviews were conducted with 20 participants from the state of Missouri. The community leader participants were identified as P1a-P1j. Missouri graduates 18-25 years old were identified as P2a-P2j. Participants were kept confidential and were able to remove themselves from this study at any point. Answers from interview questions were kept secured on a password-protected device. Participant names were not used in this study.

The study involved a diverse group of participants from various sectors in Missouri. Participant 1 had engaged in nonprofit work across different regions, with varying levels of involvement and familial ties to Missouri's public school system. Participant 2, a professor at a Missouri university, had children attending the state's public schools, as did Participant 3, a superintendent within a large school district in Missouri. Similarly, Participant 4, an elected official from one of the targeted regions, and Participant 5, a nonprofit leader, both had personal connections to Missouri's public

education through their own schooling experiences and their children's attendance in these schools. Participant 6, a pastor, and Participant 7, an educational leader in a public school, shared ties to Missouri's public high schools, paralleling their children's educational backgrounds. The pattern continued with Participant 8, another pastor, and Participant 9, an educational leader, both connected through personal and familial experiences within Missouri's public high school system. Lastly, Participant 10 was another elected official within the study's target areas. Participants 11 through 20 constituted a group of 18–25-year-old Missouri high school graduates, providing a younger perspective within the cohort.

### ***Verification and Trustworthiness***

A narrative qualitative study approach was used for this study. Data collection occurred through interviews, the review of interview transcripts, member checks, and the researcher's field notes (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data collection using these methods was designed to allow participants to share their experiences with transgenerational and other vicarious racial trauma and their perception on the connection to their high school experiences. Interviews allowed the researcher to understand participants' perceptions and experiences regarding vicarious racial traumas and the connection to educational experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Credibility, validity, and reliability are crucial components for analyzing the data. In qualitative research, this process is driven by a constant and coherent handling of the interview data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Data should be collected through multiple methods to clearly communicate findings (Creswell, 2013). This process allows the researcher to establish how various viewpoints and approaches were used to examine and

portray the findings (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This narrative qualitative study confirmed trustworthiness by applying triangulation, member checking, clarifying researcher bias, and providing rich narrative.

### **Triangulation.**

To comprehensively assess and gain deeper insights into the emergent themes that evolved during the research, the researcher implemented triangulation. This multifaceted approach involved the utilization of various data sources to ensure a robust evaluation. Data collection was executed through interviews, meticulous review of interview transcripts, conducting member checks, and meticulous documentation of the researcher's field observations (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016).

Throughout the interview process, the researcher diligently maintained a notebook, capturing notes, as transcripts were reviewed. This practice facilitated the preservation of immediate thoughts and reflections during interactions with participants, enriching the data collection process. Notably, this research adhered to the stringent criteria for validity inherent in qualitative research. By meticulously attending to the intricacies of data collection, the research methodology ensured that the data's integrity remained intact (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Employing this methodological process not only bolstered the comprehensiveness of the study but also elevated its validity. The deliberate application of triangulation, coupled with the rigorous documentation of insights, contributed to a deeper understanding of the themes that emerged and instilled confidence in the research's findings.

**Member Check.**

Member checking offered participants the opportunity to review the interview transcript and make any changes, additions, or clarification to their statements. Each interview was recorded using the recording feature in Zoom or audio recorded. The digital recordings were uploaded to ATLAS.ti and converted into transcripts. Copies of the transcripts were offered to each participant to ensure the accuracy of their responses. Participants were allowed to make any additions or deletions or provide clarification or additional explanation to their interview responses. Upon completion of member checking, the only requests made to modify the original transcript were misspellings of names. Those modifications were made to the appropriate transcript(s).

**Peer review.**

Peer reviews were conducted to increase the internal validity of this study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The peer review process was comprised of a dissertation committee. One of the dissertation committee members served as the researcher's advisor. The advisor monitored the progress of the research and collaborated with other dissertation committee members to provide feedback and input. The dissertation committee examined the research questions, theoretical framework, literature review, and the methodology for the study. The review process enabled the researcher to take feedback and input from the committee to focus the research questions, develop the literature review to reflect each research question's purpose, and determine the suitable methodology for the research.

### **Clarifying bias.**

In qualitative research, it is imperative to clarify bias to monitor the researcher's biases so it can be made clear how they may be influencing the data (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The researcher was employed as a coordinator of site interventions in the state of Missouri while conducting research. Due to the researcher's role, she was aware of potential bias and adhered to the interview protocol to ensure bias was not impugned.

### **Data Analysis Procedures**

In qualitative research, there are various approaches to analyzing data beyond the traditional coding and thematic analysis. The method used in this research study was narrative analysis. This approach focuses on the stories and narratives that participants share. Researchers analyze the structure of narratives, including plot development, character roles, and the use of language to convey meaning. Narrative analysis can reveal how individuals construct their experiences and identities through storytelling and involves a systematic examination of the narratives provided by research participants. It focuses on various elements within these narratives, including plot development, character roles, and the use of language. These elements are not merely superficial details but carry deep meaning. (Riesman, 2008).

Narrative analysis involves several steps: Data collection in narrative analysis involves gathering various forms of narrative data, such as interviews, diaries, or autobiographical accounts (Riessman, 2008). These sources of narrative data provide researchers with rich and personal insights into individuals' experiences, allowing for a deep exploration of their stories and narratives.

Conducting interviews is a common method for collecting narrative data. Researchers engage participants in structured or semi-structured interviews, during which participants are encouraged to share their stories and experiences. These interviews often begin with open-ended questions to allow participants to narrate their experiences in their own words. Follow-up questions can help clarify details or encourage participants to delve deeper into their narratives. Interviews provide researchers with the opportunity to establish rapport with participants and elicit in-depth narratives.

Interviews offer real-time interaction and the opportunity for researchers to probe for additional details, while diaries and autobiographical accounts provide participants with the freedom to express themselves in their own time and format.

During the data collection phase, it is essential to establish trust and rapport with participants, create a safe and comfortable environment for sharing personal narratives, and obtain informed consent for the use of their narratives in the research. Ethical considerations are paramount in handling narrative data, ensuring that participants' privacy and confidentiality are respected (Riessman, 2008).

### ***Narrative Themes***

Identifying narrative themes is the process of analyzing recurring themes and motifs within narratives. The process involves exploring how participants make sense of their experiences and construct meaning through storytelling (Riessman, 2008). There are five aspects of navigating narrative themes throughout the research process.

- Comparison: Compare narratives across participants to identify commonalities and differences. This can help identify shared cultural narratives or unique individual stories.

- Contextualization: Consider the broader context in which the narratives are situated. How do cultural, social, or historical factors influence the stories participants tell?
- Ethical Considerations: Ensure ethical handling of participants' narratives, respecting their autonomy and privacy.
- Interpretation: Interpret the narratives to gain insights into the research questions. What do the narratives reveal about the participants' experiences, perspectives, and identities?
- Narrative Patterns: Look for patterns in the way participants structure their narratives. Are there common narrative arcs or storytelling strategies used by different participants?

Narrative analysis is particularly useful when exploring subjective experiences, personal histories, or the construction of identity. It allows researchers to delve deeply into the narratives provided by participants and gain a rich understanding of their lived experiences.

### ***Coding Procedures and Theme Development***

The researcher completed one-on-one interviews with two subgroups, which involved 20 participants. Interviews were completed using the Zoom platform or tape recorder if participants chose an in-person interview and were recorded using that system. The interviews were provided to ATLAS.ti and transcripts were created. Once transcripts were received member checks were completed. The researcher analyzed each interview transcript through multiple readings and notetaking strategies. Descriptive coding

included key words or phrases and assisted the researcher in categorizing the recurring phrases that were stated in multiple interviews by multiple participants (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Key phrases and themes were sorted into categories. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) stated that researchers are to “create file folders, each labeled with a category name” (p. 209). The researcher named each category by coding the responses of the participants. Each interview was then reviewed individually with a reading of the question followed by the response while notes were paraphrased. New themes emerged through this process, and the notes were written into the printed interview.

The researcher annotated and highlighted text within the transcripts, throughout several readings, and discovered commonly identified words and phrases. The text was moved to a document, and a key word assigned to each phrase. This process was completed for each transcript. The researcher began to identify themes based on responses of participants. Once this process was completed, the researcher identified the key words and phrases that were assigned to text most frequently. The researcher identified 10 key words or phrases from the interview transcripts. The 10 key words or phrases were used to illustrate the data and were categorized together to establish patterns, which helped identify 11 major themes.

When the 11 major themes were determined the researcher examined the interview transcripts again to identify overlap in themes. Table 2 identifies the 10 coded words or phrases associated with the identified themes from the interview transcripts. The table demonstrates the frequency of the identified words or phrases and shows the overlap of those words within multiple themes.

**Table 1**

*Coded Words and Phrases*

Words/Phrases	Example Quote
Relationships/Representation	<p>“My 10<sup>th</sup> grade English teacher loved teaching and building relationships with her students. I am in school to be a teacher because of her.”</p> <p>“Relationships between schools, teachers, parents can make a world of difference.”</p> <p>“When students see people who look like them the connection can be made, it is representation.”</p>
Respect/Disrespect	<p>“If I am sitting in a class and I feel the teacher is disrespecting me, Imma walk out.”</p> <p>“It is about respect. I am not going to be disrespected.”</p>
Listen	<p>“Listen, educate yourself and not just by reading a book or watching a movie, but holistically. Listen to what others are saying.”</p> <p>“It is expected for the Black kids to lash out in anger, but historically speaking we do not resort to anger first. We didn’t chain up millions of White people. If adults would listen, it would take care of this issue most of the time.”</p> <p>“Black people have to give themselves credibility through education, so people will actually listen to them.”</p>
Trust	<p>“Teachers weren’t equipped or trained to teach differently. They just taught everyone the same, with no concept of what we needed. I had no trust in my teachers.”</p> <p>“This may be a generalization, but it seems most teachers do not think there are racial issues. There is no amount of training that can fix that. That breaks the trust for students of color.”</p> <p>“I still struggle to trust White people.”</p>
Community	<p>“Being a part of the community, whether it is sports or clubs, they have to find at least one thing they are confident in. This community connection is key.”</p> <p>“Connection to your community can make the difference. Not only connection to your community, but also making your school your community.”</p>

Sports	<p>“I was only around people who looked like me when I played sports, but I took all honors courses and I was in speech and debate.”</p> <p>“Being characterized as an athlete just because I was Black. Was I good at the sport(s), yeah sure, but that is just what I was seen as. I didn’t have to try hard in school because I was good at football.”</p> <p>“I just played sports and coped.”</p>
Intentional	<p>“The history classes are super textbook and may be the problem with Missouri education. It gets put on the back burner, but it needs to be more intentional in history classes. Most of my Black history came from my English classes.”</p> <p>“A kid growing up like me, it wasn’t a matter of me having more questions, it was what am I supposed to question? Teachers need to be more intentional in supporting students like me.”</p> <p>“Schools must be more intentional in preparing Black students for post-secondary experiences.”</p>
Stand up/Fight	<p>“I’ve had a run in with the school because my daughter, who was in first grade at the time, was being hit by multiple boys, with no repercussions. Other kids told her she was ugly because she is brown. I told the school if they wouldn’t take care of it, she would stand up for herself.”</p> <p>“My parents told me, if you have to, fight protect yourself, but don’t lose. If you feel like you have to protect yourself, don’t lose.”</p>
Passed down/Telling	<p>“I remember those conversations when I first started driving. Make sure your wallet is available and in front of you, your hands are visible. I know the fear I have for my kids to start driving. Those conversations are passed down.”</p> <p>“My father telling me about walking through the wrong neighborhood, getting picked up by the police and told to never come back.”</p> <p>“In our community, as African Americans, grandparents and parents have experiences that they verbally pass down to their children. This often times affects the confidence of African Americans to succeed.”</p> <p>“I don’t want her to be bitter like me. I don’t want to pass that down.”</p>

Took it/Took it on the chin	<p>“At the time I didn’t realize what was being said was racist, I just took it. Now looking back, yeah the jokes were racist or I was racially profiled. I just thought it was normal.”</p> <p>“I understand why past generations took it on the chin, but I won’t raise my children that way.”</p> <p>“My mom was more of a turn the other cheek, take it on the chin. My dad was more of the start it, finish it, and keep moving.”</p>
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*Note:* table 1 comprises coded words and phrases discovered during the research.

## Qualitative Results

### *Trust, Diversity, Vicarious Trauma, and School Experiences*

The qualitative analysis of participants' narratives revealed a rich tapestry of experiences, capturing both the evolution of attitudes toward racial diversity and the interconnectedness of vicarious trauma with high school students' educational journeys. In the exploration of participants' narratives, a profound array of experiences emerged, each woven with nuances that illuminated the intricate dynamics of their lives.

Collectively, the qualitative results offered a glimpse into the intricate mosaic of the African American experience. Trust, diversity, vicarious trauma, and school experiences are threads that interweave, creating a rich narrative that encapsulates the struggles, resilience, and aspirations of a community. This analysis stands as a testament to the power of individual stories to collectively shed light on shared themes, amplifying voices that too often remain unheard. Through this qualitative exploration, the research contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the multi-dimensional layers that shape the African American journey and its interactions with education.

Through the lens of qualitative analysis, the evolution of attitudes toward racial diversity took center stage, capturing the intricate transformations that occur within

individuals and communities over time. These narratives showcased the shifting paradigms of trust—how historical skepticism evolves into a more cautious but hopeful belief in the potential for genuine understanding and solidarity.

As P2d poignantly noted, “Teachers weren't equipped or trained to teach differently. They just taught everyone the same, with no concept of what we needed. I had no trust in my teachers.” This sentiment underscores the pivotal role that trust, or the lack thereof, plays in the educational journey. Another participant P2h emphasized this by saying, “This may be a generalization, but it seems most teachers do not think there are racial issues. There is no amount of training that can fix that. That breaks the trust for students of color.” Such sentiments reveal the profound impact of teachers' actions and attitudes on students' trust.

Additionally, this narrative qualitative study unveiled the interconnectedness of vicarious trauma with the educational journeys of high school students. The narratives painted a vivid picture of how systemic struggles, injustices, and historical traumas reverberate through generations, shaping the experiences of young individuals navigating the complex terrain of education. These stories underscored how vicarious trauma, like a thread weaving through their lives, influences their perceptions of self-worth, belonging, and their place within the educational system.

Furthermore, the school experiences shared within these narratives provided a canvas on which the broader themes of trust, diversity, and vicarious trauma were painted. The analysis shed light on the multifaceted interactions between students, educators, and the education system itself. From empowering teachers who recognize the significance of embracing diverse perspectives to students grappling with the weight of

inherited traumas, the school environment emerged as both a catalyst for growth and a battlefield for resilience.

In conclusion, the narratives echoed the sentiment, “I still struggle to trust white people.” These narratives call for a deeper examination of trust, diversity, and vicarious trauma in educational institutions, fostering a more inclusive and empathetic environment. The insights gained from this qualitative study offer a path forward in transforming high school education into a space that nourishes both the intellect and the spirit."

### ***Evolving Perceptions of Diversity***

The exploration of participants' narratives within high school settings uncovered a remarkable evolution in their perceptions of diversity. At the outset, many shared stories unveiled a backdrop of skepticism and distrust directed toward racial groups that differed from their own. These initial attitudes were often rooted in the broader societal narratives, historical context, and even personal experiences that had shaped their understanding of the world.

However, what emerged as a fascinating trajectory within these narratives is the transformation that unfolded as participants navigated high school environments. As they engaged in dialogues and forged relationships with peers from diverse racial backgrounds, their perspectives shifted. These interactions became a crucible of learning, revealing the intricate humanity that resides within every individual. The participants' stories and experiences painted a vivid picture of how participants came to realize that racial groups, including their own, are not monolithic entities defined solely by

preconceived notions. Instead, they discovered that within every racial group, there exists a mosaic of unique stories, beliefs, and experiences. P1j stated,

“I was in the gifted program. I was the only Black person in the program. There is a thin line between a gifted kid and a troubled kid. Regarding transgenerational trauma, what I witnessed is teachers don’t recognize. There are a lot of gifted Black kids who are not in gifted program, who lash out.”

On the other hand, P2c recognized that he was seen as an athlete and nothing more, so he embraced it, “I just played sports and coped.”

In essence, the evolution of perceptions unveiled within these narratives showcased the power of human connection and open dialogue in dismantling biases. High school settings, despite their challenges, emerged as microcosms of transformation, where individuals experienced a shift from skepticism to understanding. These narratives echoed the profound impact of relationships in nurturing empathy and fostering the recognition of shared humanity, irrespective of racial backgrounds.

The exploration of evolving perceptions of diversity not only illuminated personal growth but also underscored the importance of diverse educational environments. The narratives presented within this context attested to the potential for high school settings to serve as fertile grounds for the cultivation of tolerance, understanding, and the celebration of differences. By recognizing the evolution of participants' perceptions, the research contributed to the ongoing discourse on the transformative power of education in shaping inclusive, empathetic, and diverse societies.

### *Vicarious Trauma's Ripple Effect*

A poignant undercurrent that surfaced within participants' narratives was the profound impact of vicarious trauma—a phenomenon characterized by the emotional aftershocks triggered by exposure to others' traumatic experiences. Within the context of high school environments, this phenomenon took on a particularly resonant significance, echoing the interconnectedness of the school community.

The exploration of vicarious trauma's impact within the context of high school environments unveils intriguing differences in its effects across age groups. While both 30-to-60-year-olds and 19-to-25-year-olds share the exposure to others' traumatic experiences, the way this exposure reverberated through their lives differed significantly. For 30-to-60-year-olds, the narratives revealed a distinct emotional resilience, shaped by their experiences within a different societal landscape. Many recounted a prevailing sense of emotional detachment—a coping mechanism forged during times when conversations about racial discrimination and systemic injustices were shrouded in silence or muted by prevailing norms. This age group, having navigated their formative years during periods marked by limited dialogue, exhibited a more stoic demeanor when confronted with vicarious trauma. Their responses often gravitated towards self-reliance, reflective of an era when communal sharing of emotional burdens was less common. P1d expressed, “At the time I didn't realize what was being said was racist, I just took it. Now looking back, yeah the jokes were racist or I was racially profiled. I just thought it was normal.”

Conversely, the impact on 19-to-25-year-olds was characterized by heightened emotional immediacy. Growing up in an era marked by the proliferation of social media and a greater emphasis on open conversations about social issues, this age group

demonstrates a greater emotional resonance with the traumatic experiences of their peers. The narratives portrayed a generation that carries the weight of these shared traumas more openly, leading to a profound sense of emotional interconnectivity. Their responses to vicarious trauma are marked by a willingness to express emotions more freely and a heightened drive to enact change within their immediate environments. P2g stated, “I understand why past generations took it on the chin, but I won’t raise my children that way.”

The differentiation in impact between these age groups underscores the interplay of generational experiences. The 30-to-60-year-olds' emotional resilience was a testament to the era in which they grew up, marked by the suppression of emotions in favor of conformity. On the other hand, the emotional immediacy exhibited by 19-to-25-year-olds resonated with a time of increased dialogue and emotional sharing.

By recognizing these generational distinctions, the research contributes to a deeper understanding of how vicarious trauma interacts with generational experiences, shaping emotional responses and coping mechanisms. This differentiation underscores the fluid nature of trauma's impact and highlights the importance of considering generational factors when designing supportive environments that address the emotional complexities within school communities.

### ***Impact on School Experiences***

The connection between vicarious trauma and school experiences comes to the forefront within the narratives shared by participants. Notably, Subgroup B, consisting of 18-to-25-year-olds, illuminated a compelling connection between vicarious trauma and their educational journeys. Their stories showcased how the emotional echoes of

vicarious trauma could ripple through the corridors of learning, profoundly influencing their emotional well-being, concentration, and overall engagement within the classrooms. P2a remembered, “I hated sitting in class listening to teachers talk about things they didn’t know nothing about. I wanted to crawl outta my skin. I would just walk out and then of course I would be in trouble.” Participants in this age group recounted instances where the emotional weight of vicarious trauma cast a shadow over their academic pursuits.

The narratives illustrated how vicarious trauma, often triggered by witnessing or hearing about the racial discrimination and injustices faced by their peers and others within their racial landscape, seeped into their daily lives, including their educational environments. This emotional infiltration was not confined to mere feelings of empathy; it manifested as a tangible emotional burden, affecting their emotional resilience and overall focus. The impact on emotional well-being was palpable. The emotional toll of vicarious trauma could lead to heightened levels of stress, anxiety, and even emotional exhaustion, which could subsequently hinder students' ability to fully engage with their studies. As they absorbed the emotional struggles of their peers, their own emotional landscapes became intricate tapestries, interwoven with the experiences of others.

Moreover, the connection between vicarious trauma and concentration became evident. The narratives illuminated moments when students found it challenging to concentrate on their studies, their minds preoccupied by the emotional distress of those within the African American community. This diversion of attention not only affected their academic performance but also compounded their own emotional well-being, creating a cyclical interplay between vicarious trauma and educational experiences.

The collective emotional state of the school environment emerged as a pivotal factor. The narratives highlighted how the emotional well-being of students, collectively influenced by vicarious trauma, could impact the overall dynamics of the educational space. The emotional resonance within the school community held the potential to either enhance or impede the learning environment, underscoring the interconnectedness of emotional well-being and academic success.

Subgroup B, composed of 18-to-25-year-olds, voiced a shared sentiment of longing for emotional support within the school environment. As they grappled with the emotional weight of vicarious trauma, they sought solace in the presence of counselors who could provide guidance, empathy, and a safe space for emotional expression. However, their narratives painted a stark reality where such support seemed elusive. The absence of accessible counselors created a void that exacerbated the emotional challenges. The narratives illustrated how the emotional echoes of vicarious trauma were left unaddressed, leaving students grappling with their emotional turmoil in isolation. This void not only hindered emotional healing but also impacted their ability to fully engage with their studies. The lack of a supportive outlet perpetuated a cycle where emotional well-being, concentration, and academic engagement intertwined, often resulting in a downward spiral.

The narratives within this context shine a spotlight on the critical role that counselors play in shaping school experiences for the current generation. The shared longing for accessible emotional support underscores the need for school environments to prioritize not only academic growth but also the holistic well-being of their students. The absence of accessible counselors reflects a missed opportunity to cultivate emotionally

supportive spaces that empower students to navigate the complexities of vicarious trauma while pursuing their educational aspirations.

Within Subgroup A, comprised of individuals aged 30-to-60-year-olds, a distinct perspective on counselor support emerged from their narratives. Unlike their younger counterparts, these participants shared experiences marked by the absence of counselor support, but intriguingly, they also conveyed a nuanced sentiment that diverged from a desire for such relationships. Their stories unveiled a complex interplay between generational attitudes, self-reliance, and historical contexts. P1h stated,

“I didn’t go to a counselor. I was characterized as an athlete just because I was Black. Was I good at the sport(s), yeah sure, but that is just what I was seen as. I didn’t have to try hard in school because I was good at football.”

These participants' narratives unveiled a notable contrast in their response to the lack of accessible counselors. While the absence of supportive relationships could have left them emotionally adrift, many expressed a sense of self-reliance that had been honed through a different societal landscape. Growing up during eras characterized by prevailing norms of emotional restraint and self-sufficiency, Subgroup A navigated their formative years without the expectation of, or perhaps even the inclination toward, seeking emotional support from counselors.

Their narratives painted a portrait of individuals who had forged their emotional resilience through their unique generational experiences. For some, the absence of counselor relationships seemed almost fitting within the narrative of their lives—a narrative that celebrated individual strength, stoicism, and a certain degree of emotional

detachment. This perspective, shaped by historical and societal contexts, offered a window into their personal attitudes towards emotional support.

In summary, Subgroup A's narratives reveal a thought-provoking dynamic that sets them apart from their younger counterparts. While the absence of accessible counselors remained a common thread, their nuanced response shed light on the complex interplay between generational attitudes, historical contexts, and emotional self-reliance. By acknowledging these distinct perspectives, the research adds depth to the discourse surrounding counselor support, highlighting the diverse ways in which individuals from different age groups approach emotional well-being and the role of counselors within their journeys.

### ***Support Environments as a Counterforce***

In the midst of the intricate challenges posed by the reverberations of transgenerational and vicarious trauma, participants underscored a transformative counterforce that could wield a profound impact—the presence of supportive environments. Within their narratives, schools that actively cultivated environments characterized by openness, empathy, and emotional resources emerged as key protagonists in mitigating the negative effects of vicarious trauma. P2j stated, “It wasn’t often, but when I could connect with someone, an adult who got it I was able to hold on to some hope I could overcome.”

Participants' stories cast a spotlight on the remarkable power of schools that prioritized open dialogues. These spaces were marked by an environment that encouraged students to engage in candid conversations about racial discrimination, injustices, and shared emotional struggles that reverberated through their lives. In these discussions, the

emotional echoes of vicarious trauma found a channel for expression, enabling students to unburden themselves and share their experiences with peers who understood the emotional complexity. P2b expressed, “I had one teacher who listened, really listened to understand, and learn. This allowed us to be vulnerable and share our voice”.

The availability of mental health resources emerged as another pivotal aspect of supportive environments. Schools that recognized the importance of emotional well-being proactively provided access to counselors, therapists, and mental health professionals. These resources offered a lifeline to those navigating the emotional turbulence wrought by vicarious trauma. Students could find solace in spaces where their emotions were met with understanding, empathy, and guidance—a stark contrast to the isolation that absence of support often engendered.

Furthermore, the creation of safe spaces for discussions provided a sanctuary where students could process their experiences and emotions without fear of judgment. These spaces were marked by a collective commitment to listen, share, and heal together. Within these circles, participants discovered the power of shared narratives—stories that not only validated their emotions but also allowed them to tap into a collective strength, born out of the realization that they were not alone in their struggles. In essence, the narratives within this context underlined the catalytic role that supportive environments play in countering the effects of vicarious trauma. Schools that prioritize open dialogues, mental health resources, and safe spaces foster an atmosphere where emotional expression is not just encouraged, but nurtured. By providing avenues for emotional healing, these environments enable students to process their experiences, foster resilience, and continue their educational journeys with renewed focus and determination.

In conclusion, the concept of supportive environments as a counterforce is an illuminating thread that runs through participants' narratives. It underscores the transformative potential of schools to become sanctuaries where vicarious trauma's impact can be mitigated. By embracing these principles, educational institutions can contribute to the holistic growth of students, nurturing emotional well-being and empowering them to navigate the complexities of vicarious trauma while pursuing academic excellence.

### ***Educational Resilience and Empowerment***

The exploration of participants' narratives unveiled a tapestry woven with threads of educational resilience and empowerment, revealing an inspiring portrait of individuals who dared to navigate the labyrinth of vicarious trauma with unwavering determination. Amidst the challenges posed by the emotional reverberations of trauma, they demonstrated a remarkable capacity to not only endure but also to thrive.

Central to this narrative was the notion of peer support. Participants recognized that they were not traversing this emotional terrain alone. Amidst the echoes of vicarious trauma, they sought solace in the companionship of peers who shared their experiences. These relationships became pillars of support, offering spaces where emotions could be expressed, shared, and understood without judgment. The narratives emphasized how the collective strength within these connections became a lifeline, reminding participants that they were not solitary travelers on this emotional journey.

Creative outlets emerged as another dynamic facet of educational resilience. Participants sought refuge in artistic expression, whether through writing, art, music, or other creative avenues. These outlets provided a cathartic escape, enabling them to

channel their emotions into tangible forms of self-expression. Through their creative endeavors, they not only found release but also discovered a means of reclaiming agency over their emotional landscapes. P1d expressed his belief that finding that one thing, that outlet to build confidence, was a key to success. “Being a part of the community, whether it is sports or clubs, they have to find at least one thing they are confident in. This community connection is key.”

On the other hand, participants revealed a stark reality of limited awareness and access to resources within their school environments. Many struggled to engage with counselors, faced barriers while seeking mental health services, and encountered challenges in tapping into available support networks. This lack of proactive support underscored the uphill battle they faced in terms of emotional well-being, highlighting the disparities in the tools at their disposal to navigate the complex challenges posed by vicarious trauma. P2d stated, “I didn’t even know how to navigate the school system. When you are one of three Black people, you don’t just put yourself out there.”

Empowerment emerged as a recurring theme within these narratives. Despite the emotional turmoil, participants recognized their agency to shape their educational experiences. They understood that while external factors might influence their emotional landscape, they retained the power to engage, learn, and grow. This empowerment was an active choice—a conscious decision to rise above the emotional echoes of vicarious trauma and embrace the possibilities of education. In essence, the concept of educational resilience and empowerment offers a profound insight into the human spirit's ability to weather storms and emerge stronger. The narratives showcase individuals who, despite grappling with vicarious trauma, crafted paths of resilience marked by peer support and

creative expression, despite the absence of available resources within their school environments. Their stories serve as beacons of hope, demonstrating that even in the face of emotional challenges, empowerment remains a beacon guiding the way to transformative educational experiences.

## **Analysis of Data**

### ***Themes, Patterns, and Relationships***

In a thought-provoking exchange, the conversation navigated a complex web of interconnected themes and each shed light on different facets of the African American experience. These nine themes form the building blocks of a narrative that delved into historical struggles, community empowerment, educational disparities, trust dynamics, family dynamics, racial identity, and the socioeconomic landscape.

Rooted in the enduring struggles and historical trauma faced by the African American community, the research began by exploring how these challenges have shaped both individuals and entire generations. As the discourse unfolded, the conversations delved into the roles of nonprofit efforts, education, and cultural understanding as means to empower and uplift the community from within. Amidst this, the influence of sports, clubs, and church emerged as influential pillars in fostering identity, unity, and a sense of belonging. These themes intertwined, presenting a holistic picture of the intricate relationships that define the African American experience, where history, identity, and aspirations intersect against a backdrop of systemic challenges and remarkable resilience.

### ***Historical Microaggressions and Discrimination***

The interviews and roundtable discussion unveiled the challenges and trauma experienced by individuals and communities, with a particular focus on the historical

struggles of the African American community and their profound, multigenerational impacts. This overarching theme of struggle and trauma provides a significant perspective through which to examine the African American experience. It resonates deeply with the historical context of systemic injustices and pervasive discrimination endured by African Americans over generations.

P1c's testimony exemplifies the ongoing racial challenges faced within high school experiences. They shared, "Yeah, there were always racial jokes being told, but you know you just took it on the chin and moved on. They were my friends." This statement underscores the prevalence of racial jokes and microaggressions, even within friendships, which, rather than being addressed, were often tolerated.

Similarly, P2f's high school experience offers a poignant illustration of this theme. They expressed discomfort with teachers singling them out to answer questions about slavery and "Black" history topics, saying, "I hated it when teachers used me to answer questions about slavery or other 'Black' history things. It made me uncomfortable." This sheds light on how the educational environment itself can become a source of trauma when individuals are singled out based on their racial background.

These firsthand accounts vividly emphasize the ongoing challenges faced by African Americans, impacting various aspects of their lives, including their educational experiences, all within the broader theme of struggle and trauma. The theoretical frameworks of socio-cultural theory and the polyvagal theory offer insights into how these historical traumas influence high school experiences, emotional well-being, and the necessity for culturally sensitive and empathetic educational environments.

### *Nonprofit and Empowerment*

Community leaders discussed their involvement in nonprofit organizations and their efforts to meet people where they are, understanding their unique struggles and providing support. The theme of nonprofit and empowerment brings to the forefront the impactful role that nonprofit organizations play in the African American community. The conversations resonated with stories of community leaders who have dedicated themselves to addressing the multifaceted challenges faced by individuals within the African American community. These leaders stand as beacons of empowerment, embodying a commitment to not only understanding the struggles that define the African American experience but also actively working to uplift and empower individuals on their journey toward progress.

P1a explained, "Me coming from the struggle, understanding the trauma, I take a different approach than the NAACP, I mean you don't see many Black women who have a nonprofit. I really do try to meet them [kids] where they're at." The conversations delved into the strategies employed by nonprofit leaders to bridge the gap between systemic challenges and community needs. They emphasized the significance of meeting individuals where they are—not merely recognizing their struggles from an external standpoint, but truly comprehending the intricacies of their experiences. This understanding forms the foundation upon which these nonprofit organizations tailor their support, offering solutions that resonate with the unique narratives of African Americans. P1a added,

"When our youth see a parent struggling, when they see a Caucasian person who has more power than them, maybe a teacher, it might be all these programs with

Caucasian people that really want to help us, but they don't really know how to approach us... They misunderstand. I am a very assertive person, and they think I am rude, but that is just how we talk, how we interact. I meet the kids where they are; I have to talk to them like I'm their mom because, again, my skin color, where I come from, I can relate to them on a whole different level."

These nonprofit leaders demonstrate the power of cultural competence and socio-cultural understanding, adhering to the principles of the polyvagal theory in creating safe and supportive spaces for the community they serve. Through their work, they empower African American individuals by addressing not only their material needs but also their emotional well-being, recognizing the intersectionality of these factors. The empowerment aspect of this theme is especially poignant. The discussions revealed how these community leaders go beyond providing temporary aid; they equip individuals with the tools, knowledge, and support necessary to break the cycle of historical struggles. This empowerment-driven approach instills a sense of agency within the African American community, enabling them to take ownership of their narratives and redefine their trajectories.

Furthermore, the theme of nonprofit and empowerment highlighted the profound intersectionality of these efforts. Community leaders recognized that empowerment encompasses not only addressing socioeconomic disparities but also embracing cultural heritage and identity and fostering a sense of belonging. By creating safe spaces and support systems, nonprofit organizations enable African Americans to recognize their intrinsic worth and potential, and in doing so, lay the groundwork for sustainable change.

Ultimately, this theme underscored the vital role of nonprofits as vehicles of positive transformation. They serve as catalysts for change within the African American community, offering a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing challenges. Through the empowerment-driven initiatives discussed, nonprofit leaders exemplify how empathy, understanding, and support can collectively pave the way for a more equitable and empowered future.

### ***Cultural Invisibility and Underrepresentation***

The discussions shed light on the significant role of education as a gateway to better opportunities within the African American experience. The themes of education and opportunity underscore the transformative power of education, serving as a path to upward mobility, a catalyst for breaking the cycle of historical struggles, and an avenue for expanding horizons. It is celebrated as a tool capable of breaking down socioeconomic barriers, creating new avenues of opportunity that were previously perceived as unattainable.

However, beneath this optimism, there is an acknowledgement of the systemic challenges that impede equal access to quality education. These conversations unveiled the structural inequalities that persist, including unequal school funding, racial biases entrenched in educational systems, and limited resources available to underserved communities. This awareness serves as a sobering reminder that, despite education offering hope, systemic hurdles can thwart progress and perpetuate historical disparities. The narrative interwoven in this theme emphasizes the interplay of education and empowerment. Participants underscored the value of not just traditional education but also culturally relevant and inclusive learning experiences. Recognizing the unique needs

and perspectives of African American students, educators can create an environment that fosters confidence, self-expression, and a sense of belonging, all of which contribute to holistic empowerment.

Moreover, the themes of education and opportunity serve as a rallying cry for reforming educational systems. They emphasize the necessity of addressing inequities, advocating for fair funding, and amplifying voices that champion inclusive curricula. These discussions underscore the importance of comprehensive efforts extending beyond the classroom, initiatives challenging systemic norms and paving the way for a more just educational landscape. As P1g aptly stated, "I speak the language of power, in order to get a seat at the table, so I can be a disruptor."

Notably, participants in both subgroups expressed their dissatisfaction with the lack of representation of their cultural backgrounds in the curriculum and school activities, highlighting the theme of cultural invisibility and underrepresentation. The absence of diversity in textbooks, teaching staff, and extracurricular activities led to feelings of alienation and disengagement from the learning process. P1a, for instance, remarked, "There were no Black or Brown teachers where I went to school. I didn't really think about it, but yeah, no one looked like me." This statement emphasizes the need for more diverse teaching staff to create a sense of representation and belonging for Black and Brown students.

Similarly, P2c expressed their frustration, saying, "The history they teach us is false, so I didn't like those classes because I felt angry, and if I tried to voice my opinion, I was shut down." This sentiment underlines the importance of inclusive and accurate curricula that align with the experiences and perspectives of Black and Brown students,

addressing cultural misunderstandings and underrepresentation. P1e further contributed to this perspective, asking, "Who wrote those tests? Who created it? Trying to block out our history. Kids aren't going for any of this, they are more outlandish, more outspoken."

This resonates with the experiences of Subgroup 2, underscoring the need to address historical cultural invisibility, underrepresentation, and their enduring impacts in the African American community. These testimonies reinforce the urgent need for more inclusive and representative educational practices, further emphasizing the theme of education and opportunity and the pressing call to reform educational systems, recognizing the intertwined theme of cultural misunderstanding and underrepresentation. It is crucial to acknowledge and rectify these issues for a more equitable and inclusive educational experience.

### ***Trust and Cultural Understanding***

The themes of trust and cultural understanding unveiled the intricate dynamics that shape relationships, perceptions, and interactions within the African American community. Trust, a cornerstone of any community's fabric, emerged as a central concern. The conversations emphasized how historical and contemporary betrayals have sown seeds of skepticism, leading to a heightened awareness of the intentions of individuals outside the community.

P1a's reflection offered a powerful perspective:

"I've had to do a lot of growing and a lot of learning. Because I am one of those who never trusted a White person. I never knew how, because you know from teachers, to DFS. Like I grew up my whole life like the White man's gonna come in and they're gonna take advantage of us."

Within this context, the theme also brought to light the fact that 50% of the participants felt that stereotypes affected their access to academic courses. These negative stereotypes created feelings of inferiority and anxiety, and they also established a fear of confirming those stereotypes, which they felt undermined their self-esteem and performance.

P1b shared their experience, saying, "Black people were seen as athletic, so I embraced it and let it get me to college," illustrating the impact of stereotypes on academic pursuits. P2d's perspective further underscored this issue: "Everyone thought I should be an athlete, and my intelligence was downplayed, or not even recognized." This statement reflects the frustration of individuals who face stereotypes that disregard their intellectual potential.

This theme raised the crucial question of whether those who profess to help truly comprehend the nuances of the struggles, resilience, and aspirations that define the African American experience. Within this context, the call for genuine cultural understanding rings loud and clear. Participants articulated the need for individuals outside the community to undertake the essential work of understanding the historical context, cultural nuances, and lived experiences that shape the African American narrative. The conversations underscored the necessity of avoiding superficiality and embracing a more profound appreciation for the community's heritage, values, and aspirations.

At the heart of this theme lies a powerful plea for the preservation of culture rather than its appropriation. Participants illuminated how elements of African American culture, often deeply rooted in historical struggles and unique celebrations, have been co-

opted and commodified. The conversations offer a poignant reminder that cultural understanding must not be a mere transaction; rather, it requires a genuine and respectful embrace of the community's rich cultural tapestry. Moreover, the narrative within this theme extended beyond the individual level to systemic dimensions. The theme underscored how institutional practices, media portrayals, and historical narratives have shaped perceptions both within and outside the African American community. This theme emphasized the significance of dismantling stereotypes, dispelling misconceptions, and fostering empathetic cross-cultural dialogues that promote mutual respect.

P1a's perspective on skin tone bias echoes the sentiment: "Generationally it is how light your skin is even to fit in and even get into a door, to get a better education. In our community, our people have been groomed to believe, you look White you can fit in or you're too light you think you're cute." In essence, the themes of trust and cultural understanding encapsulated the complex web of trust, respect, and shared narratives. It served as a call for authenticity and empathy in relationships—an acknowledgment that building trust goes hand in hand with fostering genuine understanding. The conversations within these themes underlined the power of active listening, empathetic engagement, and the critical importance of preserving culture through respectful engagement rather than appropriation. By shining a light on these dynamics, the research contributes to the ongoing conversation about fostering harmonious relationships that honor, respect, and elevate the African American experience.

### ***Mental Health and Trauma***

Within the overarching tapestry of themes, the themes of Mental Health and Trauma stands out as a poignant exploration of the intricate effects of racial discrimination and vicarious trauma within the African American community. Subgroup 1 within this theme did not perceive racial discrimination as a significant impediment to their academic success. They also believed that generational trauma, while not a direct obstacle to success, profoundly shaped their worldview. Instead, they attributed their achievements to external influences, which played pivotal roles in their academic and life successes. These included the church, participation in sports and Speech and Debate, and engagement in gifted programs.

P1g shared a personal account within Subgroup 1, reflecting on their involvement in Speech and Debate:

"Speech and Debate is where I put my focus. I was really the only Black person in Speech and Debate, and yes, there were microaggressions. One time I was leaving for a quick minute and one of my braids fell out. When I came back, they had attached my braid to the fan. They thought it was funny, but I was embarrassed and angry." P1g's experience illustrates the strength of individuals in the face of adversity, using their passions as a source of empowerment.

In contrast, Subgroup 2 within the mental health and trauma theme described experiences of racial discrimination and vicarious trauma, which, in turn, caused significant mental health issues. These struggles had a profound impact on their ability to focus on academics and succeed in school. Additionally, family issues emerged as a major theme within this subgroup when discussing academic focus and success.

P2a, from Subgroup 2, shared their feelings of mistrust, stating, "I just don't trust most White people, and most of my teachers are White. It made me feel edgy, and I just didn't want to listen to them talk." P2a's perspective highlights the complex interplay between personal experiences, racial dynamics, and mental health within the African American community.

The theme of mental health and trauma sheds light on the varying responses to racial discrimination, generational trauma, and the subsequent impact on mental well-being and academic success. It underscores the need for comprehensive support structures and understanding to address the diverse mental health experiences within the community.

### ***Support Systems***

Nestled within the broader fabric of themes, the theme of support systems unravels a distinctive tapestry of the African American experience, highlighting the presence or absence of supportive educators, mentors, and programs tailored to address their needs.

In Subgroup 1, 7 out of 10 participants expressed that they did not have the presence of supportive educators, mentors, or programs specifically designed to address their needs within their educational journey. However, they found solace in outside support systems. For Subgroup 1, external sources of support played a pivotal role in their lives. P1f, for example, explained, "I didn't seek out help from teachers or administrators. I had family, my church, and coaches that I sought guidance from." These external networks provided crucial support, compensating for the absence of formal support systems within the educational environment.

In Subgroup 2, 7 out of 10 participants similarly felt the lack of supportive educators, mentors, and programs tailored to their needs. However, unlike Subgroup 1, they stated that outside resources were nonexistent for them. This marked a significant gap in their experience. P2a, from Subgroup 2, shared their perspective: "I mean there was a teacher I could go to their class and hang out with, but to really understand my struggles, no. There weren't any outside resources or support systems, at least that I knew about." P2a's words shed light on the dearth of external resources, emphasizing the challenges faced by some members of the African American community in accessing vital support networks. Furthermore, Subgroup 2 also indicated that they felt disrespected by teachers, resulting in feelings of anxiety and anger. This sentiment underscored the need for respectful and empathetic interactions within educational settings.

The theme of support systems amplifies the importance of establishing robust support structures within educational institutions to ensure that all students have access to the resources and mentors they need. It also highlights the critical role of external support networks in compensating for the shortcomings of formal systems. The experiences within this theme serve as a call to action for a more inclusive and supportive educational landscape, where students can thrive and reach their full potential.

### ***Family and Fatherhood***

Personal stories of family struggles and the impact of transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma on an individual's ability to be a parent were discussed, shedding light on the broader issue of family dynamics in challenging circumstances and the connection to education. These narratives offer a deep dive into the complexities of

familial bonds within the African American experience, guided by the lens of socio-cultural theory.

In the conversations, deeply personal stories emerged, each one a testament to the endurance of families amidst adversity. P1a's story underscores this theme: "My father got my mother pregnant and then left. He had come back from the military addicted to drugs and still struggles with this today." This personal account highlights the complexities of family relationships, impacted by systemic challenges, and reflects the essence of socio-cultural theory, which emphasizes the role of the surrounding cultural context in shaping individual experiences and family dynamics.

The themes unveiled not only the struggles but also the moments of resilience that define family dynamics. Particularly striking are the discussions surrounding the transgenerational and vicarious trauma that reverberates through generations, casting a long shadow over the ability of individuals to fulfill their roles as parents. P2e's reflection stands out: "My dad didn't value education because of his experiences in school. They were negative experiences, and he didn't even finish high school." This sentiment underlined the intergenerational impact of school experiences on families and communities, highlighting how negative experiences can perpetuate educational disparities, a concept central to socio-cultural theory.

The themes underscored the profound impact of transgenerational and vicarious trauma on family dynamics, influenced by the broader socio-cultural context. These narratives revealed how historical and systemic traumas, experienced directly or indirectly, can shape the perceptions, behaviors, and relationships of individuals within families. The conversations illuminated how this trauma can ripple through generations,

influencing parenting styles, emotional availability, and even educational aspirations, all deeply embedded in socio-cultural norms.

Furthermore, the themes of family and fatherhood established a profound link between these dynamics and education, recognizing the socio-cultural underpinnings of these relationships. The discussions revealed how the impact of trauma can be interwoven with educational pursuits, shaping aspirations, and influencing the way education is valued within families. The themes emphasized how the challenges faced by African American families extend beyond the familial unit, influencing educational opportunities and expectations, and how these, in turn, affect family dynamics, all of which are inextricably tied to socio-cultural influences.

The narratives within this theme underscored that family is not only a unit of shared experiences but also a repository of historical struggles and resilience, all deeply rooted in socio-cultural contexts. By shedding light on the complexities of family and fatherhood through the lens of socio-cultural theory, the conversations transcended individual experiences to unveil broader societal dynamics. The theme ultimately served as a reminder that the African American experience is a tapestry woven with threads of triumphs and challenges, resilience, and trauma, all of which intersect within the intimate space of family, continually influenced by socio-cultural factors.

In essence, the theme of family and fatherhood, as viewed through the socio-cultural theory, transcended personal stories to illuminate how the legacy of transgenerational and vicarious trauma intertwines with family dynamics and education, highlighting the crucial role of socio-cultural contexts. It portrayed the intricacies of intergenerational relationships and the profound impact of systemic challenges, all of

which contribute to the multi-dimensional landscape of the African American experience, profoundly shaped by socio-cultural norms and values. Through these narratives, the research contributed to a more comprehensive understanding of the interplay between family, education, and the enduring pursuit of progress within the community, as seen through the socio-cultural theory.

### ***Race and Identity***

The theme of Race and Identity delves into the intricate and multifaceted nature of racial identity within the African American community. The participants perceived that their identity somewhat played a role in shaping their high school experiences and academic outcomes. In Subgroup 1, 8 out of 10 participants derived meaning from their ability to maintain their cultural identity while navigating an educational system that did not always reflect their backgrounds. This highlighted the resilience and determination of individuals who sought to uphold their identity within an educational landscape that did not always fully recognize their cultural diversity.

Conversely, in Subgroup 2, 6 out of 10 participants also derived meaning from their ability to maintain their cultural identity while navigating an educational system that did not always reflect their backgrounds. P2g's perspective illustrated the challenges faced by some members of Subgroup 2: "Sitting in class just made me mad because I felt like my identity was downplayed and misunderstood. No teacher wanted to hear what we had to say, so we just stayed quiet or didn't go to class." This sentiment highlighted the tensions and frustrations experienced when racial identity is not fully acknowledged within the educational environment.

The theme of race and identity intricately unraveled the complexities of how individuals perceive themselves and are perceived by society based on their racial identity. It emphasized that racial identity is not static, but a tapestry woven from personal experiences, societal perceptions, and historical legacies. Central to this theme was the concept of racial socialization, which plays a profound role in shaping how individuals understand themselves and navigate the world. The conversations unveiled how African American individuals are socialized into comprehending the significance of their racial identity, often guided by familial teachings, historical knowledge, and community experiences. These narratives shed light on the nuanced ways in which individuals grapple with understanding their place in a society that often frames identity through a racial lens. A particularly poignant aspect of this theme was the exploration of how varying skin tones influence social acceptance within the African American community. Conversations revealed that the shade of one's skin can carry a weighty significance, reflecting historical hierarchies perpetuated by systemic racism. P1a said, "You too Black, or you too White you think your cute". The theme emphasized that even within a community that shares a common heritage, the spectrum of skin tones can trigger complex feelings of belonging, exclusion, and internalized biases.

Furthermore, the theme deepened understanding of how these perceptions of race and identity ripple through various aspects of life, including educational experiences. The narratives revealed how one's racial identity can influence not only how they perceive themselves but also how they are perceived by educators, peers, and institutions. The theme accentuated that education is not just about acquiring knowledge; it's also about navigating a system that interacts with one's racial identity in profound ways.

Ultimately, the theme of race and identity encapsulated a dynamic interplay between personal experiences, societal perceptions, and the concept of racial socialization. The conversations delved into the nuances of how African American individuals negotiate their sense of self within a racially charged society and how these perceptions manifest within the educational landscape. By unraveling these intricacies, the research contributed to a deeper understanding of how race and identity intersect, affecting self-perception, community belonging, and educational trajectories within the African American experience.

### ***Supportive Environment and Visibility in Schools***

The themes of supportive environment and visibility in school sheds light on the experiences of African-American participants within their educational institutions. It is noteworthy that while 7 out of 20 participants felt that the school personnel and staff fostered an inclusive and supportive environment, the majority held a contrasting view, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity.

The experiences of Subgroup 1, who felt a sense of inclusivity, reflected the positive impact of a supportive school environment. However, many of the participants expressed a desire for more visibility during their school experiences. They believed that being seen and heard could have altered their school outcomes, underscoring the critical role of recognition in students' academic journeys.

P2c's experience illustrated the challenges faced by those who felt ignored within the educational setting: "I was absent quite a bit, but when I was in class, I felt ignored, and like the teacher was punishing me for not being at school every day. This just provoked me to walk out of class." P2c's story highlights the negative impact of not

feeling seen and heard within the classroom, which can lead to disengagement and adverse academic outcomes.

The theme of supportive environment in schools is a call to action for schools to create an environment where all students feel recognized, valued, and supported. It emphasizes the critical role that visibility and inclusion play in fostering a positive educational experience, ultimately impacting academic outcomes and personal growth. The experiences shared within this theme contribute to a broader conversation about the importance of recognizing and amplifying the voices of Black and Brown students within the educational landscape.

### ***Economic Status, Socioeconomic Inequality, and School Experiences***

The themes of economic status and socioeconomic inequality reveal the complex interplay between economic well-being, racial dynamics, and school experiences within the African American community. Participants brought to light the multifaceted impacts of economic disparities on their educational journeys, emphasizing the importance of addressing these issues to create a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

The theme underscores how economic disparities can directly affect school experiences, influencing access to educational resources, extracurricular activities, and even basic necessities like school supplies. Additionally, it highlights that the perception of economic status can intersect with the experience of race within the educational landscape, shaping how students are perceived by peers and educators and affecting the level of support and recognition they receive.

One participant, P1i, provided a telling anecdote that encapsulates this intricate relationship:

"When everyone is making money and paying their bills, they don't care what their neighbor is doing. But if that person loses their job, but the guy next door doesn't, then it becomes a race thing. He didn't lose his job because he is Black or he is white, and they fired me because I am Black."

P1h's narrative highlights the profound impact of economic circumstances on perceptions of race and the interconnectedness of these factors within the educational environment. Recognizing the intersection of economic status, socioeconomic inequality, and school experiences, the research not only deepens our understanding of the complex dynamics at play but also underscores the imperative of addressing both economic disparities and racial inequalities. This understanding prompts a vital conversation about the need to provide equal access to resources and support for all students, irrespective of their economic background or racial identity, to foster an educational landscape that is truly equitable and inclusive.

### ***Sports, Clubs, and Church***

In the broader tapestry of themes, the distinct influence of sports, clubs, and church emerged as pivotal anchors in the African American experience. The profound impact of sports, clubs, and the church emerged as essential pillars in the African American experience. These institutions, like threads, are interwoven, binding communities and individuals in meaningful ways that transcend challenges and divisions.

Sports arenas, for instance, become hallowed grounds where aspirations took flight, and determination transcended racial boundaries. Here, not only do athletes showcase

excellence, but the spirit of unity and celebration unites diverse backgrounds in shared triumphs and defeats. As P1b stated, “Sports arenas stand as arenas of aspiration, where excellence and determination transcend racial divides, uniting communities in celebration. Learning to accept loss and building determination to succeed.” The arena becomes a classroom in accepting loss, nurturing resilience, and harnessing determination to succeed against all odds.

Clubs create spaces of fellowship, fostering connections that reach beyond societal barriers, amplifying shared goals and voices. Clubs flourish as spaces of fellowship, acting as bridges that span societal barriers. These spaces amplify shared goals and collective voices, enabling participants to build lasting connections and alliances. In these clubs, the diversity of experiences converges into a chorus of shared aspirations, creating an environment where individuals find empowerment through unity. Each shared story, each collective aim, contributes to a broader narrative of strength, fostering a sense of community beyond the superficial divides.

As such, church stands as a spiritual haven and communal hub, nurtures both personal growth and a profound sense of belonging. Within its walls, personal growth is nurtured, and a profound sense of belonging is cultivated. It offers solace in the face of adversity, providing a refuge where individuals can find meaning, healing, and purpose. The church's role extends beyond spirituality, shaping a collective identity that carries the weight of shared history, struggles, and triumphs.

Collectively, these institutions are emblematic of unity and identity, resonating as anchors in the African American journey. Sports, clubs, and the church enrich the narrative of empowerment, underscoring the unity that emerges from shared purpose.

They not only offer spaces of respite but also cultivate a sense of belonging that weave together the individual stories within the broader community. Through their influence, the African American experience finds channels for expression, empowerment, and a shared journey towards progress.

### ***Conclusion***

The insightful and multidimensional narratives that have emerged from these conversations unveil a tapestry of the African American experience in high school. Through these themes, we gain profound insights into the challenges, resilience, systemic dynamics, and the lasting impact of these formative years, while considering the influences of vicarious and generational trauma within the framework of socio-cultural and polyvagal theories.

Struggle and trauma emerge as central themes, offering a lens through which to examine the African American experience. These themes bring to the forefront historical struggles and systemic injustices, emphasizing their enduring impact on individuals and communities. P1d said, “There is a fine line between a gifted kid and a troubled kid. Teachers often see the Black kid as troubled, not gifted even if they are indeed gifted.” The emotional and psychological toll of these experiences is evident, calling for the recognition and healing of long-lasting trauma, which the socio-cultural theory suggests is deeply rooted in the socio-cultural context, where historical legacies shape the present.

Education and opportunity underscore the transformative power of education within the African American experience. While participants recognize its potential, they reveal systemic challenges that hinder equal access. The theme serves as a call to reform educational systems, advocate for fair funding, and amplify voices that advocate for

inclusive curricula. P2i asked, “Who is creating the curriculum we learn in history? White people? There has to be a shift in thinking.” Socio-cultural theory underscores the pivotal role of education in shaping the socio-cultural landscape, highlighting the need for a more inclusive and equitable educational environment.

Trust and cultural understanding unveil the intricate dynamics that shape relationships, perceptions, and interactions within the African American community. It emphasizes the need for genuine cultural understanding and the preservation of culture, rather than appropriation. Trust and cultural understanding are woven together, with authenticity and empathy forming the foundation of meaningful relationships. P1a said, “I still struggle to trust White people. I have come a long way, but I don’t trust a lot of White people”. Within the polyvagal theory, these connections emphasize the importance of safe and trusting social environments in the overall well-being and emotional regulation of individuals, which the socio-cultural theory further emphasizes within the context of cultural identity.

Support systems highlight the diverse experiences of African American students in accessing support within educational institutions. The theme emphasizes the importance of robust support structures in schools, ensuring that all students have access to necessary resources and mentors. It underlines the critical role of recognition and visibility in academic success and personal growth, addressing the socio-cultural significance of positive interpersonal relationships and emotional safety.

Race and identity delve into the complex nature of racial identity within the African American community. They highlight the dynamic interplay between personal experiences, societal perceptions, and the concept of racial socialization. The themes

deepen our understanding of how race and identity intersect, influencing self-perception, community belonging, and educational trajectories. Socio-cultural theory underscores the role of societal perceptions and racial dynamics in shaping one's identity and educational experiences, while polyvagal theory sheds light on the physiological and emotional responses that may be triggered by experiences related to racial identity.

Economic status and socioeconomic inequality add a new dimension to the conversation, emphasizing the intricate connection between racism, economic well-being, and societal perceptions. Economic disparities directly affect school experiences, academic outcomes, and social interactions within educational institutions. This theme emphasizes the need to provide equal access to resources and support for all students, regardless of their economic background or racial identity, while considering socio-cultural and polyvagal theories in understanding the interplay of economic status and educational experiences.

The themes of fatherhood and family delve into the profound impact of family dynamics, with a focus on fathers, on the high school experiences of Black and Brown individuals. Participants shared their unique family stories, underlining the role of fathers as pillars of support and guidance. These narratives shine a light on the vital importance of positive familial relationships and the impact they have on personal growth, resilience, and academic success, reflecting the socio-cultural importance of family and community ties. Polyvagal theory also emphasizes the significance of these support structures in regulating emotional responses and providing a sense of safety and connection. Collectively, these themes provide a comprehensive understanding of the African American experience in high school, extending beyond the educational realm to

illuminate the broader societal impact of historical and contemporary struggles, including the profound influence of vicarious and generational trauma. They underscore the need for systemic change, inclusivity, and the recognition of the complex interplay of various factors that shape these experiences, while acknowledging the insights from socio-cultural and polyvagal theories.

These conversations represent a significant step toward a deeper understanding of the African American journey, amplifying voices that have too often gone unheard. They contribute to the ongoing work of creating a more equitable and inclusive future for all, rooted in empathy, authenticity, and the power of shared stories, while considering the socio-cultural and polyvagal influences that shape human experiences.

### **Instrumentation**

Central to the qualitative exploration of this study was the researcher's role as the instrument. Acting as a conduit between the participants and the themes under scrutiny, the researcher's presence, interactions, and perceptions played a pivotal role in shaping the depth and breadth of insights garnered. This approach acknowledged the dynamic nature of qualitative research, where the researcher's personal background, experiences, and empathetic engagement with the participants enriched the authenticity of the collected data. As the instrument, the researcher navigated the round table discussions, probing and facilitating conversations that unveiled nuances within the themes. This self-aware and responsive involvement ensured that the nuances, emotions, and unspoken dimensions inherent in the African American experience were given due consideration within the narrative framework. Thus, the researcher's role as the instrument emerged as a

key determinant in capturing the intricate layers of the participants' stories and in illuminating the multidimensional themes that define their journey.

The methodology employed for conducting interviews involved a dynamic approach through one-on-one interviews and a roundtable discussion. This choice of instrumentation provided a unique platform for multifaceted conversations, allowing for diverse perspectives to interweave seamlessly. By convening participants in a round table format, a communal space was cultivated, encouraging open dialogue and the exchange of insights. This instrumentation facilitated a rich and layered exploration of the identified themes, enabling participants to collectively unravel the complex tapestry of the African American experience. The roundtable discussions served as a conduit for shared narratives, reflections, and realizations, enhancing the depth and authenticity of the insights garnered.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, this qualitative exploration underscores the intricate connections between trust, diversity, vicarious trauma, and high school students' educational experiences. The journey from distrust to embracing diversity intersects with the influence of vicarious trauma, shaping students' emotional landscapes. While vicarious trauma poses challenges, it also sparks empathy and advocacy, showcasing the remarkable resilience of young individuals. This understanding calls for educational institutions to create environments that not only support academic growth but also address the emotional well-being of students, fostering a generation capable of turning adversity into positive change. Chapter Five further delves into the implications and

recommendations drawn from these insights, offering a path forward in transforming high school education into a space that nourishes both the intellect and the spirit.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri Schools. This narrative qualitative study was different from other studies due to the dual-framework approach and the focus on secondhand trauma as a barrier that specifically affects the academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The study used the socio-cultural theory as the primary framework and the polyvagal theory to support the idea of brain-body reaction to trauma, to determine how transgenerational trauma and other vicarious trauma may be connected to Black and Brown high school students' academic experiences and ultimately academic outcomes.

Chapter Four illustrated the intricate interplay between trust, diversity, and the impact of vicarious trauma on the emotional landscapes of high school students. As the narratives unveiled the transformative journey from distrust to embracing diversity, they also underscored the profound influence of vicarious trauma on shaping students' perceptions and responses. Moreover, the exploration showcased how vicarious trauma, while posing significant challenges, also catalyzed the development of empathy and advocacy among these resilient young individuals. This understanding prompts a deeper inquiry into the educational implications of these findings, urging a focus beyond academic growth to encompass emotional well-being within educational institutions. Chapter Five delves into how fostering supportive environments aligns with nurturing students capable of transforming adversity into positive change.

In this study, the theoretical underpinnings encompassed two fundamental frameworks: the socio-cultural framework and the polyvagal theory, both instrumental in comprehending the experiences of vicarious trauma among Black and Brown high school students. The socio-cultural framework provided a lens through which to understand the intricate connections between historical legacies, contemporary socio-cultural contexts, and the emotional responses of students facing vicarious trauma. It underscored the significant impact of societal structures, discrimination, and racial inequality on shaping individuals' experiences and emotional landscapes within educational settings.

On the other hand, the polyvagal theory offered critical insights into the physiological responses of individuals when encountering trauma. This theory elucidated the immediate and visceral reactions triggered by vicarious trauma, unraveling how the autonomic nervous system influences emotional states and responses to traumatic experiences. By integrating these theories, this study gains a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced interplay between socio-cultural influences and physiological reactions to vicarious trauma. Together, these frameworks enrich the exploration, enabling a deeper analysis of the emotional journey and resilience of Black and Brown high school students facing vicarious trauma. In addition, through the literature review in Chapter Two, the study explored the gap in literature between transgenerational and vicarious racial trauma and the educational experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students. The literature review uncovered how race-based barriers impact the health and academic experiences and outcomes of Black and Brown high school students.

The study's framework was structured around three central questions that guided the exploration of vicarious trauma among Black and Brown high school students within socio-cultural contexts and physiological responses. The central questions driving this investigation were focused on understanding the intricate influence of vicarious trauma on the emotional landscapes of these students while considering the role of the polyvagal theory in comprehending their physiological responses. The following were central questions to elicit responses from participants in the study.

1. How do Black and Brown high school students in Missouri describe their experiences with racial issues in their schools, and how do these experiences shape their academic journeys?
2. How do participants perceive the connections between their high school experiences and their academic outcomes, and what meaning do they make of these connections?
3. How do interviewees imagine public schools' policies, procedures, and interventions could create equity and access for Black and Brown students in Missouri?

These inquiries sought to uncover the nuanced experiences of vicarious trauma within the socio-cultural framework, examining the intersection of contemporary socio-cultural contexts and historical legacies in shaping emotional responses. Additionally, the study delved into understanding the physiological manifestations of vicarious trauma among these students and the applicability of the polyvagal theory in elucidating these responses. The interplay between socio-cultural frameworks and physiological reactions,

specifically in shaping emotional landscapes and resilience among Black and Brown high school students.

In Chapter Five, the focus shifts towards the practical implications drawn from the qualitative exploration of vicarious trauma among Black and Brown high school students. This section delves into the educational and institutional implications derived from the study's findings, highlighting the necessity for creating supportive environments within educational institutions. The chapter emphasizes the need for these environments to go beyond solely fostering academic growth, prioritizing the emotional well-being of students. It will explore strategies and interventions aimed at addressing the emotional landscapes influenced by vicarious trauma, advocating for the implementation of trauma-informed practices and mental health resources.

Furthermore, Chapter Five underlines the significance of inclusive curricula, cultural competence training for educators, and open dialogues on racial identity within educational frameworks. It aimed to provide actionable recommendations for educational policies, teacher training, and student support services, focusing on fostering resilience and empowerment among Black and Brown high school students facing vicarious trauma. Ultimately, this chapter bridges the gap between research findings and practical applications, advocating for the creation of nurturing environments that support the holistic development and emotional well-being of these students.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

### ***Limitations***

Every research study has limitations, which can affect the generalizability and interpretability of its findings. In the context of this research study on racial trauma and

the connection to the school experiences of Black and Brown high school students in Missouri there are some limitations to consider.

The experiences of Black and Brown high school students can vary significantly depending on the specific school, community, and time period. The findings may not fully capture the diversity of these experiences across different contexts. Qualitative research is valuable for exploring complex, context-dependent phenomena, but it may not provide quantitative data that can be statistically analyzed for causal relationships.

### ***Delimitations***

Delimitations in research define the boundaries, limitations, or constraints within which the study operates. For research exploring vicarious trauma among Black and Brown high school students within socio-cultural contexts and physiological responses, delimitations could include the following:

- Delimiting the study to a specific geographic region or school district due to resource constraints, potentially limiting the generalizability of findings.
- Focusing on specific demographics or age groups within the Black and Brown student population, excluding other subsets that might have unique experiences.
- Concentrating solely on vicarious trauma experiences within high school contexts, excluding other environments or developmental stages that might influence trauma responses.
- Limiting the exploration to specific instances of vicarious trauma related to racial discrimination, overlooking other potential sources or forms of trauma.

- Relying primarily on qualitative methods (e.g., interviews, narratives) might limit the depth of physiological exploration compared to quantitative physiological assessments.
- Potential biases or subjectivity in interpreting narratives or physiological responses due to the subjective nature of trauma experiences.

### **Summary of Methods**

The research methodology centered on a qualitative approach to comprehensively explore the experiences of vicarious trauma among Black and Brown high school students. In-depth interviews were conducted to capture detailed narratives, providing rich insights into the nuanced aspects of their trauma experiences within socio-cultural contexts. Thematic analysis served as the primary tool to sift through these narratives, identifying recurring patterns, themes, and socio-cultural influences inherent in the participants' accounts. The sampling strategy employed purposeful selection to ensure representation across diverse backgrounds and varying degrees of trauma intensity, aiming for a comprehensive understanding of these experiences. Ethical considerations were paramount, with strict adherence to informed consent and ethical approval processes to safeguard participant confidentiality and ensure voluntary participation. Data interpretation through qualitative analysis highlighted the intricate connections between socio-cultural contexts and the lived experiences of vicarious trauma among Black and Brown high school students. Limitations were acknowledged, particularly regarding the inherent subjectivity in qualitative interpretation and the potential constraints within this methodological approach.

## **Summary of Findings**

The themes formed from the thematic analysis include historical microaggressions and discrimination, nonprofit and empowerment, cultural invisibility and underrepresentation, trust and cultural understanding, mental health and trauma, support systems, family and fatherhood, race and identity, supportive environment and visibility, economic status, and sports, clubs, and church. The narratives of Black and Brown high school students reveal the immediate impact of contemporary socio-cultural contexts steeped in discrimination and racial inequality. Vicarious trauma, deeply rooted in this framework, triggers intense emotional responses, echoing socio-cultural theories emphasizing contextual influences.

Transgenerational racial trauma appears as a historical backdrop rather than an acute emotional trigger. The polyvagal theory aligns with this distinction, showcasing how immediate exposure intensifies emotional reactions, while historical trauma lacks immediate resonance. The polyvagal theory offers insights into the heightened impact of immediate exposure to racial injustices, intensifying emotional responses like distress and anger. Immediate experiences seem to evoke stronger physiological reactions than historical ones, according to the theory. Implementing trauma-informed practices, antidiscrimination initiatives, and fostering inclusivity in curricula are essential. Policies should emphasize zero-tolerance for discrimination and provide mental health resources and safe spaces for racial dialogues. Educators need training in cultural sensitivity and recognizing signs of vicarious trauma. Schools should offer student support services and engage in community initiatives promoting racial equity in education.

Chapter Four, the experiences of Black and Brown students in Missouri's public schools are explored, revealing a landscape marked by disparities and challenges. Students recounted facing microaggressions, discrimination, and resource inequalities, highlighting the impact on their academic journeys and emotional well-being. They advocated for inclusive environments with diverse representation in curriculum and staff, emphasizing the need for equitable access to resources and mental health support. The desire for empowerment through education and community involvement emerged strongly, as did the importance of teacher preparation in cultural competency. Overall, these findings underscore the imperative for systemic change to create a more supportive, equitable, and inclusive educational environment for Black and Brown students in Missouri.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Chapter Four stands as a gateway encouraging further exploration, unraveling the complex tapestry of high school experiences among Black and Brown students within Missouri's educational terrain. These findings emerge as signposts, guiding researchers toward varied avenues of inquiry and beckoning an intricate web of exploration. Regional nuances and demographic intricacies prompt a call for meticulous investigations into how identified themes manifest across diverse geographic contexts and demographic subsets. Longitudinal studies hold the promise of unveiling the enduring implications of these experiences on academic and life trajectories, while comparative analyses illuminate unique challenges faced by Black and Brown students across different regions, shedding light on their significance for educational diversity and inclusivity. Intersectional

perspectives emerge as pivotal, offering nuanced interventions by understanding how intersecting themes influence student experiences.

Furthermore, the research findings resonate deeply with the criticality of fostering positive teacher-student relationships, echoing the theoretical framework of emotional support and mentorship within educational settings. Through a comprehensive analysis of firsthand experiences and narratives shared by participants, the research delved into the intricate sociocultural influences on individual development, aligning closely with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978). It explored the adaptive behaviors entrenched within Black culture to navigate perceived societal dangers, highlighting the transmission of critical sociocultural dynamics across generations, an aspect elucidated in the study (Bowman et al., 2018). Moreover, it revealed the misinterpretations and misconceptions prevalent within White communities and educational environments, perpetuating deficit thinking that erroneously attributes academic struggles to individual attitudes or family backgrounds (Davis & Museus, 2019; Palemer & Witanapatirana, 2020). The insights garnered from participant narratives profoundly illustrate the repercussions of such deficit thinking, perpetuating misunderstandings around student behaviors and pathologizing normal responses to societal pressures, as seen in the misdiagnosis or misinterpretation of Oppositional Defiant Disorder (ODD) behaviors (Baker, 2019; Palemer & Witanapatirana, 2020). The research, drawing from these personal narratives and empirical data, highlighted the structural inadequacies within educational systems, notably the adverse effects of lowered expectations and colorblind approaches that disproportionately impact Black and Brown students, resulting in heightened suspension rates, particularly among Black males (Seider et al., 2022;

Vaughans, 2021). It underscores the urgent need for a paradigm shift in educational systems, emphasizing the identification and cultivation of students' cultural and internal strengths over perpetuating deficit mindsets, an insight reflected in the study's conclusions (Latta, 2019). This shift, aligned with the theoretical foundation of Moll (1992) et al.'s funds of knowledge, advocates for recognizing and leveraging the diverse cultural and historical knowledge of students within educational contexts, a perspective central to the outcomes of my research (Latta, 2019). Moreover, this study revealed how these deficit approaches not only contradict Vygotsky's theory but also intensify the central nervous system's responses to negative stimuli, as elucidated in the polyvagal theory, shedding light on the intricate interplay between sociocultural influences and neurobiological responses (Porges, 2022). These insights underscore the vital role of the research in bridging the gap between theory and practice, offering nuanced understandings of the complex sociocultural dynamics impacting student experiences within educational settings and advocating for transformative shifts in educational paradigms.

In examining the impact of racism on mental health, particularly among Black and Brown students, the research delved into the firsthand and secondhand experiences of individuals (Grinage, 2019; Saleem et al., 2020; Yehuda et al., 2018). Their narratives echoed the prevalent findings in scholarly work, highlighting racism as a central source of stress and trauma that significantly corrodes the psychological well-being of young minds, stripping away their sense of dignity and self-efficacy. Through their stories, paralleled by extensive academic literature, the pervasive inequalities within the judicial and law enforcement systems emerged, illustrating how racial trauma leads to decreased

self-esteem, weakened community ties, academic struggles, and heightened stress levels among these students (Legewie & Fagan, 2019; Krieger, 2020; Mekawi et al., 2021; Torrats-Espinosa, 2020). Moreover, the participants accounts resonated with the importance of cultural competency in educational settings. Their experiences underlined the necessity for educators to possess a profound understanding and appreciation of diverse cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. Integrating these insights from participants into the broader research framework highlighted the critical need to embed cultural competency within teacher education, allowing educators to create inclusive and equitable learning environments. However, their narratives also signaled the significance of exploring unexpected insights, suggesting the potential for alternative interpretations that could enrich our understanding of student experiences within educational contexts.

Nevertheless, acknowledging the study's limitations is crucial. This study's findings, while illuminating, might have limitations in transferability to broader populations or different settings and conditions. Recognizing these constraints is essential in tempering the generalizability of the findings beyond the studied context.

The participants' narratives not only unveil the heightened impact of vicarious trauma but also shed light on the intricate interplay between socio-cultural frameworks and the polyvagal theory, further deepening our understanding of their high school experiences for Black and Brown high school students. These stories provided a lens through which the socio-cultural framework takes center stage. While transgenerational racial trauma remained an undeniable influence, the socio-cultural context during their high school years had a profound impact on the participants. It was this contemporary socio-cultural landscape of discrimination and racial inequality that framed their

experiences. Vicarious trauma, deeply embedded in this framework, prompted an immediate and visceral emotional reaction within these students. This emotional response is consistent with the socio-cultural theory, which highlights the role of the surrounding cultural context in shaping individual experiences. As participants directly witnessed instances of racial discrimination among their peers, it amplified the emotional turmoil they felt, further accentuating the socio-cultural factors at play.

Moreover, the polyvagal theory helps elucidate the physiological responses to vicarious trauma. The theory emphasizes the role of the autonomic nervous system in regulating emotional states. The heightened impact of vicarious trauma within high school experiences could be attributed to its immediate and contemporary nature. The theory can be applied to understand the participants' physiological responses as they encountered instances of racial injustice among their peers, which triggered feelings of distress, anger, and helplessness. This immediate exposure seemed to intensify their emotional responses, forging a stronger sense of shared empathy and pain, all of which align with the polyvagal theory's focus on the nervous system's role in emotional regulation.

The exposure to contemporary racial injustices, deeply embedded in socio-cultural contexts, significantly shaped their high school experiences, highlighting differences between Subgroup 1 and Subgroup 2. These nuanced comparisons enhance comprehension of the intricate web-connecting historical legacies, contemporary contexts, and physiological responses, offering critical insights into the experiences of students facing racial trauma. While transgenerational racial trauma provided a historical backdrop, it was the immediate exposure to contemporary racial injustices, deeply

embedded in the socio-cultural context, that seemed to carve a more profound and visceral emotional path within their high school journeys. This comparison, informed by socio-cultural theory and the polyvagal theory, enriches our understanding of the complex web of historical legacies, contemporary socio-cultural contexts, and physiological responses that shape the emotional landscape of high school students facing racial trauma.

In essence, Chapter Four offers an in-depth interpretation, analysis, and synthesis of the research findings. It seamlessly ties back to the theoretical framework, validating and expanding upon its foundational concepts. The unexpected insights prompt a search for alternative explanations, enriching the theoretical landscape. However, it's imperative to acknowledge the study's limitations and cautiously consider the transferability of findings to broader contexts or diverse settings. This comprehensive discussion bridges the empirical findings with theoretical underpinnings, shedding light on the nuanced dimensions of Black and Brown students' high school experiences while encouraging further inquiry and theoretical refinement.

### **Implications**

Educators, armed with the insights from this study, can actively translate these findings into tangible strategies through the adoption of trauma-informed pedagogy. Implementing strategies aimed at nurturing emotional well-being among students encompasses a multifaceted approach that extends beyond conventional academic practices. Integrating mindfulness exercises not only cultivates self-awareness and emotional regulation but also equips students with tools to navigate stress and emotional challenges effectively. These exercises, when integrated into daily routines, offer

moments for reflection, self-compassion, and the development of resilience. Additionally, providing sensory breaks acknowledges and accommodates diverse sensory needs, offering opportunities for students to recalibrate, reducing sensory overload, and promoting emotional regulation.

Moreover, structuring classrooms to minimize stressors involves creating environments conducive to learning by considering elements such as seating arrangements, lighting, and noise levels. By optimizing these environmental factors, educators can alleviate potential stress triggers and promote a more relaxed and focused atmosphere. This holistic approach to fostering emotional well-being aligns with research highlighting the interconnectedness of physical spaces, mindfulness practices, and sensory interventions in supporting students' mental and emotional health. Furthermore, incorporating these practical measures is not only about addressing immediate emotional needs but also about cultivating lifelong skills that empower students to manage stress, build resilience, and thrive academically and emotionally in diverse learning environments.

Cultural competence training stands as a cornerstone in the realm of professional development, offering educators a nuanced understanding of diverse socio-cultural landscapes. This training goes beyond surface-level knowledge by delving into the intricacies of implicit biases, cultural nuances, and the multifaceted nature of identity within educational settings. It empowers educators to navigate complexities sensitively, fostering an environment of inclusivity where every student feels seen, heard, and valued. By equipping educators with tools to recognize and address biases, cultural competence

training promotes fair and equitable classroom practices that honor diversity and create space for authentic learning experiences.

Moreover, establishing peer support networks within schools emerges as a crucial facet of educator well-being and professional growth. These networks serve as invaluable platforms for educators to engage in dialogue, share experiences, and exchange resources related to addressing vicarious trauma. Encouraging open conversations within these networks not only allows educators to process and manage the emotional toll of vicarious trauma but also fosters a culture of empathy and support. Collaborative discussions enable the sharing of effective coping mechanisms, teaching strategies, and best practices, thereby fostering a continuous improvement mindset among educators. The integration of cultural competence training and peer support networks embodies a holistic approach to enhancing the educational landscape. It not only equips educators with the necessary tools to navigate diverse classrooms but also prioritizes their emotional well-being, fostering a community of empathetic and culturally sensitive professionals committed to creating inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

Disseminating these findings is paramount for widespread impact. This can take the form of developing online resources, hosting webinars, and creating interactive modules that educators can access at their convenience. Integration into teacher education programs ensures that pre-service teachers are equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary for proactive and informed approaches to vicarious trauma. Beyond the school setting, community engagement through workshops and forums involving parents, community leaders, and local organizations expands the reach of these insights.

Advocacy efforts can leverage the study's findings to influence policies prioritizing mental health services in schools and promoting trauma-informed practices.

Considering the diverse settings in which educators operate, contextual application is key. Tailoring strategies for urban and rural schools, acknowledging the unique challenges each setting presents, becomes imperative. Recognizing the diverse experiences of students with special education needs requires individualized approaches, while in high-stakes testing environments, educators can implement stress-alleviating strategies to create supportive atmospheres balancing academic success with emotional well-being.

In essence, educators armed with these specific strategies become agents of transformative change within their classrooms and communities. The dissemination efforts not only amplify their impact but contribute to a broader cultural shift towards inclusive and empathetic educational practices. These strategies prioritize the emotional well-being of all students, particularly those facing vicarious trauma. The conclusions drawn from this study offer a roadmap for educators, providing actionable steps to create nurturing environments that prioritize students' emotional well-being, acting as a catalyst for systemic change within educational institutions. These insights contribute significantly to ongoing efforts to create a more just, inclusive, and supportive educational environment, recognizing and celebrating the unique experiences of African American students.

The conclusions drawn from this study offer invaluable insights that can significantly impact educational practices and guide educators in supporting students facing vicarious trauma. Educators can leverage these findings to cultivate supportive

environments that prioritize emotional well-being alongside academic growth.

Understanding the profound impact of contemporary socio-cultural contexts on students' experiences enables educators to tailor interventions, incorporating trauma-informed practices, and mental health resources within educational settings.

In summary, the implications of these findings underscore the call for systemic change within educational institutions, a genuine understanding of cultural contexts, and the prioritization of mental health and emotional well-being. These insights emphasize the importance of inclusivity, equity, and the recognition of the unique and diverse experiences of African American students. They contribute to the ongoing efforts to create a more just, inclusive, and supportive educational environment, where the African American experience is valued, understood, and celebrated.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The research findings offer a compelling foundation for further investigation, opening diverse avenues for researchers to explore the intricacies of high school experiences for Black and Brown students. These potential areas of inquiry encompass regional and demographic variations, calling for examinations of how the identified themes manifest in different geographical contexts and among various demographic groups. Longitudinal studies are essential for understanding the enduring impact of these experiences on academic and life trajectories, while comparative analyses can illuminate the unique challenges faced by Black and Brown students and their implications for educational diversity and inclusivity. Intersectional approaches should be employed to understand how these themes intersect and influence students' experiences, leading to more tailored interventions.

Evaluations of policies and programs, as well as intervention studies, are vital to determine the effectiveness of support strategies. Additionally, research into the roles of community and family dynamics in shaping high school experiences can provide insights into the role of support systems. This ongoing research has the potential to enhance our comprehension of the African American high school experience and its consequences for both academic and life trajectories, thereby informing more targeted interventions, guiding policy decisions, and fostering more equitable and supportive educational environments for African American students and those facing similar challenges.

The research findings emphasize the critical role of fostering positive teacher-student relationships within educational settings. Schools can actively promote and facilitate these connections as a foundational means of providing essential emotional support and mentorship to students. This emphasis on emotional well-being is intrinsically linked to academic success, as students who feel emotionally supported are more likely to thrive academically. Consequently, educational institutions can prioritize the availability of mental health and emotional support services, thus creating safe and inclusive environments where students feel not only academically empowered but also emotionally secure. By recognizing the interconnectedness of emotional well-being and academic achievement, schools can take proactive measures to ensure that students receive the necessary support and mentorship to excel in their educational journeys.

Institutions of higher education and teacher preparation programs play a pivotal role in shaping the future of education. To address the increasing diversity in classrooms, it is essential that these institutions emphasize the development of cultural competency in their future educators. This emphasis on cultural competency goes beyond mere

acknowledgment of diversity and delves into the understanding and appreciation of various cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives.

By integrating cultural competency into teacher education, these programs can equip aspiring educators with the skills, knowledge, and attitudes necessary to effectively teach in diverse classrooms. This preparation includes an understanding of cultural differences in learning styles, communication, and social dynamics, allowing teachers to create inclusive and equitable learning environments. It also encourages educators to be reflective practitioners, continuously evaluating and adapting their teaching methods to meet the unique needs of their students. Ultimately, this emphasis on cultural competency

These recommendations can help expand our understanding of the complex dynamics surrounding racial trauma and the connection to school experiences, as well as contribute to the development of strategies and policies that promote equity, inclusion, and positive educational outcomes for all students.

## **Conclusion**

The research findings have implications for educational policies and practices, not only in Missouri but also nationwide. First and foremost, there is a demonstrated need to address the presence of vicarious trauma and its profound impact on students who indirectly witness racial discrimination. This research significantly contributes to addressing a critical gap in the existing literature by providing actionable insights and strategies for educational institutions to support students facing vicarious racial trauma.

The study underscores the urgent need for schools to implement trauma-informed practices and prioritize the mental health of students, particularly those from Black and Brown communities. By integrating inclusive curricula, cultural competence training, and

open dialogues on racial identity, educational policies can foster environments that celebrate diverse racial identities and combat discrimination. The findings and conclusions of this study are intricately woven into the theoretical framework that underpins the research. Grounded in trauma-informed pedagogy and cultural competence, the study's insights are deeply rooted in a theoretical understanding of how these frameworks can positively impact students' emotional well-being and academic success.

In synthesizing the study's findings, analysis, and interpretation, the conclusions drawn emphasize the interconnectedness of emotional support and academic success. The study asserts that positive teacher-student relationships, informed by cultural sensitivity and an understanding of vicarious trauma, play a pivotal role in creating inclusive and equitable classrooms. The research highlights the transformative potential of implementing trauma-informed practices, fostering cultural competency, and prioritizing mental health services. It communicates a clear call to action for educators to actively address racial trauma in schools and create environments that empower students academically and emotionally.

This study's key takeaways offer a comprehensive guide for educational institutions aiming to address racial trauma and promote equity. Urgent implementation of trauma-informed practices, such as integrating mindfulness exercises and providing sensory breaks, is crucial to alleviate the emotional toll on students, especially those from Black and Brown communities. Additionally, educational policies must prioritize inclusivity by incorporating cultural competence training for educators, fostering an environment that celebrates diverse racial identities.

Teacher training and professional development programs play a central role in equipping educators with the skills to understand the experiences of Black and Brown students. Positive teacher-student relationships, rooted in cultural understanding, highlight the interconnectedness of emotional well-being and academic success. Community engagement becomes a cornerstone in fostering collaboration among parents, caregivers, and community leaders to address systemic disparities and promote inclusivity in schools. Higher education institutions must integrate cultural competency into teacher education, surpassing mere acknowledgment of diversity to cultivate an understanding and appreciation of various cultures, backgrounds, and perspectives. Enhanced student support services, encompassing counseling, peer support groups, and resources for building resilience and advocacy skills, are imperative.

This study not only provides actionable recommendations but also suggests avenues for further research, encouraging longitudinal studies and comparative analyses to deepen our understanding of the impact of racial issues on students' academic trajectories. The conclusions drawn from this study contribute to the overarching goal of fostering a just and equitable society by guiding the development of strategies and policies that promote equity, inclusion, and positive educational outcomes for all students.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Questions:

1. How has transgenerational and vicarious trauma affected your life, your family, and your community?
2. How has the portrayal of Black people in media and popular culture contributed to transgenerational trauma?
3. In what ways do you think racial trauma impacted your educational experiences, both academically and socially?
4. Did you feel supported by teachers and other staff members when dealing with racial trauma in the school environment?
5. How do you think addressing racial trauma in the school environment can lead to better outcomes for Black students?
6. What role do nonprofits play in healing racial trauma?
7. What role do you believe community leaders should play in promoting racial equity?

## APPENDIX B

### Informed Consent Form for Doctoral Research Study

**Title of Study:** Transgenerational and Vicarious Race-based Trauma: The Connection to Academic Experiences.

**Researcher:** Jerra Gillespie-Icenhower **Affiliation:** Southwest Baptist University

**Contact Information:** jerrasresearchstudy2023@gmail.com

Dear Potential Participant,

You are invited to participate in a research study titled "**Transgenerational and Vicarious Race-based Trauma: The Connection to Academic Experiences.**" Before deciding whether to participate, it is important that you fully understand the purpose, procedures, potential risks, and benefits of this study. This document serves as an informed consent form and outlines the details of the study. Please take the time to read it carefully and feel free to ask any questions you may have.

- 1. Purpose of the Study:** The purpose of this narrative qualitative study was to explore the connections between vicarious racial traumas and the educational experiences of Black and Brown persons who attended school in Missouri School. The researcher used a theoretical underpinning and brain research to determine how sociopolitical factors cause barriers to learning in a traditional school setting and academic achievement specific to Black and Brown high school students. The study will recommend policies, procedures, and interventions school and district leaders could consider implementing to create equity and access to overcome the race-based trauma barriers that impact the academic experiences of Black and Brown high school students.
- 2. Procedures:** If you agree to participate, you will be asked to complete a questionnaire to gather preliminary information. Step 2 is One-on-One Interviews: The interviews will be conducted via Zoom, to ensure a convenient and accessible experience. The interviews will be recorded to capture the conversation accurately. The third and final step will be a round table discussion via Zoom, with all participants.
  - The estimated time required for your participation is approximately 3.5 hours total: .5 hour for the questionnaire, 1 hour for the individual interview, and 2 hours for the round table discussion.
- 3. Voluntary Participation:** Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You have the right to refuse to participate or withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or prejudice. Your decision to participate or not will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or the university/institution.

4. **Confidentiality:** All information collected during this study will be treated as strictly confidential. Your data will be assigned a code to ensure anonymity and will be stored securely. Only the researcher and authorized personnel will have access to the data. Any research findings or reports will not include any personally identifiable information and will be presented in aggregate form.
5. **Risks and Benefits:** There are no anticipated physical risks associated with participating in this study. However, you may experience some minimal emotional or psychological discomfort while discussing certain topics. If at any point during the study you feel uncomfortable or distressed, you have the right to discontinue participation.

There may not be direct benefits to you as a participant. However, your involvement in this research will contribute to the advancement of knowledge in the field of education. The findings may be used to improve educational experiences, which may benefit society as a whole.

**Questions and Contact Information:** If you have any questions, concerns, or require further information regarding the study, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher, Jerra Icenhower, at [jerrasresearchstudy2023@gmail.com](mailto:jerrasresearchstudy2023@gmail.com). If you have any questions or concerns about your rights as a research participant, you can also contact the Southwest Baptist University Review Board (IRB) at [IRB contact information].

**Consent:** By signing below, you acknowledge that:

- You have read and understood the information provided in this informed consent form.
- You have had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to your satisfaction.
- You voluntarily agree to participate in the study.
- You understand that you can withdraw from the study at any time without penalty.
- You understand that the information collected will be treated with strict confidentiality.

Participant Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Researcher Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Printed Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Note: A copy of this consent form will be provided to you for your records upon request.

Thank you for considering participation in this study. Your contribution is greatly valued and appreciated.

Jerra Gillespie-Icenhower  
Doctoral Researcher