You Just Gotta be Able to Pick Something Outta Nothing: Black Students' Sensemaking on Racism in High School

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“YOU JUST GOTTA BE ABLE TO PICK SOMETHING OUTTA NOTHING”:
BLACK STUDENTS’ SENSEMAKING ON RACISM IN HIGH SCHOOL

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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CHAPTER ONE
INTRODUCTION

The Research Problem

The education reform movement over the past 25 years ushered in many federal, state, district, and school-level policy and programmatic prescriptions to eradicate racial disparities in education. Policies like No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top were created to increase teacher quality and the rigor of state tests as means to close the racialized achievement gap. More granular initiatives were created as well, such as penalizing schools for too many discipline infractions or rewarding schools who increased students’ average daily attendance as a ways to decrease racial disparities in suspensions and graduation rates. Indeed, there have been many efforts to solve the racial inequities in education. Paradoxically, these efforts have not fully acknowledged the role that racism plays in racial disparities in school and how pervasive racism (individual and institutional) is in education.

Racism in schools is ubiquitous and has resulted in demonstrated, deleterious effects on Black students in particular. Black students navigate schools that routinely reproduce societal anti-black racism through policies and practices that result in the academic and educational racial inequities we see in schools today. Many efforts to address these racial disparities that particularly impact Black students have not considered Black students’ awareness of how racism manifests in schools and results in the disparities they experience. By now, there are myriad policies geared towards reducing the racialized achievement gap, but little is known about how
Black students understand the racialized achievement gap in general, and as it affects them in particular. Similarly, implicit bias training for teachers is growing as a way to address the disparities in suspension and expulsion Black students face. This is a critical step in the evolution of training teachers on matters of race, but what do Black students think about disparities in suspension and expulsion? In order to support Black students with navigating racism in schools, researchers, practitioners, and policy-makers need more knowledge on how Black students understand the vitriolic phenomenon of racism in schools. The purpose of this research study is to deepen the literature on how Black students make sense of racism in schools.

For centuries, racism has infested the social, physical, and psychic context surrounding Black minds and bodies in American education. In his groundbreaking book of allegorical essays, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, Bell (1992) offers as the central thesis that racism is endemic, pervasive and a permanent fixture in America and its many institutions. The permanence of racism in America’s institutions, particularly anti-Black racism, comes into stark focus upon examination of how schooling for Black people in America has unfolded over the centuries for Black people. From the dawn of America’s existence, both the idea and the pursuit of educating Black people conflicted with America’s need to mentally oppress Black people in order to fuel the economic engine of the country. Educating Black people also conflicted with America’s conception of Black sub-personhood. In the eyes of this country, Black people had neither the need nor the capacity to learn, thus education was withheld.

Historically, the mere concept and physical manifestation of Black bodies and minds entering education spaces elicited a strong and caustic response from white Americans. During
slavery, Black people risked and endured harsh and deadly physical consequences to learn to read and write (Williams, 2005). During the Reconstruction Era, Black people experienced racist, anti-black (mal) distribution of physical and financial resources, which resulted in physically and psychologically harsh schooling conditions for Black students in the south (Williams, 2005). Disgust for Black students in close proximity to White students in schools fueled de facto and de jure school segregation during Reconstruction, Jim Crow and the Civil Rights Era in the south and the north, segregation which persists post Brown v. Board (Bell, 2005; Du Bois, 1935). Indeed, Black people’s experience with education in America has been negatively impacted by anti-black racism since the founding of this country. The 400 years of explicit anti-black racism in education, and the persistence of anti-black racism in education through implicit forms of racism, not only suggest that Bell’s central thesis is correct; the centuries of anti-black racism in education before this moment also suggest that education might always be an institution and site of racism in America. Critically, the heavy hand of racism towards Black students compels us to better understand Black students’ sensemaking of racism that exists in schools as a critical means to support them on their journey through schools.

The objective of this research study is to increase researchers’, educators’ and policymakers’ knowledge of Black students’ sensemaking on racism in school. Specifically, I set out in this study to answer the following research question: How do Black students make sense of racism in school? The Literature Review section of this study provides the reader with an in-depth exploration of the relevant literature and conceptual framework grounding this study. The Methodology section details the methodology and methods guiding this study. The Findings section of this study presents the major findings from interviews with students. Finally, the
Discussion, Implications and Conclusion section offers the reader an in-depth discussion of major findings as well as key implications and overall conclusions. Overall, the findings of this study provide insight into Black students’ critical sensemaking concerning racism in their school. Specifically, findings on what informs Black students’ sensemaking process on racism, how the process unfolds, and what shapes the sensemaking process on racism are presented in study.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Anti-Black Racism in Schools

Racism in education is a peculiar phenomenon connected to abstract systems and structures in society that are not physically manifested but have material consequences for individuals nonetheless. White supremacy, which privileges white normative ideology, white power and culture, and that foregrounds policies and practices in schools, pervade education (Gillborn, 2009). More critical notions of racism in schools situate anti-blackness, another abstract system, as the engine that fuels racism in education. Theorists on anti-blackness define it as the “gratuitous, constituent violence against Black people – as demonstrated by police murders, mass incarceration, urban planning, and surveillance of black people (Sexton, 2011; Wilderson, 2003; Wilderson, 2003; Sexton, 2011). Wilderson asserts that anti-blackness is the conscious and subconscious view of Black people as socially dead; as “unincorporated or unincorporative.” Critically, he also asserts that “there is something about the black body in and of itself that makes it the repository of violence (Wilderson, 2003). Stated another way, anti-blackness is the automatic, native and violent response at the site of the Black body.

Unfortunately, automatic, native disgust for the Black body pervades schools. Dumas (2016) describes anti-blackness and anti-black racism in schools as “ideologies, discourses, representations, (mal) distribution of material resources, and physical and psychic assaults on Black bodies in schools.” Anti-blackness in schools, or disgust and violence against the black
body in schools, becomes apparent when we examine how Black girls’ and boys’ bodies are routinely criminalized, disciplined, and punished in schools, or the racial configuration of schools deemed “good” and “not good” by parents and students of all races (Ferguson, 2001; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Morris, 2016; Wun, 2016). As white supremacy and anti-blackness reproduce structural racism in schools, the impact of these abstract systems has far-reaching and damaging effects on Black students beyond academic disparities. Schools are sites of education violence against Black students, creating a toxic climate with both physical and psychological consequences for Black students in education spaces (McGee & Stovall, 2015).

The educational disparities that routinely result in positive outcomes for white students and negative outcomes for Black students strongly suggests that Black students’ race plays a central role in their experience in schools, and the processes, practices, and policies they encounter. For example, Black students are twice as likely as all other students to be retained in ninth grade, which prevents them at the starting point of high school from accessing higher level classes later in high school. Twenty-five percent of schools with the largest concentration of Black students fail to offer Algebra II, and 33% of those schools fail to offer Chemistry I (Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Black students also experience unequal access to gifted education. Black students make up 42% of the student body of schools with gifted programs but just 28% of students in gifted classes (Office of the Civil Rights, 2016). Findings from the literature demonstrate that this is due to ways students are identified for gifted-programming (Ford, Harris, Tyson, & Trotman, 2002; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). These examples show that, just as in larger society, anti-black racism manifests in schools in a way that positions Black students as the
repository of racially unequal access to academic opportunities. Stated another way, where Black students exist, their academic opportunities diminish.

Racialized school tracking and low teacher expectations for Black students’ academic success further illustrate how everyday racism in schools harms Black students. Studies identify that teachers, students, and parents consider Black students as less academically capable and thus, their perpetual placement in lower-ability classes warranted (Ford et al., 2002; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Sociological studies also advance the idea that racialized academic tracking is heavily influenced by perceptions of Black students’ intelligence and pedagogical practices that reduce Black students’ knowledge and ways of displaying knowledge (Delpit, 2012; Ford et al., 2002). As such, for Black students, tracking is essentially a school’s statement on either the absence of their intellect or bankruptcy of their embodied knowledge. Studies also demonstrate that high school teachers have lower expectations for students of color and economically disadvantaged students, particularly Black students. Research on teacher expectations shows that Black boys in particular experience schools with teachers who have especially low expectations for their learning and success (Boser, Wilhelm, & Hanna, 2014; Gerhenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016). As assumptions in larger society about the intellectual inferiority of Black people prevail, schools are social institutions that reproduce conclusions about Black students’ intellectual inferiority into low expectations for their success.

Perhaps nowhere is the impact of school racism on Black students more evident and toxic than in the highly racialized sorting and punishing that leads to disproportionate suspension of Black students above all other students. Black students make up less than 20% of pre-k students but account for nearly half of multiple-out-of-school suspensions. Black girls make up 8% of all
students but 13% of all students receiving a suspension. Black students are permanently expelled from school at a rate three times that of white students (Office of Civil Rights, 2014). Studies show that this disproportionality of discipline stems from negative connotations of the physical, social, and cultural performance of “Blackness” in schools. For example, Black students’ cultural styles of dress and mannerisms are habitually targeted through school and classroom-level policies, rules, codes, and practices that normalize and reward white normative styles of dress and speaking and assimilation into white dominant culture (Carter, 2005; Emdin, 2016; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Black students speaking out against injustices in classrooms, opting not to enact white notions of femininity in conversations, and appearing to perform overly-masculine, “naturally naughty” communication styles stereotypically associated with Black boys and girls have materially negative consequences for Black students in schools in the form of school discipline (Ferguson, 2001; Morris, 2016).

Across the education strata, racially unequal access to academic opportunities, racialized teacher expectations, and racially unfair discipline demonstrate how the racial inequities we see in larger society have infiltrated schools such that schools are yet another societal institution that reproduces racism and leads to the unfair treatment of Black students. Whether the manifestation of white supremacy or anti-blackness that underpin educational policy and everyday schooling practices, the manifestation of the negative social imagery of Black youth or the everyday reproduction of societal racialized power, social and cultural capital imbalances in schools and classrooms, Black students are uniquely and specifically targeted by racism in schools (Delpit, 2006; Dumas, 2016; Gillborn, 2009; Howard, Flennaugh, & Terry, 2012; Yosso, 2005).
Importantly, studies indicate that Black students are not blind to the racism that exists in their schools. Rather, Black students are keenly aware of the anti-black racism they see or experience in their schools. In their study of how racialized schooling processes manifest, Lewis and Diamond (2015) document several cases that demonstrate high school students’ ability to identify racialized schooling processes and their ability to indict race in the schooling inequities they see. In their study of Black high school students in a Youth Participatory Action Research program, Hope, Skoog, and Jagers (2015) found that students not only named instances of racism in their schools but also connected these instances to specific policies and practices at the school that they felt typify the racism they experience. Allen (2012) found in his study of Black boys in high schools that they examined closely the actions of teachers towards them and attributed the racism they experienced to how teachers treated them. In her study of high-achieving Black students in a predominately White high school, Andrews (2012) found that students were not only aware of the racism around them; importantly, they also used sophisticated mental and emotional processes to understand racism, examining the words and actions of teachers and students to attempt to make sense of how the racism manifested.

From the literature on racism in schools, we have strong evidence concerning Black students’ subjective experience with structural racism in schools. While these findings show that Black students are astute at picking up on racism or racial phenomena at school, and even have an instinct towards making sense of it, the literature on racism in schools does not clearly illuminate the sensemaking processes and tools Black students use to understand or make sense of the racism they experience in schools. Given the ubiquity of structural racism in schools, Black students’ sensemaking processes of the racism they encounter in schools might be
important for their emotional and psychological survival at school, if not an act of survival in and of itself.

**Black Students’ Sensemaking about Racism in Schools**

Classical and critical sensemaking theory ground this research study. Simply, classical sensemaking theory concerns sensemaking on events, situations and phenomena in a social environment whereas critical sensemaking theory considers sensemaking on socio-political phenomena or events dealing with race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Together, both classical and critical sensemaking theory provide conceptual clarity on how student sensemaking on critical phenomena such as racism might operate. As will be detailed later, however, insufficient attention in existing classical and critical sensemaking literature has been paid to student sensemaking, and Black student sensemaking in particularly, on critical issues like racism. This research study aims to fill this gap.

**Classical Sensemaking**

Classical sensemaking theory advances the idea of sensemaking as “the process and mechanisms by which individuals come to an understanding of a phenomenon or an event, often novel, unexpected or confusing, within an organization” (Maitlis & Christenson, 2014; Weick, 1995). According to this literature on sensemaking, individuals within an organization first engage in a process of discovering or generating the thing they are trying to make sense of, after which, a process of interpreting that thing and ascribing meaning to it follows. In this pursuit of understanding a phenomenon, the preservation and stabilization of identity and self-concept are critical to the sensemaking process. Sociological sensemaking studies find that the desire to preserve or affirm one’s identity and self-concept triggers the sensemaking process within
individuals in organizations. As Weick (1995) contends, “sensemaking processes derive from the need within individuals to have a sense of identity - that is, a general orientation to situations that maintains esteem and consistency of our self-conceptions.” As such, individuals’ socio-psychological need to maintain a positive view of themselves in response to a phenomenon that threatens their sense of self elicits a process of making sense of that phenomenon.

Classical sensemaking theory also suggests that the knowledge an individual has already accumulated on the present phenomena they are trying to understand plays an important role in how they interpret the event of which they are attempting to make sense (Weick, 1995; Yanow, 1996). Further, the cues individuals extract from the social environment surrounding the phenomenon they are trying to make sense of facilitates the sensemaking process and influences the meaning individuals make of the phenomenon within organizations (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014; Weick, 1995). These findings highlight a critical symbiosis between the sensemaker’s personal background, their knowledge about a phenomenon, the cues they recognize within a social environment to help them identify a phenomenon, and the process sensemakers embark on to make sense of that phenomenon.

Studies on sensemaking in organizations illuminate important findings about how the complex process of making sense on a phenomenon in a social environment unfolds. Schools, however, are a unique type of organization with unique social climates, cultural norms, power dynamics and constraints, features that make schools fundamentally different from other types of organizations. Findings from scholars who applied classical sensemaking theory to examine school phenomena corroborate many of the findings from studies on sensemaking in organizations broadly. Scholars of adult sensemaking in schools on policy issues find that their
sensemaking is shaped by their current worldview and prior knowledge (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004). For example, in her study of teachers’ and principals’ sensemaking processes on the enactment of a new reading policy, Coburn (2005) found that teachers and principals drew heavily on their own conceptions on the new policy, as well as their own knowledge on reading instruction. Additionally, research on sensemaking in schools finds that personal background – what experiences they bring to the sensemaking process – influences sensemaking in school leaders (Jennings, 2010). Sensemaking studies in schools also advance the idea that school and classroom culture play a critical role in the environmental cues teachers extract in sensemaking (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007).

While student sensemaking in a K-12 setting has not been studied by many scholars, the findings from the limited studies that have taken on this project identify important findings. Most studies that consider student sensemaking explicitly focus on students’ sensemaking on academic tasks rather than on social phenomena within the school. Importantly however, these studies have found that school and classroom context, and related socio-cultural practices within the classroom, influence how students construct their sensemaking processes to solve academic problems (Furberg, 2009; Furberg, Kluge, & Ludvigsen, 2013. These findings are important as they suggest that even for non-social phenomena in school, organizational and classroom context influence student sensemaking processes.

**Critical Sensemaking**

Very few scholars have taken up the project of studying sensemaking on racial issues in school, and fewer scholars have taken up students’ sensemaking on racial issues in school.
Nonetheless, the findings from this still-scant body of literature highlight important findings on critical sensemaking in schools, as well as highlight the need for future research in these areas. In her study of how school leaders made sense of racial demographic changes in their school, Evans (2007) found that school leaders’ sociopolitical identities (i.e., race, gender, class) play an essential role in their sensemaking of a racial phenomenon. For example, Evans found that school leaders’ response to the racial demographic changes in their schools was influenced by how they made sense of their own socio-political identities. In a related study on how school leaders and district officials made sense of racial demographic changes in their suburban school, Evans found that sensemakers’ prior belief systems about African-Americans and their interactions with African-American families and students influenced how school and district leaders made sense of the demographic changes. Importantly, these prior beliefs ultimately influenced their responses to African-American students.

Though she did utilize sensemaking theory in her study, Carter (2008) examined how Black students’ critical race consciousness influenced their academic achievement. In her study she highlights a potentially important feature in how students process racism in their schools. Carter (2005) states: “I define critical race consciousness as a “critical understanding of the asymmetrical power relationships that exist between Blacks and Whites in America” (p. 102). She also advances the idea that possessing a critical race consciousness influences students’ awareness and understanding of how race might impact their schooling experiences. As such, this illuminates a critical aspect of Black students’ processing of racism at their school, which has implications for their critical sensemaking processes and tools.
I only found one study that directly examined how students make sense of racial schooling phenomena. In her study of various school stakeholders sensemaking, including students’ sensemaking, of a diversity initiative in a conservative Christian school, Blosser (2015), like other sensemaking scholars, found that organizational context heavily influenced how sensemakers made sense of the diversity initiative. Her work also identified that administrators, faculty, staff and students all looked to school policies and practices to make sense of the diversity initiative. Critically, as it relates to students’ sensemaking on the diversity issue, Blosser found that students observed policies and practices to understand the social phenomenon of race in their school building.

The findings from Blosser (2015), Carter (2008), and Evans (2007) help us begin to construct a conceptual understanding of how Black students’ sensemaking on racism in their school might operate, specifically how their socio-political identities, context, and policies and practices within the school might inform and shape Black students’ critical sensemaking processes. However, more research is needed that explicitly and thoroughly examines Black students’ critical sensemaking tools and processes for understanding critical social phenomenon such as racism in school. Are Black students’ socio-political identities important in their sensemaking processes? If so, how? Similarly, are policies and practices important to Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism in their school? What else might be essential to Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism that previous literature has not identified or considered? As previously mentioned, this study seeks to fill some of these gaps in our current understanding of student sensemaking, student critical sensemaking, and specifically Black students’ critical sensemaking. In this study I also aim to connect findings to the broader research on structural
racism in school. Greater knowledge on Black students’ sensemaking on racism could inform on-going efforts to address racial disparities in education. In the face of so much anti-black racism in schooling, we must put Black students’ processes for understanding racism at the center of efforts to support them. As the racism they experience has implications beyond their academic success in school, the ways in which Black students make sense of racism might influence how they view themselves, their dignity and their humanity as they navigate schools and an education system riddled with so much racism.
CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

My central research question – *How do Black students make sense of racism in school?* – stems from the reality that there is a lot of anti-black racism in schools that Black students experience, but little knowledge about their processes for understanding the racism they navigate in schools. While there is an abundance of literature that suggests that Black students are keenly aware of racialized schooling disparities that are the product of structural racism in schools, I am interested in how Black students make sense, specifically the sensemaking tools and processes they employ, to process racism in schools. Given the type of information I sought in this study and my interest in learning more about how Black students come to understand racism in schools, I chose a constructivist, qualitative methodology for this study. The philosophy of constructivism and the focus on meaning and understanding that anchors qualitative research methods align with the philosophical underpinnings of my central research question (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). As I am interested in understanding how Black students make sense of a lived experience (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), a qualitative approach will yield the type of data useful for examining relationships between structural racism in schools and student sensemaking. As this study design is especially useful for researchers interested in “how people interpret their experience, how they construct their words, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), the proposed study design will enable me to understand how Black students make sense of structural racism in schools. Additionally, I used
Sensemaking theory as the theoretical framework in this study. This framework was used, in part, to identity my research questions and guide my data analysis as well.

**School Sampling**

I chose Lincolnville High school as the site for this study. Lincolnville is a small Midwestern city located just outside of a larger metropolitan area. Approximately 75,000 people call Lincolnville home, and for its size, the city is quite diverse.\(^1\) White residents make up 66% of the population while Black, Hispanic/Latino, and Asian residents make up 18%, 9%, and 9% of the population respectively.\(^2\) With a median home price of $360,000 and a median household income of $71,000, Lincolnville is one of the wealthiest cities in the state. Recently, the city was rated one of the best places to live in America.\(^3\)

Lincolnville High School (LHS) is a large, racially and socioeconomically diverse school. White students make up 45% of the student body, while Black, Hispanic/Latino and Asian students make up 28%, 18%, and 6% of the student body respectively.\(^4\) Additionally, Multi-racial students make up 3% of the population and American Indian and Native Hawaiian students make up .3% and .2% of the student body respectively.\(^5\) In addition to racial diversity, LHS has relatively high socioeconomic and gender diversity. Forty percent of the student population is low-income, and there is almost 50-50 gender split (male-female) as well in the

\(^1\)Source not provided to protect identity of research site.  
\(^2\)Source not provided to protect identity of research site.  
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\(^4\)Source not provided to protect identity of research site.  
\(^5\)Source not provided to protect identity of research site.  
student population. Somewhat surprisingly for its location, the teaching and administrative staff at LHS is also quite diverse. White teachers make up 51% of teachers at LHS with Black and Hispanic/Latino teachers making up 36% and 8% of teachers respectively. Currently, the head principal at the school is African-American. Additionally, many of the deans and guidance counselors are people of color.⁶

By many standards, LHS is a “high performing” school. Its graduation rate is 92%, with the graduation rate for Black and Latino students far exceeding the state average for these groups of students.⁷ LHS students perform well on standardized tests. In the 2017-2018 school year, LHS students scored well above both the state and national averages on the ACT and SAT.⁸ As impressive as these scores are, they obscure the performance of Black and Latinx students on these academic measures at LHS. Like many other schools, especially schools with similar demographics, racialized academic disparities exist at Lincolnville High School. For example, on the annually-administered Grade 11 Assessment, while 90% of white students met or exceeded ELA standards, only 27% of Black students and 33% of Hispanic/Latino students met or exceeded standards.⁹ Similar disparities exist in Math with 80% of White students meeting or exceeding standards whereas only 20% of Black students and 40% of Hispanic/Latino students met or exceeded standards.¹⁰

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¹⁰Source not provided to protect identity of research site.
I worked with a teacher at the high school to initially recruit students for my study. To begin recruiting, I presented about the study in the teacher’s classes and requested that Black students who were interested in the study either contact me or have their parents contact me, or to return informed consent, parental consent and student assent forms to the teacher. This strategy yielded several participants.

In order to increase the number of participants in my study, and to increase gender diversity within my sample, I employed a snowball strategy. I asked the students I interviewed to tell other students they knew, specifically Black male students, about my study (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This sampling strategy proved useful in recruiting more students for my study, and, importantly, for recruiting more male students for my study.

The snowball sampling strategy also aided in achieving another important outcome as well, which was to ensure I had students in my study who either were not in the teacher’s classes or participants in the anti-racism student group they advise. The teacher who helped me recruit students identifies as African-American, and they are very popular amongst students. For many of the Black students in particular, the teacher is a de facto mentor, and their classroom is a safe space for Black students to express themselves freely with regard to racial issues they experience at LHS. Importantly, the teacher themselves holds critical views on race and racism, which likely influences what and how they teach and what they implicitly or explicitly message to students about race and racism in the school. Consequently, the teacher’s views and philosophies likely impact how some of their students think about race. Cognizant of this, and wanting to mitigate this, I actively sought out student participants who were not students in his classes or participants in the student anti-racism group he advised. I used a snowball sampling strategy to
achieve this. As such, I believe my recruitment and sampling strategy yielded an ideologically diverse sample which allows me to generalize my findings to the Black student population at Lincolnville High School.

**Student Sampling**

Fourteen Black-identifying LHS students participated in this study. While all the participants in my study self-identified as Black, it’s important to note that four of the participants are Bi-racial/Black. It’s also important to note that there is diversity within the Black diaspora represented in my sample as well. Of the 14 students in my study, three students identified as Haitian/Black and two students identified as Jamaican/Black. This type of ethnic diversity within my sample aids in my ability to generalize to the overall Black student population at LHS.

Nine girls, four boys, and one Trans student participated in the study. One sophomore, seven juniors, and six seniors are represented in my sample. No freshman students participated in this study. While Quintana and Vera (1999) suggests that younger students can identify racialized phenomenon in schools, I chose to focus on high school students for my study given their ability to both identify racialized schooling processes (Hope et al., 2015; Lewis & Diamond, 2015). Additionally, as high school is a time when racial salience increases, high school students’ awareness of racial incidents is more developed (Omi & Winant, 2015).

I did not collect socio-economic data on study participants; however, from students’ narratives, I can infer about their class background. For example, a couple of students mentioned that one or both of their parents have advanced or professional degrees. Some students mentioned where they lived in Lincolnville, which is segregated by income and allows me to
draw inferences about their socio-economic status. From what students shared, the sample in my study appears to be socio-economically diverse, with students’ class demographics ranging from a low socio-economic status to a high socioeconomic status. Still, because I did not collect specific SES data on students, I am unable to draw conclusions on if, or how, students’ class background interacts with their sensemaking on racism.

**Data Collection**

I used semistructured phenomenological qualitative interviews to collect data in this study. As I was interested in arriving at a rich understanding of Black students’ experiences with racism, this data collection approach allowed me to collect a nuanced and rich description of Black students’ experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To answer my central research question, I asked a mix of *Experience, Knowledge, Feeling, Sensory and Background* interview questions (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I asked *Knowledge* questions to learn how students, in their own words, thought about racism at LHS, and how they defined racism for themselves based on their experiences. I asked *Sensory* questions to learn what students saw, heard, and felt, and whether they noticed racism in their schools. I used *Experience* questions to collect data on students’ direct or indirect experiences with racism in their high school. Finally, I used *Feeling* questions to glean the affective impact of school racism on students’ experiences, and what, if any, conclusions they drew based on racism at LHS (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Participant interviews were audio-recorded and ranged from 25 to 55 minutes in duration.
Data Analysis

I transcribed interviews verbatim to ensure accuracy of what participants shared and, importantly, to aid in interpreting the meaning of what participants shared. I transcribed all sounds, pauses, and laughter to ensure I captured a rich description of the participants constructing their experiences in real-time (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Data analysis began with First Cycle Coding, then I proceeded to Second Cycle Coding to illuminate patterns and themes. In my First Cycle of coding, I began with Provisional Coding (Miles, Huberman & Saldaña, 2014) and developed codes and descriptions aligned to the theoretical framework of Sensemaking that situates this study (Miles et al., 2014). Findings from both classical and critical sensemaking literature suggest that cues from the environment in which the phenomenon being interrupted takes place, prior knowledge and prior beliefs on that phenomenon, and policies and practices within a social environment, help sensemakers understand the phenomenon in question in a social environment (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Spillane, 2004; Weick, 1995). While classical sensemaking theory suggests that sensemaker’s identity plays a role in how they interpret a phenomenon, critical sensemaking literature suggests that sensemaker’s socio-political identity plays a role in their sensemaking, especially on charged issues such as race (Evans, 2007). As such, these findings from the literature were used to create provisional codes for my first stage of coding (Miles et al., 2014). For example, I used the code “Environmental Cues” to label elements of data that captured students discussing what they saw, heard, etc., in an environment (e.g., classroom, bus, student party) in which they perceived an instance of racism or a racially charged incident. As another illustration of my first stage of
coding, I used the code “Identity” to label data where students talked about their racial or Black identity. Figure 1 lists and describes the provisional codes I used during my first stage of coding.

After coding my data using provisional coding, I continued with First Cycle coding and used what theorists call “In-Vivo Coding” to label direct quotes in my data (Miles et al., 2014). I used this coding approach during the first stage of coding because I was particularly interested in highlighting student voice in my analysis. Verbatim transcriptions of the first five interviews revealed two types of quotes from students consistent across three interviews: (1) racism at LHS “secret,” “hidden” or “hard to see”; and (2) Lincolnville as a city as being “liberal,” “white liberal,” or “fake liberal.” These quotes were turned into In-Vivo codes “Secret Racism” and “Lincolnville” and subsequently used to label elements of data that captured students talking about racism as obscured form view and students talking Lincolnville as they processed racism at LHS.

After In-vivo coding, I transitioned to Second Cycle or second stage coding, conducting what grounded theorist call “emergent” or “pattern” coding (Miles et al., 2014). I explored what and how patterns emerged across participant interviews. Two predominant themes emerged in how students observe the subtleties of adult when processing racism at LHS, and how students are always looking for racism as part of their sensemaking process. After these patterns emerged, I created the codes “Keen Observer” and “Always Looking for Racism” (see Figure 1) and coded elements of data that demonstrated instances of students observing the “micro-behaviors” of adults and students, and always looking for racism. Importantly, during first and second stage coding, I routinely refined my codes and descriptors as I coded interview data.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CODE TYPE</th>
<th>CODE</th>
<th>DESCRIPTION</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Provisional</td>
<td>ENVIRONMENTAL CUES (EC)</td>
<td>Instances when students are looking at or thinking about things in their school, classroom, and other environments to detect/determine/assess whether or not something is racist. This also includes what students might be looking at in that environment.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional</td>
<td>PRIOR KNOWLEDGE (PK)</td>
<td>Instances of students talking about their prior knowledge on racism when discussing instances of racism they have experienced or witnessed at their school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional</td>
<td>PRIOR BELIEFS (PB)</td>
<td>Instances of students talking about their prior beliefs on racism when discussing instances of racism they have experienced or witnessed at their school.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional</td>
<td>IDENTITY (ID)</td>
<td>When a student talked about their Black identity.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional</td>
<td>RACIAL SOCIALIZATION (RS)</td>
<td>When a student talked about their parental racial socialization.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provisional</td>
<td>POLICIES AND CODES (P&amp;C)</td>
<td>When a student discussed policies, codes and practices in their school as it related to racism, racial issues, racial tension at LHS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN-VIVO</td>
<td>SECRET RACISM (SR)</td>
<td>When students say/express that racism, particularly from teachers, is secretive, overt, hidden at LHS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IN-VIVO</td>
<td>LINCOLVILLE (LV)</td>
<td>When a student mentions and discusses the larger community of Lincolnville when talking about racism at LHS.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent (Pattern)</td>
<td>KEEN OBSERVATION (KO)</td>
<td>When students pay close attention to the subtle actions, words, word choices, tons of teachers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emergent (Pattern)</td>
<td>ALWAYS LOOKING FOR RACISM (ALFR)</td>
<td>When students displayed a tendency of always looking for racism or when students explicitly stated that they are always looking for racism.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Provisional, In-Vivo, and Emergent Codes
Social Location

My social location as a Black, same-gender-loving, middle class male from a lower SES background undoubtedly influenced what participants shared with me, and what I noticed. Additionally, I attended a high school racially and socioeconomically similar to the site in this research study, which further influenced what I noticed. Being Black, I believe I gained access to more intimate thoughts from students. I noticed many students opened up to me quickly, and many students almost immediately “code-switched” when we started talking. I took this as a sign of their immediate comfort with me as Black rather than a curated performance of their Black identity.

I noticed that many students were quite unrestricted in their language detailing their relationships with white peers, and relationships between white and Black students in general. For example, many of the Black girls in my study talked about the role that white girls’ “jealously” of Black girls’ bodies might play in how teachers apply dress code policy to Black girls’ bodies. I wonder if I would have gained access to such direct and honest reflection if I were not Black. Additionally, some of the Black girls spoke intimately about the hurt and annoyance of seeing Black male students dating white girls – a larger, fraught conversation within the Black community. I believe participants were as candid with me as they were because they presumed that I understood, I do not think I would have been given such details if I were not Black.

During interviews and data analysis there were topics, themes, and comments I either focused on more acutely, or that triggered me as a Black person whose racial identity is central to my overall identity. During my conversations with students I was particularly attuned to how
students talked about their Black identity, listening closely for deficit-based conceptions of a Black identity. Similarly, existing as a Black man requires being observant of my surroundings and knowing how these surroundings bring about hidden social phenomena such as racism. As such, I took particular notice when students spoke directly or indirectly about school and classroom climate.

There were a couple of conversations that definitely triggered me as a Black male, and I struggled not to pause the interview and address them directly. Nevertheless, some topics I chose to address directly while others I chose not to address. When students spoke about feeling unattractive because of their dark skin or feeling the stress of working hard not to embody negative stereotypes associated with being Black, I diverted from the topic of the interview and offered words of advice, encouragement, and comradery – things I hoped would help them feel seen, understood and affirmed. There were, however, some complex and, for me, troubling thoughts that students shared, and I chose to leave them unaddressed. For example, there were interviews where I felt students’ explicitly or indirectly displayed a negative racial regard. In these instances, I wanted to divert from the interviews and challenge them on how they thought about their Black identity, ushering them into a more positive conception of their Black identity. Ultimately, I chose not to do so in order to keep the interview moving.

Overall, I feel like my social location provided richer context on the phenomenon in this study. I don’t think my insider status compromised the application of my methods or protocols, thus I do not believe being an insider compromised the quality of my data. My insider status influenced where and how I probed deeper to ensure proper context was illuminated to more deeply understand what students were saying, especially when at first it was not as easily
discernable. As students shared complex thoughts on their experiences with racism, sometimes their processing or their language to describe their experiences was understandably vague at first. Reflecting on my own experiences as a Black male who has experienced, and continues to experience racism, particularly institutional racism or racial biases in education spaces, I know there are often underlying thoughts on the experience that I initially struggle to articulate. When I felt like this was the case during my interviews, I asked specific follow-up questions in order to bring into focus the students’ perspectives and experiences. As such, I believe my insider status ultimately contributed to the overall quality of my data.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

There are four major sections in this chapter. The first section concerns students’ current world views on racism. I start here because, broadly, students’ sensemaking processes are grounded in how they conceptualize racism. After this, I move to findings focused on the mechanics of students’ critical sensemaking process on racism in school. Specifically, I present findings on key tools that inform students’ sensemaking on racism at LHS: policies and practices. I then move to findings on the finer details of students’ sensemaking processes. The last section of this chapter details findings on the role that context plays in students’ sensemaking processes. There, I offer more relevant details on the racial and social context of Lincolnville before presenting findings on how students’ perspectives on Lincolnville interact with their sensemaking on racism at LHS.

Findings from the 14 interviews I conducted at Lincolnville High School shed light on Black high school students’ sensemaking on racism in their school, specifically their sensemaking tools and processes on racism. First, students’ current world views on racism informs their sensemaking processes on racism. Importantly, students with more critical current world views on racism displayed more critical sensemaking on racism at Lincolnville High School. Secondly, policies and practices that noticeable result in differential treatment for Black students at LHS, and how those policies and practices operate to treat Black students differently, inform students’ sensemaking on racism at LHS. Third, students’ sensemaking on racism at LHS
is shaped by their belief that LHS has “secret” or “hidden” racism. As a result, students’ sensemaking processes involved keen observation and a perpetual state of always looking for racism at LHS. Finally, students’ sensemaking processes on racism at LHS is shaped by the broader context of Lincolnville as a city.

**Students’ Current World View on Racism**

Some students’ current world views on racism were “critical” while other students’ current world views on racism were “non-critical.” Coburn (2005) defines a current world view as one’s viewpoint on a specific subject, topic or phenomenon. Based on students’ voice, I further define Current World View as the conceptualization of a phenomenon informed by accumulated knowledge and experiences with that phenomenon. In this study, a critical current world view on racism exhibited a primary philosophical leaning of Critical Race Theory, which is that “racism is normalized in American society” (Ladson-Billings, 1998). Students with critical current world views on racism displayed knowledge of how structural racism functions through racialized imbalances in power, systems, structures, institutions, and the role history plays in racism. These students’ conceptions of racism also showcased knowledge of how these phenomena influence policies, imbalances in social and economic benefits and ultimately result in differential treatment of people due to their race. Non-critical current world views on racism, on the other hand, did not embody a Critical Race Theory orientation. Students with non-critical world views on racism made important connections to discrimination, stereotypes, and prejudice, but their conceptions of racism did not display knowledge of how racism operates through imbalances in power, systems and structures. Importantly, students’ sensemaking on racism in LHS was shaped by their critical or non-critical current world view on racism.
A Critical World View on Racism and Critical Sensemaking of Racism at LHS

Many students with a critical current world view on racism exhibited a stronger ability to interpret situations they thought were racist at LHS. By “interpret” I mean the process of understanding racism, not the quality of meaning or quality of conclusions students drew from their processes of understanding racism. Additionally, “sensemaking ability,” refers to the degree to which students take a critical approach to reflecting on racism e.g. fitting examples, situations or instances of perceived racism in a framework to facilitate a process of interpreting these situations or events.

In his current world view on racism, one senior, Grant, made a connection between the structural nature of racism in various societal institutions and how policies are set that result in the differential treatment of people of color:

It [Racism] is sorta like this grander institutional thing, like how...how is one group of people benefiting from policies and agendas that are rooted in institutions like education and like politics and business and like how are they taking these benefits. Or how are they benefiting from them at the expense of you know black and brown folks.

Gavin, a sophomore student, also situated his current world view on racism in systems and structures and made important connections to how systemic racism impacts policy:

Racism is so like structural and interpersonal. I will describe like those types of racism. Like there's structural racism where it's like just like practices and policies. In an institution like LHS I think there are policies that maybe like have racist implications, like the tracking system because its dependent on teachers' biases towards kids.

Lauryn, a junior, and Olivia, a senior, both presented current world views on racism that showcased their awareness of the role that power plays in racism, and how power imbalances result in unequal social and economic benefit for Black people. Lauryn stated:

Umm… I think racism… you have to use the word power in racism. Umm… because it has to be power and prejudice. Like I'm not a believer in reverse racism. Umm because
there’s a power structure that exists… and only a white person can… only if a black person hates a white person it's… it doesn't hurt them economically, socially. But if a white person hates a black person then that affects them and all the other categories. So that’s like really my definition of racism. Black people can definitely be prejudice to white people, but I don't think they can be racist.

Oliva’s current world view on racism illuminated a similar critical connection between power and racism and how white people, because of power, might get away with egregious behavior:

I would say racism is...it's the social and economic benefit and benefit of safety, social and political – it's just an unfair advantage. It's an opportunity for advancement that people of color do not have. Umm...it's an opportunity for safety that people of color don't have. And that's what I believe racism is. For example, I would say umm racism is when your math teacher finds a way to incorporate the N-word with a hard R and is invited back to have a renewed contract the next year because he didn't use it derogatorily.

Olivia, Lauryn, and other students with critical current world views on racism displayed a more critical sensemaking ability when processing racism at LHS. When Lauryn, a very bright junior, reflected on racism at Lincolnville High school, she used lack of access to more rigorous courses (Lewis & Diamond, 2015) as an example and in her example, made a critical connection between racialized tracking and opportunity hording (Lewis & Diamond, 2015) by white parents:

Soo…umm it [tracking] really begins early on I would say. Elementary school… middle school…umm and around the time of like middle school you people get into an advanced track of mathematics. And so…that is largely due to white parents who have access, and know that and use that… and that [tracking] leads to maybe having an easier access to advanced courses.

In discussing ways in which she experienced racism at LHS, Olivia’s example of racism showcased her ability to situate her experiences in the racialized power differentials between white families and families of color, and how that impacted resources made available to her at LHS:

Racism I feel like is hidden in a way that like I didn’t know that I could have an IEP. So yeah I didn’t know that I could have an IEP for my undiagnosed anxiety too. Whereas
these white people…. My white counterparts my white peers… have so many other privileges and they are made aware of those opportunities too. So in that way I feel like I feel racism in that moment. The fact that not until my senior year I was given some of these privileges, to have more time on these tests, to be made aware of what test I can take for free. To just be made aware. I think that’s what makes it [racism] like hush hush at Lincolnville. Like you [white students and parents] know these secrets and you [Black students and parents] don’t.

Although there could be different or additional factors that contributed to the racial inequities Lauryn and Olivia described, their processes for understanding racism at Lincolnville displayed an ability to consider how larger societal racialized phenomena – in this case, power imbalances, might explain the racism they experienced at LHS. For Olivia and Lauryn, like other more critical sensemakers, their critical sensemaking of racism at LHS mirrored their critical current world view on racism.

**A Non-Critical World View on Racism and Non-Critical Sensemaking of Racism at LHS**

Conversely, some students with a non-critical current world view on racism displayed a less critical sensemaking ability when processing racism at LHS. Some of these students struggled to speak about racism all together. Bella, a bright, out-going junior, articulated a current world view on racism that makes important connections to “ignorance” but does not showcase knowledge of the role power, structures, and systems play in racism:

So in my own words I would define racism as like something that's definitely made up. Like I don't feel like racism needs to exist. It's so bad. Racism is just separating like, the ideas of people. It’s like using your own judgement to like make those ideas. It’s just made up. It's like when a white kid is like “oh you're, you're poor” or “oh you only have one dad.” Kinda like it just follows by the stereotypes of like a certain race. Like ignorance kinda sorta.
Shortly after, when I asked Bella to describe racism at LHS, she stated that she had not experienced racism at LHS even though throughout our interview she detailed instances of racism she personally experienced at LHS:

Racism at school, umm I don’t know because at LHS I haven’t really experienced racism like that, because we’re such a diverse school. I hate the word diverse now, because it’s... It’s not the meaning it used to be. We got so many cultures in our school. Where it’s hard to just be racist out in the open like that. Umm but I feel like racism in our school is really secretive. Soo kids they say things to their friend groups, but they don’t say it out loud. Like they say what they think about a group of blacks, like a white a group of girls will say what they think about a group of black girls doing something. But they won’t actually say it. But you know that they’re saying it.

While Bella’s example of racism at LHS astutely highlights a phenomenon she and other students referred to as “secret racism” at Lincolnville, a theme explored later, her process of understanding racism at LHS was not steeped in more analytical notions of power, and systems like those students with more critical world views on racism. Similar to findings in Pollock’s (2004) study of race in a California high school, Bella’s example points to students’ reticence to talk about race or call something “racist.” Also, unlike students with a more critical world view on racism, Bella’s conception of racism focused more on individual and interpersonal relationships rather than structural racism at LHS.

Tristin, also a junior, talked about racism at LHS in less critical terms. When asked to define racism in his own words, Tristin said:

I'll be completely honest, like I'm spoiled in the sense of I've been shielded being that Lincolnville with the whole racism...I've never really witnessed or been involved in like racism. That's a good question. It's just I don't know. I honestly cannot tell you, because like I said, I never experienced it. The only like definition I can give you is out of the book. Which is like when a Black person or like when an Asian person or when a...when two races in general just...they don't like each other based off of discrimination, and based off of skin, religion ugh...like sex gender. Whatever. That's basically it.
Unlike students with more critical conceptions of racism, Tristin’s current world view on racism displayed an important connection to discrimination but, again, did not display an understanding of the structural nature of racism and how racism is normalized in societal systems and structures. Interestingly, Tristin described potential tension between Black and Asian people and used that as an example of racism, which suggests that, for him, people of color can be racist, which contrasts with what other students with more critical world views on racism have shared. As Tristin reflected on racism at LHS broadly, he doubled down on his assertion that he never experienced racism then, interestingly, contradicted himself on whether or not he had experienced racism:

Umm… at school… it’s just I feel like at school it’s like standards are a lot different. I feel like based on who you are and based on your like color of skin like... What you’re expected to do is a lot different, and that’s... and that’s the most annoying part about it. That is... that is something that I have experienced at LHS. So I guess I’ve contradicted myself by saying I haven’t experienced racism. But because like I have felt like because I was black… I had to speak and I had to like prove that okay I’m here and I have sense because I was black in a class. Or I had to be more active, or I had to prove that okay like no it’s not just the kids over there no.. I’m in this class for a reason, I know what I’m doing.

Tristin’s example of racism at LHS shows that his sensemaking process considers inequities such as racially different standards for Black students. His contradiction – starting our interview strongly asserting he had never experienced racism at LHS, then saying that he sees racism at LHS – suggests an instability in clarity of his sensemaking on racism at LHS, or perhaps a hesitancy or fear of calling something racist.

Jade, a junior student stated that she never experienced or saw racism at LHS, and at moments she seemed to struggle to talk about race and racism at LHS. When asked to define
racism in her own words, Jade’s conception focused on interpersonal and individual relationships rather than structural racism at LHS:

I think race is like being against another race. Like either in a black race or the white race, or any other race in the world. And I think that’s how racism comes from like treating people in a certain way that you wouldn't treat yourself.

When reflecting on racism broadly at LHS, Jade spoke somewhat uncertainly, about segregation in sports at LHS:

There is segregation especially between the sports. Like I don't know if other people have seen this but like I Googled like umm…water polo sports, and like I've only seen like white kids but like it's cool I have no problem against that but like it's just like wow like… where are the other colored kids…you know are they not joining or are they like too scared to join like these sports, or is it like, what is it?

Jade’s current world view on racism and sensemaking process on racism at LHS further illustrate how students’ conceptualization of racism might impact how they process racism, and whether or not they employ a critical perspective to their process of understanding racism at their school.

Jade’s use of the term “colored kids” also exemplifies a non-critical sensemaking process as compared to her more critical sensemaking peers, as they would unlikely use this term.

Additionally, whereas more critical sensemakers like Lauryn and Oliva might have situated segregation in sports in larger societal imbalances in economic capital, Jade’s analysis did not reach this level of critical analysis. Given that students with more critical views on racism tended to be more critical sensemakers of racism at LHS, for students, there seems to be a complex relationship between current world view and sensemaking ability on racism.

**School and Classroom Policies and Practices: Critical Tools for Student Sensemaking**

Formal and informal policies and practices within the school informed students’ sensemaking on racism in LHS. Many students I interviewed spoke about classroom and school-
level policies and practices when reflecting on racism or differential treatment of Black students at Lincolnville. These policies and practices included detentions, suspensions, tardy passes, dress code, tracking and recommendations to take more rigorous courses. When asked if they had ever seen or personally experienced racism at LHS, several participants spoke about policies and practices in their response or drew examples of policies and practices as evidence of racism at LHS. For example, Greg, a student with a critical worldview on racism, spoke about racialized tracking as evidence of racism at LHS:

Well I think racism at school has a lot of facets to it. Yeah so umm.. Lincolnville specifically, Dr. Spencer would have you believe like he’s de-tracked. And by de-track it means remove the tracking from the freshman and sophomore years that originate in middle school and essentially carry out your entire high school career. It’s not… so I mean I would say racism in the school manifests in the tracking system. So like when you’re stuck in sorta like these lowest tier classes like enrichment classes.

Greg also mentioned suspension inequality when thinking about racism at LHS. When I pushed for more examples of racism at LHS, Greg stated:

Umm well Black students are suspended at a rate 8 times their white counterparts. Despite we [black students] making up 29% of the [school] population.

For Greg, his sensemaking on racism at LHS was heavily informed by the existence of policies that result in racialized inequities for Black students. Melody, a gregarious and energetic Junior spoke about detentions and AP classes when reflecting on racism at LHS:

I think it's really interesting because I've noticed that the people who got detentions mostly are like specifically Black boys. I just don't think it's fair with the detentions. The AP classes are very, very divided too.

Scholars who have studied the differential treatment of Black boys in school have highlighted how Black boys receive more detentions than other students (Ferguson, 2001). Melody also talked about how Black girls at LHS were singled-out more for dress code violations than white
girls, a phenomenon that scholars have illuminated in their research on Black girls’ experiences in school (Morris, 2016: Wun, 2016). Olivia also talked about how unfairly the dress code treated Black girls before the dress code changed. She also added that even Black boys’ dress is treated differently than white boys’:

Even the white boys and their baseball caps...that’s okay. But the black boys and their sports caps...it's different. They have to stop and take them off and it's so weird.

For Melody and Olivia, interpreting racism at LHS involved looking closely at which students receive detentions and dress code infractions, and the visual manifestation of unequal access to AP classes evidenced by the absence of Black students in AP classes.

A few students talked about safety officers calling out Black students more frequently for “lingering” in the hallways. For example, Lauryn mentioned that she witnessed security officers policing Black students for lingering in the hallway, “especially Black males.” Tyrone, a junior, corroborated this:

Tardy passes have been a problem for a while at LHS. There’ll be a white kid walking to class late but they won’t give them a tardy pass. But they’ll see a Black kid walking to class late and they’ll try to get their name and give them a tardy pass. I feel like, I feel like safety is more concerned about Black kids because they think Black kids are the main ones not going to class.

For Lauryn and Tyrone, school-level practices such as which students get called out for lingering in the hallway and which students are issued tardy passes help them understand racism at LHS.

Students with more critical sensemaking processes did not just look at whether policies and practices at LHS treat Black students differently; they also examined how these policies and practices operate to result in differential treatment for Black students. This subtle yet crucial distinction is the difference between students being able to see that there are a lot of Black students receiving detentions versus them being able to see that and then analyze how more
Black end up receiving more detentions than other students. The tracking and course recommendation practices and policies LHS offered some students keen insight into how racism manifests at LHS. As he reflected on his experiences with racism at Lincolnville High School, Gavin talked about being "tracked out" of a class he wanted to take because of how teachers are more likely to recommend white kids for more advanced classes than kids of color. He stated:

The concept of teacher recommendation could be oppressive because the teachers are white and I feel like they're more likely to recommend the white students for higher-level classes.

Olivia also mentioned the tracking system, and explained how she thinks it operates and results in racism. However, she identified counselor recommendations as key to how Black students’ lack of access to rigorous coursework manifests:

I feel like it's about what your counselor sees in you. And so I think...if your counselor has this idea where they see you have a lot of potential. But I don't feel like my white counterpart has to be this beautiful shining star with so much potential for them to be put on this advanced course track...you know honors classes, AP classes. Honestly when you're a Black student you have to, you have to really look like you are going to be somebody for them to treat you like you're going to be somebody.

For Olivia, how counselors view Black students and their ability to succeed, and negative assumptions or conclusions they make about Black students’ ability to succeed is an extra burden Black student’s face in gaining access to advanced coursework at LHS.

Desmond, another critical sensemaker with a critical world view on racism, spoke a lot about the AP system too and how students get recommended for such classes. He shared that he feels that counselors encourage white students to take AP courses while they discourage Black students from taking AP courses. Desmond stated:

Besides those few teachers that will actually push that minority student, there's not that many others and so that's where I feel like the school comes short. Even you know picking AP classes and honors. That's where the school comes short.
Indeed, Olivia, Gavin and Desmond’s processes for understanding racism at LHS are informed by examining the underpinning mechanisms that bring about racism through course recommendation policies and practices.

Some students considered how dress code policy is applied in their processes for making sense of racism at LHS. Like Melody, Bella also talked about the differential treatment that Black girls experience in dress code, but she also offered an analysis of how this outcome happens:

The black girls used to be the only ones getting called out for dress because white girls always wore like their short shorts. But Black girls have the curves, and so we got called out for wearing what they were wearing.

Recently, Morris (2016) identified the role that the oversexualization and adultification of Black girls’ bodies plays in the unfair application of dress code policy they experience. For Bella, it’s precisely the oversexualization and adultification of Black girls’ bodies that make them the repository of racism through body-policing at LHS.

Overall, for some students in this study, policies and practices, as well as the mechanisms underneath them, helped students detect the presence of racism at LHS, and how it operates at LHS. This suggests that policies and practices inform students’ sensemaking processes on racism in critical ways.

Keen Observation, “Secret Racism” and Always Looking for Racism

Keen Observation

Some students exhibited keen observation in their sensemaking mechanisms to understand racism at LHS. Students’ sensemaking processes on racism at LHS involves looking at the subtleties of teacher behavior. At one point in the interview Tristin mentioned that teachers
“have different standards for Black students.” When I asked him what made him think this was the case, he mentioned that one has to “pick something out of nothing” when looking at teacher actions:

A lot of times teachers expect African American students to come in and slack off, and be loud and be obnoxious. So like no teacher would boldly or just come out and say something, but you could see it in the way they are speaking to you. Or they give you a certain amount of attention. But like you just gotta be able to pick something outta nothing sometimes and like be able to see it. For instance, how teachers would react to you in certain situations compared to another student in that situation.

For Tristin, obvious events that might easily signal racism (e.g., teacher using the N-word) are not the foci of his sensemaking process towards. Rather, teachers’ micro-actions, such as their word choice, distribution of time given to some students, or different ways teachers react to Black students compared to how they react to white students inform his process of understanding racism at LHS. Olivia’s sensemaking process on racism at LHS was informed by teachers’ micro-actions as well. When reflecting on her first AP class, Olivia stated:

It took me like a month to realize we [Black students] were being talked over. What we say gets repeating, and when we speak it’s nods from teachers. When they [white students] speak it’s something back from teachers in response to what they’re saying.

Desmond spoke about how he looks very closely and quietly at the actions of teachers and stated that his experience at LHS has been a state of constantly observing racism:

It’s like I'm really careful when it comes to teachers. I'm very observant most teachers will say... I can be very quiet. The reason why I can be very quiet is cus I'm observing what you do. And so being black at Lincolnville has been a whole lot for me when it comes to observing racism and seeing racism. I know like when there is racism.

For Tristin, Olivia, and Desmond, processing racism at LHS involved employing astute attention to teachers’ behaviors. There is an intensity and focus they bring to their sensemaking process in order to detect if, and how, racism manifests at LHS.
“Secret Racism” and Always Looking for Racism

Many students I interviewed stated that “secret racism” or “hidden racism” exists at LHS and this belief shaped their processes for understanding racism at LHS in two critical ways. First, the secret racism or hidden racism caused some students to employ keen observation in their sensemaking on racism at LHS. Secondly, for other students I interviewed, secret or hidden racism necessitated a perpetual, endless sensemaking process to determine if, and to what extent, race or racism was a factor in events of which they were trying to understand. Based on student voice, I define “secret” or “hidden” racism as racist verbal and non-verbal actions from teachers and other adults in the building that are obscured from sight, not as discernable, or not visibly manifested, but omni-present nonetheless.

At one point in our interview, Desmond brought up the notion of secret racism at LHS, and when discussing it, he displayed how secret racism caused him to look hard to detect racism:

Racism at school…. It is put under the rug I would say. It’s not obvious but it is there. It’s kind of a quiet type of racism. It is there but sometimes it’s not obvious. And it’s not out there. I mean there is quite a few faculty members and there’s quite a few students there. Who diverse as it is who kinda have a secret. A secret racism. They don't show it. They don't talk about it. They don't express it, but you know it’s there from the way they interact with other kids, and the way they treat you as a Black person.

Desiree, a senior, also spoke about secret racism at LHS. She talked about secret racism in how teachers use coded language to talk about Black students. For example, she mentioned how a teacher told her non-Black friend that “Saturday school isn't for students like you, “it's for students who need to clear detentions or need assistance.” For Desiree, the secret racism at LHS elicited a sensemaking process that included keen observation (i.e., looking at language) to understand racism at LHS.
Some students I interviewed either displayed a tendency to always be looking for racism, or they named explicitly that they are always looking for racism. These students displayed a sensemaking process that is never turned off. For example, at one point in our interview, Greg spoke broadly about his experience at LHS. He stated that he is always looking for racism at LHS:

So I think I like just the fact that I spent the last two years like trying to critically think about race and my mind to that place like always looking for it and always like looking for it and always questioning you know and being like well does race play a factor in this and how might it play a factor in this.

Melody, who at one point in our interview stated “racism at LHS is silent but deadly” also displayed a tendency of always being watchful for racism:

I hear things and I see things all the time that are just not okay. And are slightly and very racist and people are just they just don't see it because they're like "oh, we're not racist, this is Lincolnville!"

For these Greg and Melody, their sensemaking processes are never quite turned off, which suggests a perpetual, constant process of trying to understand if and how racism manifests at LHS.

The Context of Lincolnville and Students’ Sensemaking on Racism at LHS

Lincolnville

For many students in this study, racism at Lincoln High School exists within the larger context of Lincolnville, which has history of racial issues. A study done in 2014 showed that Lincolnville police were eight times more likely to search a Black driver than a white driver.\(^1\) Lincolnville and city officials were recently sued by a public employee for alleged racial

\(^1\)Source not provided in order to protect identity of site.
discrimination. The larger community of Lincolnville has also wrestled with racialized educational inequities in recent years. Recently, a local parent-led advocacy group held a forum to discuss the pervasive racial issues within the city and its institutions, including Lincolnville High School. Parents raised concerns over Black and Latinx students being disciplined more than white students due to teachers’ and administrators’ misunderstanding of Black and Latinx students’ cultures. Parents also raised concerns over racialized academic achievement gaps, even for students from similar socioeconomic backgrounds. Despite these challenges, or perhaps because of them, LHS makes a lot of effort to address the needs of its diverse study body. LHS has many student groups to support its racial diversity, as well as to support student activism around racial issues. There are clubs for Latinx students, and several clubs for Black student (e.g., NAACP club, National Society of Black Engineers, Black Student Union, etc.).

Despite these efforts by the school, for many students in my study, the broader context of Lincolnville influenced their beliefs about how racism operates at LHS, and influenced the intensity of observation they brought to their sensemaking of racism at LHS. Melody’s perspective on Lincolnville informed her belief that racism at LHS is secretive. In speaking about racism at LHS, Melody stated that “racism at LHS is silent but deadly. When I asked her to elaborate, she stated:

Umm. I think with Lincolnville it's really strange cuz it's very umm liberal and everyone likes to be umm, I guess, woke.

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3 Source not provided in order to protect identity of site.
4 Source not provided in order to protect identity of site.
For Melody, that Lincolnville is supposedly a “woke” city contributes to the hidden nature of racism at LHS, thus necessitating a sensemaking process on racism that includes keen observation of behaviors.

Tristin spoke about Lincolnville as “fake” when he reflected on why racism at LHS is hard to see:

I don't wanna sound like I'm privileged or nothing, but like I said, it's just the safe haven of Lincolnville. A lot of it is fake. It is what it is. I know a lot of it is fake. No one wants to...no white person really wants to be a racist, especially in a place like Lincolnville

For Tristin, the “fakeness” of Lincolnville, particularly of white people, explains why the potentially racist actions of teachers might be hard to see, highlighting the necessity of keen observations in understanding racism at LHS that many students, including Tristin, exhibited. In reflecting on hidden racism at LHS, Gavin used the example of teachers “consistently mispronouncing the names of Black students” as an instance of hidden racism at LHS. He then used his perspective on Lincolnville to rationalize this behavior and stated: “I don't think anyone means to be racist. Especially in like white liberal Lincolnville.”

Other students who reflected on the larger context of Lincolnville in their sensemaking on racism at LHS considered the racism, racial bias or racial inequality in Lincolnville. For these students, this aspect of life in Lincolnville explained why Black students are treated differently at LHS. In reflecting on why policies and practices treat Black students unfairly, Maya said:

Umm well I think our actions are already more under suspicion than white students umm and I also think... I don’t think the administration or like the safety whoever’s giving suspensions. I don’t think they take into account enough like the background of the students. Cus where majority of like black and brown people in Lincolnville are lower class. And they just like… there’s not enough care towards that.
For Maya, her process for understanding racialized suspensions was connected to her consideration of income inequality within the city of Lincolnville. Similarly, when reflecting on why racism at LHS exists, Desiree spoke about the racial history of Lincolnville:

Well…Lincolnville is this… and everyone will call it this little bubble. That’s what everyone likes to describe Lincolnville as. And so it’s this little liberal bubble. And everyone will pretend like they’re really liberal, positive and everyone’s loves each other. But when you even look at the history of Lincolnville in itself, like if you look at our neighborhoods, you can tell that’s all because of the red lining in different areas.

Indeed, for many of the students I interviewed, the racial, social, and historical context of Lincolnville influenced their sensemaking on racism at LHS. The context of Lincolnville helped students more fully assess and understand racism at LHS, which provided them with additional perspective in their sensemaking processes.
CHAPTER FIVE
DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

At the onset it is important to remind readers that the purpose of this study was to learn more about *how* Black students make sense of racism in their school, not *why* they make sense of racism. *What makes Black students think about racism in their school? Why do they embark on a process to try to understand the racism at LHS?* These are critical questions concerning Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism that future research should take up. The specific focus of this study was to uncover more about the “what” and the “how” of Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism.

In this chapter, I discuss what was gleaned concerning Black high school students’ critical sensemaking on racism Lincolnville High School. Specifically, what was learned and what remains unknown about Black students’ sensemaking tools and processes on racism are addressed. After this, implications of this study on practice and scholarship are addressed. Specifically, attention is given to how findings of this research might guide educators’ work with Black high school students. After I discuss implications, I present key areas of future research need in order to fill in critical gaps in our knowledge about Black students’ critical sensemaking. Finally, I end this chapter with an imperative by revisiting the larger context necessitating more praxis and research concerning Black students’ sensemaking on racism.

My findings corroborate and extend findings from past studies on sensemaking theory in schools on the role of policies and practices in sensemaking on a phenomenon. Policies and
practices informed students’ sensemaking of racism within LHS. Previously, Blosser (2015), who used a sensemaking framework in her research, and Lewis and Diamond (2015), who did not utilize a sensemaking framework, identified that students observed policies and practices in their school to make sense of racial diversity initiatives and racial inequities within school. My findings add to the literature on the role of policies and practices play in Black students’ critical sensemaking of racism. My findings demonstrate that students glean a lot of information about racism in their school, not just from seeing that policies and practices treat Black students differently, but also by examining how they operate to treat Black students differently. As such, for Black students tasked with making sense of racism and the many ways racism manifests in schools, critically assessing the mechanisms underpinning policies and practices that result in inequities towards Black students is a critical undertaking in students’ sensemaking processes on racism.

Students’ propensity and ability to assess how policies treat Black students differently might be influenced by their current world view on racism, the racial socialization they receive from their parents, or a complex relationship between the two. Students with more critical world views on racism, and who received parental racial socialization messages focused on instilling cultural pride, displayed a greater propensity and facility with examining how policies and practices result in differential treatment of Black students. As such, Black students’ critical world view of how racism operates in society helps them assess the structural nature of racism in their school through policies and practices. In the case of the students I interviewed, this critical awareness is an important tool in Black students’ sensemaking schemas.
Another contribution of this research concerns the mechanics of students’ critical sensemaking processes on racism. Students’ critical sensemaking on racism involves them being “keen observers” of verbal and non-verbal actions of teachers. Relatedly, students’ keen observation was necessitated in part by the “secret” or “hidden” racism students perceived at LHS. Previously, Phillippo (2012) found that students can pick up on hard-to-see actions from teachers, though she did not use a sensemaking framework in her research. Interestingly, the males in my study either spoke most explicitly of, or displayed most vividly, keen observation of subtle teacher actions. Toldson (2008), Brooms (2016), and Allen (2012) consider Black males’ perspectives on their relationships with teachers. Their findings identified that Black male students closely examine teacher actions to assess whether, and to what extent, teachers cared about them. This might help explain Black males’ keen observation of teacher actions in their sensemaking processes of racism at LHS.

In addition to keen observation being a key component of Black students’ critical sensemaking processes, the perpetual and endless state of sensemaking is another critical feature. My findings identify that, from a critical sensemaking perspective, there is a perpetual state of looking at racism involved in Black students’ processes of understanding racism at LHS. This constant state of looking for racism might be a learned behavior from parents, which further suggests an important relationship between parental socialization on racism and students’ sensemaking on racism. Research on Black parents identifies that they also exhibit a constant state of being “on watch” for racism, or always reading a situation to see if race (and racism) is at play (Vincent, Rollock, Ball, & Gillborn, 2012).
Another significant contribution of this study involves how context shapes Black students’ sensemaking process on racism. The findings from this study indicate that broader context, in this case the racial and social context of Lincolnville, played a critical role in how students’ understood racism at LHS. The keen observation many students employed in their sensemaking processes, their belief that secret racism exists at LHS, and the never-ending state of their sensemaking processes were funneled through their perspective of Lincolnville as “white liberal,” “fake woke” and a city with a history of racial issues. This finding aligns with Evans (2007) findings that local context was related to school leaders’ sensemaking. The larger context of Lincolnville shaped both what students looked at to detect racism and how they processed racism. The application of broader context in students’ sensemaking processes on racism at LHS might be due to the uptick in highly visible and charged racial issues in society today such as police shootings, often of Black youth. Nonetheless, students who did consider the role that fake liberalism in Lincolnville played in racism at LHS are astute, as research shows that even teachers who teach in liberal cities and schools often hold racist views against Black students in particular (Kailin, 1999).

Past research on sensemaking in schools found that school and classroom contexts play a role in helping sensemakers process a situation or event that occurs in schools (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Furberg, 2009). Findings from this study shed light on the complex relationship between school and classroom context and Black students’ critical sensemaking of racism in their school. For students in this study, racialized phenomenon such as the differential treatment Black students experienced with dress code policy application and AP courses recommendations informed their sensemaking on racism in LHS. As these phenomena happened in classrooms and
in the broader school, they created a racially-charged social context and racial climate in the school with which Black students must navigate. Similarly, the secret racism that students perceive at LHS and the subtle actions they examine to detect racism manifest in classrooms as well as school-wide. As such, policies and practices, secret racism, and teacher actions create school and classroom contexts that ultimately necessitate, inform, and shape Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism.

Scholars of adult sensemaking in schools emphasize the role of prior knowledge and prior beliefs in sensemaking (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004). I did not find an influence of prior knowledge and prior beliefs on student sensemaking in my data. One reason for this might be that students’ prior knowledge and prior beliefs on racism are continuously revised and any relevant remnants of prior beliefs and knowledge are represented in students’ current world-view on racism. Thus, the extent to which students’ current world views on racism reflect their prior beliefs and knowledge about racism, their prior knowledge and beliefs might indirectly inform their processes and tools to make sense of racism in their school.

Importantly, the anti-racism student group that many students participated in seems to play a role in informing their world views on racism and, consequently, their sensemaking on racism at LHS. Though not all students who exhibited a critical sensemaking ability participated in the anti-racism student group, those that did participate in the student group had a more critical world view on racism. While the relationship between students’ participation in this group and their current world view on racism remains unclear, Student Participatory Action Research might shine a light on how a critical world view on racism is developed in students through opportunities like the anti-racism student group. Hope et al. (2015) conducted Student
Participatory Action Research where they helped students examine systemic racism in society and how such racism influences schooling racial inequalities. In this study students developed knowledge of systems in order to critique them and showed a facility with critiquing racial inequities in their school.

At the onset of this study, I was interested in learning more about how racial identity and parental racial socialization might interact with student sensemaking processes on racism. Existing critical sensemaking literature identified that adults’ sociopolitical identities matter to their sensemaking on racial issues (Evans, 2007). While this is a critical finding in the sensemaking literature, this research did not illuminate how sociopolitical identities influence sensemaking, and importantly, their findings considered adult sensemaking, not student sensemaking. Based on findings from the sensemaking literature and other sociological studies about Black students’ experiences with racism in schools, I hypothesized that not only does a student’s racial identity influence their sensemaking on racism in school, but also that their parental racial socialization influences their sensemaking on racism in school.

Students in my study who received parental racial socialization experiences and messages aimed at instilling cultural pride (Scott, 2003) held a more critical world view of racism and exhibited a more critical sensemaking process. Only two students reported racial socialization experiences from their parents that attempted to build cultural pride. These two students displayed a very high willingness and ability to employ a critical analytical tool kit to understanding racism at LHS. Noticeable, some students who reported parental racial socialization messages that promoted their child to take a colorblind approach or promoted mistrust of other ethnic groups (Gaskin, 2015) had non-critical world views on racism. They also
exhibited a less critical sensemaking process. With regards to racial identity, students with an overall positive racial identity displayed a more critical sensemaking process of racism at LHS. Scott (2003) identified two critical dimensions of racial identity: Racial Centrality (i.e., whether race is a normative part of ones’ identity and self-concept) and Racial Regard (i.e., extent to which someone feels positively or negatively about being black). Students in my study with a positive racial regard and students with a high racial centrality exhibited a critical sensemaking ability. In her work on how schooling influences students’ racialized identities, Nasir (2012) emphasized a critical connection between racial identity, racial socialization, and schooling, asserting that “racial identities are related to the complex process of racial socialization, which occurs in family.” My own findings show that, for students, racial socialization geared towards instilling cultural pride, students feeling positive about their Black identity, and whether students’ Black identity is integral to their overall identity buttress their critical sensemaking processes of racialized schooling phenomenon.

The findings on the role parental racial socialization and racial identity play in Black students’ sensemaking on racism are emergent and not consistent. As such, I am unable to draw stronger conclusions about the relationship between parental racial socialization, racial identity and Black students’ critical sensemaking. Still, these findings are promising and open up exciting avenues for future research, such as learning more about the role parental socialization, and other socialization, play in students sensemaking, and how students’ racial identity operates in their sensemaking of racism in school. Researchers should take up this research.
Implications for Research and Practice

If education practitioners want to help Black students develop critical sensemaking tools and processes to make sense of pervasive anti-black racism in schools, then supporting Black students with the development and refinement of their critical world view on racism is an important undertaking for practitioners. Similarly, while a number of students exhibited an ability to assess the structural nature of policies and practices that treat Black students unfairly, other students were unable to do so. As Black students interpreting potential instances of racism accurately is vital, Black students would benefit from more targeted programming that helps them understand the structural nature of how policies and practices operate. One instructive example of such programming is Oakland-based, Energy Convertors. This program helps high school students of color understand systemic racism and builds students’ critical analysis of how systemic racism manifests in their schools. This program is not only helping students make sense of the racial and socioeconomic changes happening in Oakland and the impact these changes are having on their schools, but also builds students’ critical analysis and writing skills as well.

While educators can and should promote Black students’ active, critical sensemaking of racism at school, the reality is that this will not address a toxic result of the racism they encounter at school. The psychic stress that Black students endure, and the extra labor required of them as a result of endless sensemaking on racism, is concerning. The physic stress is especially concerning given the psychological and physical health issues Black students face as they navigate racism in schooling environments (McGee & Stovall, 2015). Educators (e.g., teachers, counselors, deans, administrators), parents and families, health professionals and other caregivers of Black youth must find ways to assess how Black students are socially, emotionally,
and psychically impacted by school racism, and address the impact in profound and meaningful ways.

Importantly, this study’s findings have practical implications for our work with adult educators as well. So much of Black students’ sensemaking on racism, particularly the intensity and focus of their sensemaking processes, is directed at understanding adult verbal and non-verbal actions. Educators would benefit from much more critical training on race transcends basic diversity conversations, and guides educators through a critical exploration of their implicit racial biases and how they influence their work with Black students. As Black students’ are always looking at teachers’ subtle actions and are on the look-out for secret racism from teachers and other adults, implicit racial bias training for educators would ultimately help create a better racial climate for Black students and more positive interactions between Black students and adults. OneGoal is one organization attempting this type of training with educators. A key component of teacher training for the OneGoal program involves supporting teachers’ exploration of their racial biases connected to their identities, and providing them with tools to mitigate those biases influence their work with students.

Excitingly, this study has important implications for future research too. Similar to a critical world view on racism buttressing Black students’ critical sensemaking tools and processes, broader context also shapes their sensemaking processes. While there is strong evidence from my data suggesting that city-wide racial and social context influences students’ sensemaking on racism in their high school, more research is needed to ascertain exactly how this context operates within their sensemaking schemas.
Another major area for continued research concerns the complex relationship between racial identity, racial socialization, and sensemaking on racism. While I identified clear distinctions in the racial socialization that individual students received from their parents, and distinctions in students’ conceptions of their identity along two important dimension of racial identity (racial regard and racial centrality), exactly how racial socialization and racial identity impact students’ sensemaking processes still remains largely unclear. There is a lot still to learn about the role that racial identity and racial socialization plays in young people’s sensemaking on racial issues. Scholars should take on this charge.

Concluding Thoughts

I set out in this study to learn how Black high school students make sense of racism in their school. While more research is needed in key areas to further understand Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism, from this study we have more knowledge about the critical tools and focus students bring to their sensemaking processes, the mechanics of their sensemaking processes, and how broader context shapes the process. While this study leaves unanswered the role that racial socialization and racial identity plays in Black students’ critical sensemaking, it provides clarity on where scholars should focus our attention.

As important as advancing bodies of literature is, there is a more important reason to continue our work to understand as much as we can about Black students’ sensemaking on racism. Critical sensemaking on racism in schools will not solve the problem of institutional racism in schools, but it might help Black students more successfully navigate structural racism in schools. If Black students are going to successfully navigate schools, a strong, critical sensemaking process about racism is essential. Given the profundity and pervasiveness of anti-
black racism in schools, Black students will need critical sensemaking tools and processes to support their subsequent and ultimate meaning-making of the racism they experience in schools. The moral imperative for supporting Black students in the development and employment of critical sensemaking tools and processes became clearer in my study, and the imperative cannot be understated. Several students during our interviews spoke intimately and, at times, painfully, about how the racism they experienced at LHS made them feel about the way they look, made them question their intelligence, and made them act and speak in ways to mitigate the impact of racism they experienced or witnessed. In the face of so much anti-black structural racism in schools, Black students’ self-images and conclusions about their dignity and humanity hang in the balance. This is precisely why Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism in schools is so imperative. It’s essential that Black students draw meaning from the racism they experience in schools in ways that helps them make critical assessments on why they are experiencing racism in school while not drawing negative or toxic conclusions about who they are. As such, understanding Black students’ critical sensemaking on racism is a critical project to support their psychic survival within an education system that is still, and might always, be perpetually riddled with racism.


VITA

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