If Not Me, Then Who?:

A Study of Racial and Cultural Competence in a High School English Department

DiAnna S. Sox ⓘ
University of South Carolina
dianna.s.sox@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

While the student population in U.S. public schools is diversifying, the teacher population and curriculum remain monochromatic. This action research study grew from the observation that racial and cultural content and discourse were absent from the English classrooms in my suburban high school. Through this convergent mixed-method study, I sought to examine the factors that contribute to racial silence and improve teacher cultural competence in order to transform our classrooms into more racially and culturally just spaces. Resulting data suggests (a) targeted intervention can impact teacher cultural competence; (b) teachers desire more inclusive classroom practices; (c) yet that desire does not equate to action; because (d) the prevalence of fear engenders colormuteness and inhibits change. Recommended actions include committing to cultural proficiency alongside others; critically examining policies, practices, and support systems at the school and classroom level; engaging in intentional racial discourse; and providing prolonged antiracist professional development for classroom teachers.

KEYWORDS

English secondary education, cultural competence, colormuteness, social justice and advocacy

From 2009 to 2018, the percentage of White students in U.S. public schools decreased from 54% to 47%, yet White teachers have constituted roughly 80% of the teacher workforce for nearly 4 decades (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019a, 2019b; Schaeffer, 2021), while curriculum remains Eurocentric (Muhammad & Mosley, 2021). These conditions may prevent schools from helping students engage with contentious topics (Boyd & Glazier, 2017), interrogate institutionalized inequities (Bolgatz, 2005), and pivot from individual understanding to collective action (Coles-Ritchie & Smith, 2017). Instead, teachers may circumvent controversy (Frankenberg, 1993), silencing students as well as subject matter (Ellsworth, 1989). In particular, if White teachers feel ill-equipped, uncomfortable, or even pressured to avoid discussing race, culture, or diversity (DiAngelo, 2011; Haviland, 2008; Tatum, 2003), they may foster racial silence known as *colormuteness* (Castagno, 2008; Pollock, 2009). Disengaging from tough topics is easier than facilitating meaningful discourse. Still, it has "major implications for what students do and do not learn" (Berchini, 2019, p. 153), so as student populations diversify, teacher cultural competence is urgent.

This study began with the recognition of colormuteness in my English classroom. When I sensed teaching Coates's (2015) *Between the World and Me* would be risky, I feared my colleagues also avoided racially and culturally diverse content. I realized our department was doing students a disservice by not challenging the normative White curriculum, failing to incorporate atypical, countercultural, and—frankly—uncomfortable texts. Our student population is 90% White, and our 21-member English department is 100% White. At all grade levels, literature centered White experiences, suppressing cultural and racial dialogue.

Diverse curriculum is necessary and essential (Howard & Gay, 2010), so its department-wide absence was problematic. Resolving this problem requires teachers' "awareness of our intersectionality, standpoints, biases, and privilege, as well as the language and tone we use" (Forsgren, 2017, p. 156). This chapter presents my effort to develop such awareness by engaging in action research to "transform practice, participants . . . [and] even society" (Herr & Anderson, 2015, p. 10).

PURPOSE AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Consistent with the goal of social justice education, to develop awareness of existing oppression and one's role in it, I aimed to promote equity in our English classrooms, which requires White individuals to "build tolerance for racial discomfort" (DiAngelo, 2011, p. 60). I began by developing a comprehensive understanding of the problem. As Figure 1 illustrates, White teachers' cultural and racial incompetence reinforces monochromatic curriculum and quells diverse dialogue, and this trifecta preserves White elitism among students and teachers.

Figure 1. Problems Within the Problem of Practice
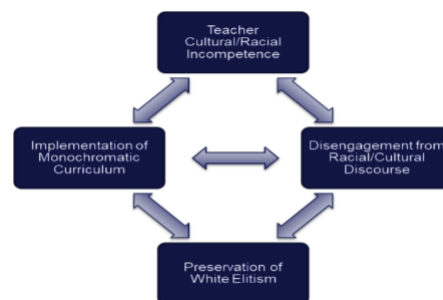
To rectify this concern by increasing teachers' cultural competence, I asked:

1. What factors contribute to racial silence in our classrooms?
2. How does targeted intervention impact our cultural competence?
3. How does focusing on teacher cultural competence affect our classrooms?

Through action research, these questions guided transformative collaboration with colleagues.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical race theory (CRT), whiteness, and cultural competence framed this study. The foundational lens, CRT revealed systemic reproduction of whiteness in classrooms, whereas cultural competence suggested how to challenge and transform the curriculum.

CRT

I used CRT to elucidate how race and education intersect, following earlier examinations of race and the law in pursuit of justice (Ansell, 2008). CRT reveals racial inequity within the larger institution of schooling, as opposed to individual beliefs, and calls for the transformation of teaching (Milner & Laughter, 2015). Applying CRT to curriculum and instruction could catalyze racial and cultural equity within the English department. Otherwise, inaction in response to the identification of systemic racism will reproduce it (Khalifa et al., 2013).

Whiteness

Beyond skin color, whiteness is an ideology associated with privilege, dominance, and social status—unearned benefits afforded to White people and unavailable to people of color (McMahon, 2015). Ensuring "production and reproduction of dominance rather than subordination, normativity rather than marginality, and privilege rather than disadvantage" (Frankenberg, 1993, p. 236), whiteness is a social construct with implications for other constructs (Owen, 2007). My study positioned whiteness, rather than racism, as a focal point because whiteness is illuminated through the application of CRT in the classroom and is a determinant of racial silence in the classroom. In this way, I aligned with Giroux's (1997a) belief that White identity and the responsibility White people have for confronting racism demand a focus on whiteness.

Cultural Competence

Cultural competence is the ability to recognize and accept others' cultural characteristics: appearance, behavior, education, actions, attitudes, and policies (Cross et al., 1989). Students may not glean or increase their cultural sensitivity without specific, guided instruction (Vande Berg et al., 2012), yet teachers must first understand their own cultural competence and develop critical consciousness (Vavrus, 2002). Because all teachers, regardless of ethnicity, must become culturally competent (Ladson-Billings, 1998), this lens aligned with my aim.

METHOD

Inspired by context-dependent problems of practice, action researchers use insider perspectives to design and implement potential solutions, actively participating in inquiry to promote social change (Efron & Ravid, 2013). Critical action research was appropriate for my study, allowing me, alongside my colleagues, to transform our individual and collective practice. Although the full study, spanning three phases over 2 months, used mixed methods (Sox, 2023), this chapter focuses on the qualitative data.

The target population was the 21-member English department at my high school, 76% female and 100% White, with teachers varying in years of experience and age. All department members have, at minimum, a bachelor's degree, a South Carolina teaching license, and 2 years of experience. Six female teachers, including me, participated—an ideal sample for focus groups (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), representing almost 1/3 of our department.

During Phase 1, participants took a survey with demographic and open-ended questions. Analyzing the responses provided a baseline profile and holistic depiction of each teacher's level and understanding of cultural competence. During Phase 2, I facilitated three 2-week modules designed to help participants explore race and culture as applied to our classrooms. Each module paired an asynchronous assignment of readings, videos, and reflection questions with a semi-structured focus group session (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Individual reflections and focus group transcripts served as additional data captured in Phase 1. During Phase 3, participants took another open-ended survey. Analyzing responses independently and against the baseline data revealed any individual and collective change in cultural and racial competence.

Each phase yielded data aligned with my research questions. The survey data spoke to Questions 1 and 2, while the independent reflections and transcripts corresponded with Questions 1 and 3. The open-ended survey responses also aligned with Question 3. Analysis across datasets surfaced overall impacts of the intervention.

FINDINGS

The baseline profiles anchor my findings by introducing each participant, attesting to how Ariel "work[s] hard to understand all sides of any given issue or situation and to keep any potential biases at bay." Her curriculum included two race-related anchor texts to engage students in open, safe discussions, indicating her comfort with racial discourse. She posited, "If the subject comes up in class, it deserves to be acknowledged in an appropriate manner."

CoCo described her competence as "moderate, but [she] would love to learn more." She derived the race-related literature and discussions in her classroom from past experience and curriculum, suggesting avoidance of current discourse. When racial topics arose, she tried to "ensure the conversation sta[id] on topic," lest "bias influence the conversation."

I categorized my own competence as "low to medium," as I was "becoming more aware and knowledgeable and interested in learning more." Race-related conversations could result from student comments or projects, but the literature in my classroom did not reflect racial diversity. I admitted to "divert[ing] racial conversations," indicating colormuteness.

Icarus described her competence as "beginner to intermediate," suggesting doubt in her knowledge and awareness. She cited some

class participation in broader conversations, provided she "mediate[s] the discussion and model[s] appropriate ways to agree with someone."

Luna described her competence as "still learning" to connect diversity to real-world issues and develop students' empathy. Most of her responses emphasized expanding students' knowledge, demonstrating racial and cultural awareness she could share with students. She prioritized honest discussion and "journal writing for encouraging [each] independent voice."

Opal demonstrated awareness yet insecurity: "I am sensitive to racial disparities, but I do not feel confident saying that I am a highly culturally competent person." She claimed to teach diverse authors and topics but admitted to not feeling "safe or comfortable," limiting "the depth" of discussion. When racial conversations arose, she would "tip toe around them . . . to make sure that everyone is comfortable and safe," remaining at a "surface level."

Baseline Cultural Competence

The initial survey also gauged participants' baseline cultural competence. I highlighted keywords and phrases for comparison with documented characteristics of cultural competence levels (Cross et al., 1989; Lindsey et al., 2009; Ward, 2013). As Table 1 shows, 33% (n = 2) of participants were culturally competent, whereas 67% (n = 4) were culturally pre-competent.

*Table 1. Baseline Cultural Competence*

Participant	Level
Ariel	cultural competence
CoCo	cultural pre-competence
DiAnna	cultural pre-competence
Icarus	cultural pre-competence
Luna	cultural competence
Opal	cultural pre-competence

Group Baseline

Further analysis of the pre-intervention open-ended responses illuminated crosscutting findings. In response to Question 32 (What race-related literature or discussions come up in your classroom?), one participant mentioned specific literature, three answered in terms of class discussions, and two reported feeling unsafe or uncomfortable teaching or talking about race in the classroom. That 83% (n = 5) of participants were not actively teaching race-related literature or sparking race-related discussions validated my prediction that our department was not racially inclusive.

Question 34, which asked if participants have ever avoided discussing race, yielded similar findings. The startling results suggest a correlation between a teacher's comfort in discussing race (Question 34) and course content (Question 32). Only one participant, Ariel, responded negatively, and she alone incorporated race-related texts and conversations in class. Responding affirmatively, the other five participants disclosed 13 different reasons for their colormuteness, which Figure 2 shows as four major fears of: professional repercussions, external consequences, offending, and showing ignorance. These themes echo literature on teacher racial silence, further highlighting the need for intervention (Bolgatz, 2005; Castagno, 2008; Tatum, 2003).

Figure 2. Reasons for Colormuteness
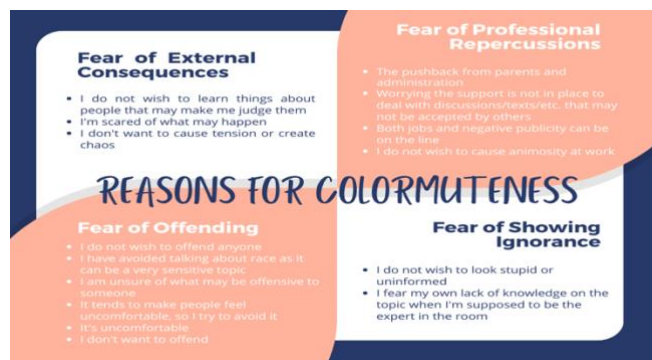
A common theme also emerged from participants' definitions of cultural competence, prompted by Question 35. Three (50%) specifically acknowledged awareness as an important aspect. Definitions also included diversity (Ariel), informed respect (Opal), and comfort discussing race (Icarus). Moule (2012) defined cultural competence in education as the capacity to teach culturally dissimilar students, which "entails developing certain personal and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, learning specific bodies of cultural knowledge, and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching" (p. 5). Although participants exhibited awareness, the absence of *cultural knowledge* and *skill set* within the definitions further legitimized my aim.

Intervention

Upon completing the baseline survey, participants received material for Module 1, commencing the 6-week intervention. During this phase, participants worked on broadening their knowledge and perspective by uncovering and acknowledging bias.

Module 1

The first focus group session presented evidence for two primary themes: our collective ability to navigate conversations on racial inequalities and the use of colormuteness.

Navigating Conversations. The group cited local and national headlines that involved racial discourse, demonstrating comfortable, knowledgeable participation in race-based conversations. We discussed at length the town's contentious proposal to widen a highway by relocating homes and splitting primarily Black communities as opposed to rerouting the highway through an opulent neighborhood. A related conversation concerned our shared experiences of being accused by parents and friends-of-friends of indoctrinating or shaming students through CRT. Our open discussion of these misguided, misjudged, and inequitable situations was noticeable; however, such events primarily happened outside of class, indicating how context may determine participants' willingness to engage.

Colormuteness. Contrasting evidence of participants' knowledge, awareness, and ability to converse about race, several statements indicated uneasiness with engaging in racial discourse in the classroom. Regarding the term *blackness*, Icarus stated: "I don't think I would feel comfortable using that term or having a conversation like this in my classroom with my students." Later in the discussion, I also admitted, "to some degree it feels impossible. I don't know that I can feel comfortable until the whole idea of race

changes for people." CoCo stated, "I don't want to be viewed as an oppressor," suggesting she's afraid to do or say anything that would imply she is.

The polarizing political climate and antagonism toward education and educators seemed to elicit the group's practice of colormuteness, exemplified by me stating, "I have this knowledge that I can actually do something about it, but education is under such an attack now that I feel like I *can't*. I'm muzzled by it." CoCo also commented on the politicization of education, noting, "You don't want to risk the drama; you don't want to end up on the news." Ariel brought up an interesting point that "we don't know where it can come from," and Luna commiserated, "We're all worried. We've all been in the hot seat before," indicating the degree to which we may attempt to avoid these conversations.

Module 2

In Module 2, I aimed to build on participants' awareness in Module 1 and facilitate constructive conversations involving race, mobilizing participants to engage in race-based dialogue. Analysis of the focus group surfaced three prominent themes: growth in racial and cultural competence, desire for action when recognizing wrongs, and fear.

Growth in Competence. Our conversation yielded personal and interpersonal evidence of our growing racial and cultural competence. For example, CoCo declared, "We've been sort of raised to not see color," but then agreed with Luna's response: "I've read a lot lately by Black authors that say we *do* need to see color." Luna suggested this awareness training "should be shared with our staff," envisioning scaled-up professional development. My responses diverted from work to home, questioning what I was teaching my children about race. My colleagues and I desired continued growth for our sake and for those in our proximity, suggesting that the path to cultural proficiency is not one you walk alone.

Acknowledging ongoing transformation also recognizes room for continued growth. For example, our conversation sifted through some pejorative terms and settled into a discussion about the use of "negro." Ariel observed that her students are no longer comfortable reading or using the term, and Opal commented that it makes her uncomfortable, attributing the discomfort to the word's having been "used in order to segregate, to discriminate . . . It was not something people used to identify themselves. It was an indicator of difference." The group seemed to discern the negative connotations associated with terms, acknowledging the semantic difference between color/person of color or autistic/person with autism because "you're a person first" (Ariel). For Opal, negative connotations require "think[ing] about the baggage that comes with the word. And just because it doesn't hurt your feelings doesn't mean that it doesn't hurt somebody else's feelings." Learning not to use harmful words stems from stepping into those conversations and learning how and why to address the words instead of avoiding them. This topic is especially apropos for English teachers. The *how* and *why* of words is our explicit domain, again reaffirming my research aim.

Desire for Action. As a second prominent theme from Focus Group 2, participants seemed to desire change, especially in response to racial and cultural wrongdoings. Opal emphasized a point from one of the readings: to consider a solution-oriented response in the face of injustice. Ariel questioned that possibility in today's climate: "How do we come up with solutions if there can't be

honest conversations?" Luna shared her belief that "schools should be the catalyst. I think that's where we start," which Ariel defended by saying:

> If we are charged with making the students college and career ready, do we not have, as part of our responsibility, putting topics out there so that when they find themselves in academic situations or in social situations or in line at the grocery store or reading something on their social media, that they can possibly respond in an informed way?

Here, Luna and Ariel showcase teachers' responsibility for educating not just on content but also on racial and cultural empathy.

Our conversation touched on national headlines, such as the misrepresentation of CRT, questionable educational policies in other states, the erasure of history, and book bans. Such external injustices are beyond our control, yet the group spent significant time discussing an example within our domain. Icarus shared how six Black students who signed up for weightlifting were dropped to accommodate White student–athletes. Responding to the group's dismay at the boys' treatment, Icarus pointed to our participation in the study, asking, "How can we let this be? It is, to me, the prime example of *this* conversation." We should have been able to intervene, yet recommended actions are noticeably absent from the discussion, suggesting a dependent belief that someone else would right the wrong. Knowing there should be change does not equate to being a change agent, yet if teachers are not willing to be change agents, who will be?

Fear. One explanation for teachers' unwillingness to act is fear—a resounding theme from Focus Group 1. Echoing our tendency not to respond to racially and/or culturally insensitive social media posts outside of school, Opal admitted to wondering if she would get in trouble for listening to the speeches I assigned during school. Similarly, CoCo indicated fear of backlash twice during the session: "How is it going to be perceived? Could it be taken out of context?" and "I would be afraid to be attacked by some kind of action group." In these instances, our group took the path of least resistance rather than speaking our minds about truth and against injustice.

In one particular instance, Icarus admitted her classroom colormuteness while illuminating how to change through dialogue:

> We keep [asking] what would you say in class? And I'm like: nothing. I'm not saying anything. I don't know what to say. 'There are three Black boys in this classroom.' I don't know if I could say that out loud. But since I heard my kids say it, now I'm saying it. What are y'all saying? 'How many people of color are here today?' I mean, how are we talking about that? Are you saying this Black author? Or are you saying this author of color?

Icarus became more comfortable using the word "Black" in class after hearing her students use it when referring to themselves and without offense. She also encouraged this discourse among colleagues by using the collective "we" and asking about our use of racial terminology in the classroom, thus showing us comfort may derive from more open discussions.

Module 3

Module 3 focused on applying skills learned in Module 2 directly to the classroom through curricular decisions and deliberate discussion. This focus gave rise to four themes: pessimism vs.

optimism, fear, modeling competent behaviors, and classroom impact.

Pessimism vs. Optimism. Echoing the uncertainty in previous sessions, the group also seemed ambivalent about racial classroom discourse. Opening the dialogue, Opal disclosed, "That's what I'm bad at . . . I don't know how I'm supposed to respond." Icarus suggested teachers have two paths involving race-related dialogue in the classroom: "initiate or ignite." To her, initiating means pausing the classroom agenda and inviting students into conversation, whereas inflaming emotions could cause ignition. In response, participants demonstrated either pessimistic or optimistic views of what would happen if we chose to initiate.

Icarus answered her own question pessimistically: "I always worry. I guess how I handle it is not choosing to ignite it, so I just move on." I concurred with my tendency to ignore "because you never know what the response will be." Our comments suggest a worst-case assumption that race-based conversations will backfire; therefore, we avoid them. In this pessimistic view, the risks of initiating are too great and the rewards too small.

Opal acknowledged the risks of such conversations but was more hopeful regarding potential benefits:

> There are ways to do it. I don't think that maybe all of us are super equipped to do it. I don't know *how* to do it. It's way harder, I think, to try and work within this system and still make a difference…But sometimes you can cause trouble and then 3 months later, it actually mattered to somebody.

Opal thus illustrates how teachers can identify the good that supersedes any risks, rendering the conversations worth igniting.

From an even more optimistic viewpoint, Ariel testified about her initial worry of introducing African-American authors in class, but students "all latched on to those two selections. It was so gratifying!" This anecdote illustrates the value of a diverse curriculum and of willingly initiating conversations, almost suggesting teachers are derelict in their duty if they do *not* ignite.

Fear. Once again, participants suggested fear stymies teachers. Ariel described the uncertainty resulting from controversial perspectives: "We don't know what they're going to go home and tell the parents they learned in English today." Other remarks included: "if there's kickback you could [be fired] because you're not following the curriculum" (CoCo); "our political climate has just influenced what is considered safe" (CoCo); "where is the actual line here, like, is it all just fear?" (Opal); "I would be so worried that would start an escalation" (Icarus); and "One thing we have to understand is that it can backfire. It can bring repercussions" (Icarus). This theme's frequency within and across focus groups suggests its prominence in our practice, dictating what we teach, how we teach it, what we say, and how we say it. Fear underpins teachers' colormuteness, reinforcing their need for racial and cultural competence. Despite our trepidation, there is consolation in the security we felt in acting and making curricular decisions together. For example, Opal responded "a million percent" when I asked participants if they would feel more comfortable taking classroom risks among a team of teachers.

Modeling. Countering participants' fear, they also demonstrated their capacity to model competent behaviors. The opening activity involved sharing a question, comment, or situation concerning race in the classroom. Every time a potentially contentious conversation was a discussion prompt, participants responded with a probing question rather than denial or deflection: "I guess I don't really understand [the student's] statement there, so I

feel like I'd be tempted to ask him to explain" (DiAnna); "Can you elaborate on that?" (Ariel); "What makes you say that?" (Icarus); and "What did I say or do that makes you feel that way?" (DiAnna). Requesting more details gives teachers more insight into a speaker's mindset, facilitating a response that will not escalate the situation. Thus, my colleagues and I seemed to understand the importance of opening constructive dialogue rather than avoiding or escalating.

Similarly, we demonstrated competence in our ability to recognize and de-escalate combative situations. Ariel discerned, "[Students] know the words are going to be explosive and sometimes they just want to get a rise out of you." She then shared her strategy to avoid escalation by offering to talk after school because "if it's really important to that student, they'll come by. If they're just trying to get a rise, they'll go on." Being able to read the situation, pausing to consider everyone's feelings, and establishing a more conducive atmosphere for honest communication characterize our cultural competence.

Impact. Throughout the session, participants directly referenced or alluded to the study's impact on their classroom, making such changes a fourth area of analysis. Suggesting a change in her perspective about *how* she teaches and *whom* she teaches, Opal said:

> In the article, they were talking about the most significant job that you can do if you want to be an anti-racist . . . is working with White kids, like, in opening the doors that way. And that was the most, probably the most impactful thing that I've read so far.

I agreed, addressing the sense of "necessity and urgency of engaging White students in conversations about race," a responsibility falling on teachers. However, we recognized that our White students are more socially aware than those who attended school years ago. I observed total agreement, verbal and nonverbal, when I said: "I feel like there's an opportunity here to make it not just what's 'out there,' but we can make it academic and school-worthy and worth studying and talking about." We thus identified a need to make our classrooms and curriculum more relevant to students, with several participants mentioning strategies they intended to implement: journaling, anonymous writing, and diversifying independent reading selections.

Opal encouraged meaningful, diverse literature for teaching fundamental racial lessons. Ariel added, "Good literature should disturb you. It's supposed to make you itch and make you think," critiquing "this world where things are so sanitized that there is no itching." These comments suggest that teachers should approach curricular decisions not based on student comfort but on what will make their students more empathetic and culturally competent. The desire to teach more diverse literature suggests growing awareness of the topics we discussed and application to the classroom as compared to prior sessions.

Individual Outcomes

The third and final phase involved a follow-up survey akin to the preliminary survey. Constructive in their own right, the responses also illuminated the efficacy of the intervention through comparison against the pre-intervention survey. As in Phase 1, I analyzed the open-ended responses to assess participants' cultural competence levels. As Table 2 shows, 83% ($n = 5$) demonstrated cultural competence and 17% ($n = 1$) demonstrated cultural pre-competence.

Table 2. Endline Cultural Competence

Participant	Level
Ariel	cultural competence
CoCo	cultural competence
DiAnna	cultural competence
Icarus	cultural competence
Luna	cultural competence
Opal	cultural pre-competence

Group Outcomes

As in Phase 1, my qualitative analysis of the endline survey focused on the open-ended questions aligned with my aims. In response to Question 32 (Do you feel more equipped to talk about race in your classroom?), most participants were affirmative but nevertheless hesitant. Luna wrote, "Yes, but still not enough," and I responded, "Somewhat," explaining, "I can't say that I feel extremely knowledgeable or comfortable, but I also feel like I'm not as scared or would not actively try to divert the conversation . . . in my classroom." Participants also seemed to value the independent assignments. Opal and CoCo specifically referenced how the TED talks provided vocabulary and strategies for conducting class discussions about race.

Similarly, Question 33 asked if participants noticed a change in their teaching. A yes response (50%; $n = 3$; Ariel, CoCo, and Luna) indicated feeling more aware and honest, adapting terminology, and being more inclusive toward students and the curriculum. Maybe/a little (33%; $n = 2$; Icarus and DiAnna) alluded to feeling more confident, less afraid or hesitant, and willing to change or apply new learning. One response of no (17%, Opal) indicated no specific changes but did express hope for future changes.

Question 34 asked participants to report any changes to their curriculum. Two (33%; CoCo and DiAnna) had added a racially diverse text, two (33%; Opal and Ariel) acknowledged changing their approach to an existing text, and two (33%; Icarus and Luna) reported no changes. Documented and desired changes to the curriculum are worthwhile, no matter how small, whereas the "no" responses merit a deeper look. Luna indicated that district demands and course pacing prevented her from answering affirmatively. Likewise, Icarus responded that her "team needs to make changes," pointing to external factors.

Considering Question 33 and Question 34 in conjunction was illuminating, with the first question highlighting *how* students and content were taught and the second looking specifically at *what*. As Table 3 illustrates, each participant provided a unique combination of responses, reflecting the intervention's variable impact. Although a shared experience can have multiple interpretations, this evidence also reiterates the complexity of my problem of practice. There is no one-size-fits-all model to becoming more racially and culturally competent. When educators commit to walking that journey, the ripple effect of their impact can be multifaceted.

Question 35, as on the baseline survey, asked respondents to define the concept to gauge participant growth and understanding of cultural competence. Post-intervention definitions were generally longer and more in-depth. Awareness, which three participants mentioned, remained a prominent theme, while celebrating differences was a new pattern in the data. This theme manifested in acknowledging and understanding differences (Icarus), effectively communicating with others outside one's racial/cultural group (DiAnna), willingly participating in culturally diverse situations (Opal), and considering other perspectives (Ariel). Other noteworthy words and phrases include "honest conversations" (Luna), "a skill, not an attribute, that can grow" (DiAnna), "empathy and consideration" (Opal), and "appropriate sensitivity" (Ariel). These definitions align more with Moule's (2012) view of educational cultural competence as the awareness and sensitivities, cultural knowledge, and cross-cultural teaching skills that determine a teacher's facility for educating culturally diverse students.

Lastly, I compared the final levels from both surveys to detect any movement along the continuum. As Table 4 shows, half of the participants (50%; $n = 3$; Ariel, Luna, and Opal) exhibited no change in their cultural competence. The other half (50%; $n = 3$; Coco, DiAnna, and Icarus) exhibited increased cultural competence.

Table 3. Responses to Questions 33 and 34

Participant	Question 33: change in approach	Question 34: change in content
Ariel	yes	changed approach to current content
CoCo	yes	yes
DiAnna	maybe/a little	yes
Icarus	maybe/a little	no
Luna	yes	no
Opal	no	changed approach to current content

Table 4. Change in Cultural Competence

Participant	Convergent baseline	Convergent endline	Movement
Ariel	competence	competence	no change
CoCo	pre-competence	competence	increase
DiAnna	pre-competence	competence	increase
Icarus	pre-competence	competence	increase
Luna	competence	competence	no change
Opal	pre-competence	pre-competence	no change

DISCUSSION

To address my research questions, I looked across datasets, determining the overall impacts of the intervention.

Question 1: Factors Contributing to Racial Silence in Our Classrooms

My data suggests exposure to racial and cultural dialogue and literature can make teachers more comfortable with implementation. However, few participants admitted to teaching diverse literature or engaging in racial discourse, underscoring the need for the study.

Baseline survey responses suggested four fears underlying participants' colormuteness, but fear of professional repercussions dominated during the focus groups. Participants expressed uncertainty and discomfort in their skills, yet colormuteness may have more to do with willingness than knowledge or awareness, feeding their primary fear. They deemed external improbabilities more significant, making decisions based on potential reactions of individuals outside the classroom.

Question 2: How Targeted Intervention Impacted Our Cultural Competence

Three participants originally at the pre-competence level increased to competence, two initially at the competence level stayed the same, and one at the pre-competence level stayed the same. The evident increase could be attributed to our participation in the study and exposure to texts, videos, and focus group discussions on race and culture. Although the results are inconclusive, the 50% who retained their cultural competence level may have increased their competence after all; lack of change in level does not preclude individual growth. Just as participants' definition and understanding of cultural competence expanded post-intervention, their self-descriptions also denote a positive shift (see Table 5). Thus, their growth in knowledge and improved self-image suggest that the intervention succeeded.

Table 5. Responses to Question 36

Participant	Baseline	Endline
Ariel	I work hard to understand all sides of any given issue or situation and to keep any potential biases at bay.	I feel optimistic and empowered to respond to issues of race and culture in the classroom albeit I still have plenty to learn!
CoCo	I would describe my level of racial/cultural competence as Moderate, but I would love to learn more.	My level of racial/cultural competence has been raised as the topic has been at the forefront of my awareness.
DiAnna	Low to Medium. I am becoming more aware and knowledgeable and interested in learning more.	Growing. Better than before.
Icarus	beginner to intermediate	much improved
Luna	Still learning…	Evolving. Long way to go.
Opal	I am sensitive to racial disparities but I do not feel confident saying that I am a highly culturally competent person.	Medium-low. I could be more educated for sure. I need to take the time to really educate myself.

Question 3: How Focusing on Teacher Cultural Competence Affected Our Classrooms

During Module 3, I expected participants to apply new learning and awareness in the classroom. Participants demonstrated deep self-reflection on their professional habits and intentional use of these lessons. These connections suggest that increased teachers' cultural competence can directly impact classrooms. From new strategies to new texts to new considerations of terms, participants were willing to adapt their practices to be more inclusive, diverse, and accepting. This willingness could radically shift instruction if teachers commit to being change agents.

When asked about the potential impact on their classroom, participants offered practical strategies they were willing to try, such as journaling, anonymous writing, and offering diverse literature. During Focus Group 3, participants cited independent reading as a way to diversify the curriculum and promote student choice and exploration of culture and race. Any of these steps would offer time

and a safe space for students to articulate their thoughts and are admirable ways to cultivate inclusive classrooms. However, such strategies are solitary, suggesting a hands-off approach on the teacher's part. Neither hiding writing through anonymity nor independently reading diverse texts constitutes discussing race, permitting colormuteness to persist.

Nevertheless, progress has to begin somewhere, and my study demonstrated our initial steps toward racially and culturally inclusive classrooms. As teachers grow in competence, classroom impact will stem from their intentional action, beyond mere willingness or desire. Growth in competence should correspond with growth in confidence, but teachers must *act* for classrooms to be conducive to honest discussions about race. Otherwise, misinformation, hatred, fear, racism, confusion, and oppression will continue to reign. The responsibility falls on teachers. If we do not act, who will?

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Because race and whiteness permeate society, my action research holds insight for fellow practitioners. First, teachers should commit to collective growth in cultural competence. Cultural awareness implies learned behaviors, warranting intentional effort to improve. The cultural competence framework (Cross et al., 1989) assesses individual or organizational competence, yet progression along the continuum need not occur in solitude. In fact, Lindsey et al. (2009) encouraged professional learning teams, mirroring my participants' productive discussions and altruistic desire for others to develop cultural competence.

Second, teachers must investigate their curriculum and instruction, critically examining what they teach, why, and how. Diversifying curriculum acknowledges and celebrates differences among students and in content. Moreover, intentional conversations about race are opportunities to teach students beyond the normative perspective. Classroom practice should combat inequities and promote social justice; however, teachers must first abandon their fear.

School leaders can mitigate teachers' fear by examining the policies, environment, and administrative support they provide. Fear of professional consequences was a dominant reason for my participants' colormuteness. Assurances from above would likely ease this reported fear, provided administrators are also culturally competent and committed to continual growth. Operating outside the classroom does not render school leadership immune to whiteness and racism. In fact, administrators are arguably schools' first line of defense against external complaints or opposition, which may materialize as teachers adopt antiracist practices.

Furthermore, school leaders should provide research-based, antiracist professional development. My participants' desire for such opportunities echoes Ward's (2013) call for administrators to "transform their staffs by fully engaging them in difficult conversations, exercises, and professional development that move them along the cultural proficiency continuum" (p. 28). A school-wide series is necessary to transform school culture rather than a 1-hour, 1-day, one-group, or one-department session.

IMPLEMENTATION

As Figure 3 illustrates, Kemmis and McTaggart's (1988) action research model emphasizes a continuous spiral through multiple

cycles, while cultural competence follows a linear progression. Both models reflect my ultimate goal of cultural proficiency in my thinking and teaching. Educational action researchers conclude one cycle with a revised plan that moves the teacher and their students forward (Herr & Anderson, 2015). In my case, this study reinforced my commitment to antiracist practice, illuminating several means of applying the findings to create a more equitable classroom. Specifically, I resolved to being intentional about classroom and curricular decisions that thwart whiteness and celebrate diversity, such as diversifying literature through choice novels *and* whole-class novel studies, engaging and even prompting racial discourse, and critically examining my pedagogy. To remain cognizant of my fear and take steps to curb it, I also aspired to heed my own advice of choosing action and discourse over negligence and silence. Specifically, I vowed to find others to share in my cultural competence journey. Changes will be more feasible if I allow myself to influence and be influenced by others.

Figure 3. Action Research and Cultural Competence
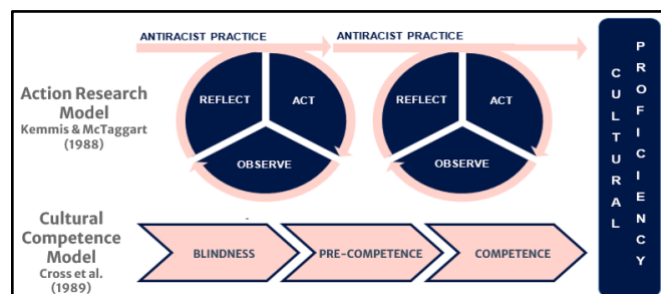
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESEARCH

At its core, action research prioritizes "making a situation such as a classroom or whole school system better" (Bradbury et al., 2019, p. 7), prompting this study on colormuteness and teacher cultural competence. Considering the necessarily small, homogenous sample, future researchers may wish to include different gender, racial, and/or cultural perspectives. Future research could also investigate whether the problem exists in other departments, schools, and districts. Finally, given teachers' fear and school leaders' capacity to abate it, examining administrators' cultural competence and professional support may be necessary. Investigating antiracist support systems in place for teacher activists could yield school-wide growth toward cultural competence and more longitudinal insights about racial discourse and diversity in the classroom—goals worth striving for at every level of education but only achievable if teachers answer the call to act.

REFERENCE

Ansell, A. (2008). Critical race theory. In R. T. Schaefer (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of race, ethnicity, and society* (pp. 344-346). Sage Publications. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412963879.n138

Berchini. C. (2019). Reconceptualizing whiteness in English education: Failure, fraughtness, and accounting for context. *English Education*, *51*(2), 151–181.

Bolgatz, J. (2005). Teachers initiating conversations about race and racism in a high school class. *Multicultural Perspectives*, *7*(3), 28–35. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327892mcp0703_6

Boyd, A. S., & Glazier, J. A. (2017). The choreography of conversation: An exploration of collaboration and difficult discussions in cross disciplinary teacher discourse communities. *The High School Journal*, *100*(2), 130–145. https://doi.org/10.1353/hsj.2017.0003

Bradbury, H., Lewis, R., & Embury, D. C. (2019). Education action research: With and for the next generation. In C. A. Mertler (Ed.), *The Wiley handbook of action research in education* (pp. 7-28). Wiley.

Castagno, A. E. (2008). "I don't want to hear that!": Legitimating whiteness through silence in schools. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly*, *39*(3), 314–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1492.2008.00024.x

Coates, T.-N. (2015). *Between the world and me*. Random House.

Coles-Ritchie, M., & Smith, R. R. (2017). Taking the risk to engage in race talk: Professional development in elementary schools. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, *21*(2), 172–186. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2016.1193562

Cross, T., Bazron, B., Dennis, K., & Isaacs, M. (1989). *Towards a culturally competent system of care*. Georgetown University Child Development Center.

DiAngelo, R. (2011). White fragility. *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy*, *3*(3), 54–70. http://libjournal.uncg.edu/ijcp/article/view/249/116

Efron, S. E., & Ravid, R. (2013). *Action research in education: A practical guide.* Guilford Press.

Ellsworth, E. (1989). Why doesn't this feel empowering? Working through the repressive myths of critical pedagogy. *Harvard Educational Review*, *59*(3), 297–324. https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.59.3.058342114k266250

Forsgren, L. (2017). Breaking down the "walls of whiteness": Strategies for teaching about race and social justice in a "very black year." *Theatre Topics*, *27*(2), 151–162. https://doi.org/10.1353/tt.2017.0026

Frankenberg, R. (1993). *White women, race matters: The social construction of whiteness*. University of Minnesota Press.

Giroux, H. A. (1997). Racial politics and the pedagogy of whiteness. In M. Hill (Ed.), *Whiteness: A critical reader* (pp. 49-61). Sage Publications.

Haviland, V. S. (2008). "Things get glossed over": Rearticulating the silencing power of whiteness in education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, *59*(1), 40–54. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022487107310751

Herr, K., & Anderson, G. L. (2015). *The action research dissertation: A guide for students and faculty* (2nd ed.). Sage Publications.

Howard, T. C., & Gay, G. (2010). *Why race and culture matter in schools: Closing the achievement gap in America's classrooms*. Teachers College Press.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (1988). *The action research planner*. Deakin University.

Khalifa, M., Dunbar, C., & Douglas, T. (2013). Derrick Bell, CRT, and educational leadership 1995–present. *Race Ethnicity and Education*, *16*(4), 489–513. https://doi.org/10.1080/13613324.2013.817770

Ladson-Billings, G. (1998). Just what is critical race theory and what's it doing in a nice field like education? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *11*(1), 7–24. https://doi.org/10.1080/095183998236863

Lindsey, R. B., Robins, K., & Terrell, R. D. (2009). *Cultural proficiency: A manual for school leaders*. Corwin.

McMahon, C. T. (2015). The pages of whiteness: Theory, evidence, and the American immigration debate. *Race & Class*, *56*(4), 40–55. https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396814567407

Merriam, S. B., & Tisdell, E. J. (2016). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation* (4th ed.). Jossey-Bass.

Milner, H. R., & Laughter, J. C. (2015). But good intentions are not enough: Preparing teachers to center race and poverty. *The Urban Review*, *47*(2), 341–363. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11256-014-0295-4

Moule, J. (2012). *Cultural competence: A primer for educators* (2nd ed.). Cengage Learning.

Muhammad, G. E., & Mosley, L. T. (2021). Why we need identity and equity learning in literacy practices: Moving research, practice, and policy forward. *Language Arts*, *98*(4), 189–196.

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019a, February). *Indicator 6: Elementary and Secondary Enrollment*. U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/indicator_rbb.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019b, February). *Spotlight A: Characteristics of Public School Teachers by Race/Ethnicity*. U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/raceindicators/spotlight_a.asp

Owen, D. S. (2007). Towards a critical theory of whiteness. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, *33*(2), 203–222. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453707074139

Pollock, M. (2009). *Colormute: Race talk dilemmas in an American school*. Princeton University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781400826124

Schaeffer, K. (2021, December 10). *America's public school teachers are far less racially and ethnically diverse than their students*. Pew Research Center. https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/12/10/americas-public-school-teachers-are-far-less-racially-and-ethnically-diverse-than-their-students/

Sox, D. (2023). *If not me, then who?: A study of racial and cultural competence in a high school English department* [Doctoral dissertation, University of South Carolina]. Scholar Commons. https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/etd/7320

Tatum, B. D. (2003). *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the cafeteria? And other conversations about race*. Basic Books.

Vande Berg, M., Paige, R. M., & Lou, K. H. (2012). Student learning abroad: Paradigms and assumptions. In M. Vande Berg, R. M. Paige, & K. H. Lou (Eds.), *Student learning abroad: What our students are leaning, what they're not, and what we can do about it* (pp. 3–28). Stylus.

Vavrus, M. (2002). *Transforming the multicultural education of teachers: Theory, research, and practice*. Teachers College Press.

Ward, C. J. (2013). Addressing stereotypes by moving along the continuum of cultural proficiency. *Voices from the Middle*, *20*(3), 27–31.