

James Madison University

**JMU Scholarly Commons**

---

Educational Specialist, 2020-current

The Graduate School

---

5-11-2023

## Representation is everything: The impact of diversity in literature on the racial identity and psychological safety of Black youth

Zaakirah B. Fulani

*James Madison University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/edspec202029>



Part of the [Education Commons](#), [Psychology Commons](#), and the [Sociology Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Fulani, Zaakirah B., "Representation is everything: The impact of diversity in literature on the racial identity and psychological safety of Black youth" (2023). *Educational Specialist, 2020-current*. 65.

<https://commons.lib.jmu.edu/edspec202029/65>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the The Graduate School at JMU Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Educational Specialist, 2020-current by an authorized administrator of JMU Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [dc\\_admin@jmu.edu](mailto:dc_admin@jmu.edu).

Representation is Everything: The Impact of Diversity in Literature on the Racial Identity and  
Psychological Safety of Black Youth

Zaakirah B. Fulani

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY

In

Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the degree of

Educational Specialist

Department of Graduate Psychology

July 2023

FACULTY COMMITTEE:

Committee Chair: Tiffany Hornsby, Ph.D.

COMMITTEE MEMBERS/READERS:

Tammy Gilligan, Ph.D.

Debi Kipps-Vaughan Psy.D.

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	iii
Introduction.....	1
Background	
Problem Statement	
Statement of Need	
Review of the Literature.....	3
Cultural Relevancy: What Is It and Why Is It Important?	
Psychological Safety and Academic Performance: How Are They Related?	
Purpose of Current Study	
Research Questions	
Methodology.....	10
Research Design	
Participants	
Procedure	
Instrumentation	
Data Analysis	
Rigor and Trustworthiness	
Positionality	
Results.....	17
Psychological Safety: Representation	
Belongingness: Comfortability and Connection	
Racial Identity: Pride and Inspiration	
Academic Achievement/Engagement: Meaning	
Academic Achievement/Engagement: Interest	
Discussion.....	27
Appendices.....	33
Appendix A: Consent to Participate in Research	
Appendix B: Introduction Script	
Appendix D: Semi-Structured Interview Questions	
References.....	40

## **Abstract**

This study addresses the issue of U.S. schools often acting replicating the same racist/discriminatory practices that play out on a national level, resulting in school being an unsafe environment for Black and other REM students. A lack of psychological safety in schools, according to research, can lead to decreased academic achievement and engagement, feelings of stress and anxiety, and a negative school experience. This study proposes that using culturally relevant texts in curriculums can enhance psychological safety for Black students in order to cultivate safe school environments for REM students. Using an analysis of qualitative data from focus group discussions with high school students on feelings of safety and overall student perceptions towards school in the absence and presence of culturally relevant texts, this study aims to show the extent to which diversified classroom texts impact the school experience for Black students. Themes that emerged from focus group data suggested that participants felt a sense of representation, comfortability, and connection in classrooms where culturally relevant texts enhance psychological safety and belongingness. In conclusion, this project discovered a possible link between psychological safety being constructed in the classroom and the use of culturally relevant texts in reading curriculums for Black students. When schools and teachers show how they see and value student populations who have been historically ignored or persecuted, they prove to REM students that they are safe, loved, and valued.

## **Introduction**

In Black families and communities across America, it is commonly known and felt that a main objective of Black parents is to keep their children safe from harm. Many Black parents understand that in a country marred by police brutality, antiblackness, racial violence, slavery, and injustice, their children face threats that they may not be able to see each time they leave the safety of their home. For example, I recently had a discussion with friends, who were also raised in households of color, in which we realized that the notion of ‘Don’t’ was something that underscored childhood for all of us. For racially and ethnically minoritized (REM) children, being told by parents “Don’t walk where I can’t see you,” “Don’t lose your temper,” or “Don’t argue with authority” was commonplace because being careful of the way we are perceived by others was paramount to safety. Our parents understood that they were protecting us from the consequences associated with being Black in a country where Blackness is often considered both dangerous and disposable. For Black children growing up, these ‘Don’t’s’ essentially tells us something that every Black child eventually learns, that the world has different rules for us and, most importantly, that the world is not as safe for us as it is for White people.

Proof of the potential danger facing many Black communities and families was on full display as the deaths of multiple Black people were filmed and shared widely on social media in the past few years. As attention was drawn to injustice in the criminal justice system, the disparate and sometimes harmful treatment of Black children in schools must also be addressed. In May 2020, a 15-year-old Black student was jailed after a judge found that not completing her schoolwork during shelter-in-place and virtual schooling was a violation of her parole (Cohen, 2020). A report from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights revealed that Black preschoolers are 3.5 times more likely to be suspended than their White peers, are

disproportionately expelled from school, and, along with Latinx students, are more than twice as likely to be arrested or deal with law enforcement throughout their K-12 years (DOE, 2016).

These examples show how detrimental racial bias and lack of cultural competency in schools can be to REM students as well as how differently Black students are treated when it comes to discipline and compassionate support compared to their peers.

As previously stated, Black children learn early on that the world at large is not always a safe place for people who look like them and is instead a minefield that they must painstakingly learn to navigate. However unjust, visceral, and urgent this issue is, it is not one that a single person or group of people can solve. What educators and school systems do have the power to address is the racial biases and practices that negatively impact Black students by taking steps to make school communities more inclusive and less impacted by anti-Black and racist perspectives, practices, and policies. If students are aware that their Blackness makes the world outside of their home and community unsafe for them, then they must be given reasons to believe that their school is a part of their community and is, therefore, safe.

This shift is not only vital to the lived experiences of Black students but may also be essential to their academic success and efficacy considering research indicating that a sense of belonging is critical to learning (Gangi, 2008). Humans are social beings who are hard-wired for group membership and, as existing research suggests, when mental resources are devoted to monitoring one's environment for signs of rejection, students are unable to simultaneously use those resources to comprehend academic content (Walton & Cohen, 2007). Unless society expects Black students and other ethnically diverse students to overcome their evolutionary nature and somehow be able to juggle constant environmental monitoring with classroom learning, school systems must take steps to do more than attempt to protect students from unjust

practices. Educational communities must actively create a targeted and intentionally inclusive environment where Black students can have intersecting aspects of their identities affirmed, feel that their Blackness is valued instead of feared, and feel comfortable enough to be their whole selves within the classroom. To do this, intentional safe spaces that decenter eurocentrism and affirm identities within and beyond racial confines must be created in our school and classrooms. There are a number of practices that schools and teachers can implement to create more inclusive and safe environments; however, the current study investigates the relationship of diversity in literature on racial identity and psychological safety of Black youth.

### **Review of Literature**

This paper begins with a review of relevant literature, organized by theme, that focuses on evaluating the practice of diversifying classroom reading materials as it relates to enhancing feelings of belongingness and safety among Black students, increasing reading and academic engagement among Black students, and fostering a more empathetic and caring school community.

### **Cultural Relevancy: What Is It and Why Is It Important?**

Oftentimes, books are a child's first peak into the world around them as well as far-away worlds that they may never experience. Children read books, absorbing their images and lessons, and they begin to build a more dynamic understanding of what life looks like through different eyes and how their own life fits into the larger human experience. In an essay about the importance of culturally relevant texts in classrooms, Bishop (1990) asserts that readers often actively seek out mirrors of themselves and their experiences in books as a means of self-affirmation. Mirrors are books that reflect the life experiences and culture of the reader, while windows are books that allow children to see into unfamiliar worlds that they may never have

experienced. Bishop argues that when REM children read window books that either omit them entirely or present “distorted, negative, or laughable” images of them, these children are learning that they are not valued in the society to which they belong (Bishop, 1990, p.1). In order to flip this harmful narrative and teach Black students that their presence, experiences, and contributions matter, it is important that their teachers make efforts to normalize and humanize Blackness in the classroom by highlighting mirror literature that showcases the myriad of Black experiences.

Books that are culturally relevant are books that feature characters and problems similar to the lives and identities of the reader (Feger, 2006). The utilization of culturally relevant texts in classrooms have many benefits for both ethnically diverse and White students, a few of which will be discussed later in this paper. Wynter-Hoyte and Smith (2020) conducted a study on the effect of using texts centered around the African diaspora on the humanization of Blackness in early education. After developing a diverse classroom curriculum that focused on countering anti-Black practices, as a way of disrupting the default narrative that privileges Whiteness in schools, the researchers found that a more positive racial identity had a marked effect (Wynter-Hoyte and Smith, 2020).

By reading and adapting the book *Hey, Black Child* (Perkins, 2017) to feature pictures of the students themselves, studying African royalty such as Hatshepsut of Egypt and Mansa Musa, as well as using ancient African Ma’at principles (i.e., truth, justice, balance, order, compassion, harmony, and reciprocity) to guide behavioral expectations, the all-Black class of first-grade students in Wynter-Hoyte and Smith’s (2020) study were found to have a stronger appreciation for their Blackness as they began to associate more positive traits with their Black identity. Not only did these students begin to unlearn the negative stereotypes around Black and African



people by reading self-affirming fiction books about African royalty that emphasized the greatness from which Blackness descended, but they were also able to experience self-love and admiration of their racial identity in a way that is rarely encouraged in a traditional eurocentric curriculum.

Similar to Wynter-Hoyte and Smith, researcher Gangi (2008) discusses the ways in which culturally relevant texts are important to readers of color and investigates how traditional literacy books advantage White children while marginalizing REM children. Referencing Bishop's previously mentioned "mirrors and windows" analogy regarding literature and using a qualitative content analysis, Gangi sampled literacy books, textbooks, booklists, author awards, book fairs, book order forms, and children's literature books being used across the country, concluding that there are significantly more windows than mirrors for REM children than for White students (Bishop, 1990; Gangi, 2008). From prestigious author awards with committees made up of mostly White, middle-class citizens and whose winners are relied on heavily by teachers to decide classroom reading material, to advertised reading lists with authors of color only comprising 2% of the total, Gangi discovered a striking need for the inclusion of multicultural, interactive, and culturally responsive reading materials.

Gangi's (2008) research highlighted the tendency for White teachers to choose books that they themselves resonate with, rather than selecting books that reflect the identities of *all* the students in the classroom. She also discussed how traditional mirror books set White students up for success while hindering students of color with her assertion that mirror books are necessary for the development of proficient reading skills. Readers who can make text-to-self connections become proficient readers faster than children who cannot. Thus, White children "whose experiences are depicted in books can make many more text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-

world connections than can children of color” (Gangi, 2008, p. 30). Much like the theoretical basis of Wynter-Hoyte and Smith’s work, Gangi highlighted the severe need for more culturally diverse texts in classrooms, provided insight into the factors that influence this dearth of multicultural materials, and discussed the unjust educational impact of this issue. Together, these researchers show the importance of culturally relevant texts, the dangers of eurocentric curriculums, and the benefits of culturally relevant teachings on the identity development of Black students.

### **Psychological Safety and Academic Performance: How Are They Related?**

Psychological safety can be understood as the belief that one is “able to show and employ oneself without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career” (Kahn, 1990, p. 708). When considering this phenomenon in the context of Black students, we must also think about the state of a Black student's psychological safety in a classroom that they do not believe to be a safe place, and how that may impact their school experience. Musa et. al (2016) conducted a study in Gombe, Nigeria to determine student perceptions of psychological safety in their school environments in relation to their emotional development and academic success. Researchers administered a questionnaire to 239 secondary school students to assess feelings of psychological safety, which was found to be insecure among participants and indicates that students do not feel safe, supported, or secure in their school environment. Many schools in the Gombe region were reported to lack a culture of cooperation between teachers and students, and also failed to teach emotional and social skills to promote meaningful relationships and trust between students. While not conducted in the U.S. with its culture of racial relations, the implications of this study bears significant relevance to the experience of Black Americans, as well as other minoritized groups, discussed in this study in that it displays the replicated impact of eurocentrism and white

colonization. Even across distinct countries and cultures, the psychological effects of colonialism among groups subjected to it often share themes and can be used to draw conclusions about the system of colonialism at large.

Supporting earlier findings that psychological safety supports academic learning, the next study revealed that low or insecure feelings of psychological safety were significantly and negatively correlated with both emotional development and academic performance. Essentially, students who did not feel psychologically safe in their school, due to an unsupportive school culture, also seemed to struggle with emotional development or the handling of unpleasant emotions, which impeded their academic performance; a connection that was also asserted in previous studies that a safe environment is necessary for student growth and academic learning (Musa et. al, 2016; Duke & Stein, 2001). This study clearly indicates that when students can sense potential threats and do not feel supported or safe in school, they also have difficulty managing the negative emotions (such as hopelessness and anxiety) that follows their unease, perhaps because they do not feel safe enough to express those feelings. This, in turn, can obstruct students from succeeding academically by making it difficult for them to believe they are capable of overcoming hardship. For Black students who are already marginalized in and outside of school, this cycle may be even more salient. If we want students to reach their personal and academic potential, educators must create a school environment where REM students feel psychologically safe and supported.

A 2021 case study also draws attention to the importance of a healthy and supportive school climate in order to enhance feelings of belongingness and wellbeing among Black students. Reginal (2021) studied instances of unfair disciplinary practices and other racial injustices at majority-White schools as he discussed the phenomenon of a racial school climate

gap. This gap can be understood as a difference in student perceptions around the safety and climate of their school, which can exist in varying degrees within racially diverse schools. According to Reginal, Black, and Hispanic students often report less positive school climate perceptions than their White counterparts, which may lead to the development of the same negative racial identities that Wynter-Hoyte and Smith were attempting to counteract in their research. The current study called for school officials to address the racial school climate gap by centering equity, diversifying teaching staff, and fostering a fair and nondiscriminatory school culture.

Reginal's mention of paying special attention to the hiring and training of teachers may also be important, as suggested by a study conducted in the UK on the role of a university professor's interpersonal characteristics, such as authenticity and his relationship with students, and how it impacted psychological safety and academic performance in higher education. The researchers distributed a questionnaire to undergraduate students and found that when students believed their professors to be trustworthy and authentic leaders who behaved in a way that was consistent with beliefs and values espoused by the professor, it had a positive impact on academic performance (Soares & Lopes, 2017). Additionally, high networking density, or classes where students are supportive of each other and form genuine connections, were also shown to be positively correlated with better performance.

According to the research described in this review, there are number of important factors that should be present in a classroom in order to promote psychological safety, such as building trust in teachers, strengthening connections and friendships with classmates, encouraging self-efficacy and emotional development, enhancing a positive school climate, and promoting nondiscriminatory disciplinary practices. Each reviewed study discussing psychological safety

asserted its importance to the academic and personal health of students, consistently finding psychological safety to be tied to positive outcomes in school and to negative outcomes when it is absent. Cultural relevancy in instructional texts was also discussed as a necessary practice for affirming identities, enhancing belongingness, as well as fostering academic success among REM students. What is lacking in the literature is research that combines the concepts of culturally relevant texts with psychological safety, using the former to enhance and support the latter.

### Purpose of the Current Study

According to the literature, culturally relevant texts help REM students to feel represented and valued in a school environment while psychological safety allows them to feel protected and trusting of those that they share space with. The current study will attempt to fill the gap in the literature by using the ideas of both racial representation in classroom texts and psychological safety to show how classrooms that normalize the diaspora of Blackness in the curriculum while also ensuring that Black students feel free from judgement and negative perceptions may yield benefits such as higher degrees of school engagement, increased feelings of belongingness, decreased stress and anxiety, better academic performance, and a more positive school experience.

Research shows both culturally relevant texts and psychological safety have a profound impact on the performance and experiences of children in schools, but little to no research exists on how these concepts interact and how they can be actively cultivated to create a safe school environment. The purpose of this narrative inquiry study is to investigate the relationship between racial representation in class texts and psychological safety in Black students. Using an analysis of qualitative data on feelings of safety and overall student perceptions towards school

in the absence and presence of culturally relevant texts, this study aims to show the extent to which classroom texts impact the school experience for Black students. The research questions are stated as follows:

1. How does the use and/or non-use of racially representative texts (i.e., texts that center Black characters, experiences, and themes) by classroom teachers influence feelings of psychological safety, belongingness, and racial identity in Black students?
2. Are the positive impacts of psychological safety in Black students also associated with higher degrees of school engagement and academic performance?

The current study attempts to answer these questions with the use of a facilitated student focus group that encouraged group discussions around these topics and analysis of relevant themes. Such themes formulate a cohesive narrative on school experiences for Black students in schools that will be explored and discussed as it relates to the stated research questions. It is hypothesized that students in classrooms that use racially representative texts will be related to increased feelings of psychological safety, belongingness, and positive racial identity development in Black students. Furthermore, these benefits will also be related to improved academic performance and increased school engagement.

## **Method**

### **Research Design**

Because this study depends largely on the shared and lived experiences of Black students from diverse public-school systems, a qualitative narrative inquiry approach through the use of focus groups is an appropriate approach. Researcher Liamputtong describes a focus group as not just a group interview, but rather, an opportunity for a group of people to gather and discuss a specific issue of concern (Liamputtong, 2018). A focus group setting allows participants to share

their individual opinions, which are of interest to a researcher, as well as to build on each other's responses to form a deeper understanding of a given topic, which can be even more meaningful in response to a researchers' question.

Another important piece of a focus group is that participants are homogeneous in some way that is of interest to the researcher and share social and cultural backgrounds. Liamputtong posits that when focus group members share backgrounds and have similar lived experiences, they will feel more comfortable sharing their honest opinions and talking openly amongst each other, which will yield more meaningful data and perspectives for the researcher. In essence, homogeneity in focus groups requires the researcher to "bring together people who have enough in common to allow the development of a productive conversational dynamic" (Liamputtong, 2011). Because this study is investigating the lived experiences of Black students, the use of focus groups is the most appropriate vehicle to encourage meaningful discussion with like-minded members who are likely to understand each other's perspective due to shared lived experiences. Focus groups allow participants to freely discuss their thoughts and feelings around belongingness, psychological safety, and identity development in school in a collective sense rather than an individual one. This design helps answer the research questions in a way that accurately reflects the experiences of the target group by honoring and validating their unique perspectives.

### **Participants**

Two students who recently attended high school in an urban community within a southeastern state were recruited using word-of-mouth and snowball techniques to participate in a 60-minute focus group discussion about their high school experiences, specifically in relation to feelings of psychological safety and if/how racially representative texts are able to foster such

feelings. Participants included one 19-year-old female (a rising college sophomore who attended a large, diverse public school in an urban area) and 18-year-old one male (a rising senior attending a small alternative high school for talented students from low-income and minority families) who identified as Black/African American and reported taking at least one English class in high school that included texts focusing on the experiences and perspectives of REM populations. These were classes where the curriculum included textbooks, novels, and other classroom materials written by Black authors, highlighting Black characters and their unique experiences at the center of the story, and presenting relevant concepts from a culturally responsive perspective. Both participants reported taking classes such as these in high school and, during a focus group, were asked to reflect on and discuss, in detail, their experiences in these classrooms and how they perceived the use of culturally relevant texts to have impacted their overall school and/or classroom experience.

### **Procedure**

Following a review and approval of research methods by the James Madison University Institutional Review Board, participants were recruited using word-of-mouth and snowball recruitment methods. Informed consent forms were signed by participants, who were both age 18 or older, before participating in virtual focus groups (see Appendix A). This allowed the participants to understand the purpose of the study, their role in it, and their right to leave the study at any point if they chose to. The virtual focus group (via Webex) began with a welcome and introduction of the facilitator, followed by an explanation of the research purpose, what themes/data from the discussion will be used for, and why the students included in the group were selected using an oral script. Next, there was a review of informed consent forms as well as a review of audio recording procedures with consent. Lastly, the facilitator discussed guidelines



for the focus group (i.e. “This focus group will consist of 13 questions and last for the duration of approximately 60 minutes,” etc.).

The focus group session, lasting for approximately 60 minutes, followed a semi-structured interview format with pre-selected questions and probes to guide the conversational flow. The focus group discussions were audio recorded and transcribed through Webex. Transcripts were de-identified to protect participant confidentiality. Participants’ data and forms are stored on a private, password-protected server and, in order to have two levels of security, data are also stored on a computer in a JMU graduate office. A sample of the script and semi-structured interview questions can be found in Appendices C and D.

At the end of the session and following sufficient questioning/discussions, the facilitator asked participants to summarize pieces of the discussion that were most salient or important to them in order to ensure that those pieces are made clear to the facilitator for accurate reporting. A final question checking for any missing thoughts or points related to the purpose of the study was also posed to ensure that participants are satisfied with their contributions. Following the conclusion of focus group and the transcription of discussions, group members were given access to the transcribed texts of their discussions to check for validity and ensure an accurate representation of their honest opinions.

Focus group discussions were audio-recorded for analysis purposes by the researcher. While identifying participant information was kept strictly confidential, focus group data are indirectly identifiable by their link to theme coding before analysis. Confidential recordings and transcripts of group discussions were used for data analysis purposes.

## **Instrumentation**

The primary researcher was responsible for facilitating focus group discussions. The researcher served as both the interviewer and moderator of focus groups. It was important that, as a moderator, the researcher was able to effectively navigate group discussions, agreements, and disagreements in order to uncover the meaningful factors at the core. Utilizing skills such as “revisiting points, asking for clarification, and seeking further explanation for some responses” were important to foster in-depth communication within focus groups and discover meaning. (Liamputtong, 2011).

Interview questions asked during focus groups were centered around four domain areas, psychological safety, belongingness, racial identity, and school engagement in order to address research questions. The questions for each domain were adapted from existing surveys and scaled intended to measure these same variables. The four questions related to psychological safety were adapted from the Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams, which was originally designed to measure psychological safety among workers and was used to probe discussion of comfortability making mistakes and asking for help in school (Edmondson, 1999). The four questions probing feelings of belongingness encourage students to discuss if and when they feel valued at school by other students and teachers. These questions were adapted from the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI), which was developed as a psychometric self-report instrument to measure sense of belonging in adults (Hagerty and Patusky, 1995). The questions related to racial identity address how students feel about being Black and were adapted from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-teen (MIBI-t), originally created as a measure of racial identity for adolescents across dimensions of Centrality, Regard, and Ideology (Sellers et. al, 1998). Lastly, school engagement and academic performance questions ask

students to discuss their enthusiasm about school and were obtained from Panorama Education's online surveys (Panorama Education, 2022). See Appendices C and D for the introduction script and protocol.

### **Data Analysis**

The current study utilizes thematic analyses to bring forward themes and patterns of interest. In accordance with Braun and Clarke's (2006) explanation of what counts as a theme, discussion points that are important to the participant and the research question, according to researcher judgement and reflexivity, will be considered and coded as a theme. Following the transcription of verbal data from the focus group, the transcript was reviewed to identify initial codes from the data on a latent level (i.e., searching for meaning and underlying concepts beyond a simple description of what participants are sharing). These pieces of latent information and data throughout the transcript were then coded in order to organize verbal data in a meaningful way using an emergent coding technique. Next, coded data were sorted into themes on a broader level (i.e., discussion around psychological safety, feelings of belongingness or exclusion, feeling normalized and/or seen in the classroom, positive Black identity development, academic engagement and performance, school relationships and experiences, etc.). In other words, coded information was analyzed to determine how they might combine into an overarching theme related to the research questions. Organized themes were then reviewed for cohesiveness and clarity before being officially defined, described, and/or modeled.

### **Rigor and Trustworthiness**

To address and enhance the qualitative rigor and trustworthiness of the current research, some suggestions from Guba (1981) as cited in Krefting (1991) were used, specifically related to enhancing credibility. Because narrative focus group data were used to gain insight into student

perceptions of their school climate, many of Guba's recommendations are applicable to the current study. For example, familiarity with participants and prolonged engagement was a useful strategy to ensure comfortability on the part of the participants to share their honest opinions with the researcher, rather than responses that are more socially desirable, because there was an established rapport and trust with the researcher as a nonjudgmental party. As written in the introduction script, it was also emphasized to focus group members that divergent points of views are valid and of interest. The use of a semi-structured interview protocol also enhanced the rigor of this study. Additionally, debriefing with participants and ensuring that transcripts were accurate depictions of their opinions and perspectives helped ensure validity.

### **Positionality**

The primary researchers' position and identity as a Black woman in the U.S. who strongly believes in the value of education, the right for all students to feel safe in school, and is keenly aware of the impacts systemic racism has on REM learners fuels her interest in this topic. However, the researcher's strong feelings around diversity and educational disproportionately were also a potential source of bias in her research methods and focus group discussions. In order to offset this potential impact, the researcher took special precautions to keep her personal opinions and perspectives from influencing the responses of participants. This included taking an impartial and nonjudgmental approach to participant opinions and discussions. During focus group discussions, the researcher encouraged participants to expound on thoughts and listened actively but did not impart her own thoughts on theirs. Her responses did not place judgement, approval, or dissatisfaction with anything participants shared in order to decrease the likelihood of influencing participant data. Steps taken to remain impartial and encourage honest sharing

cannot guarantee that responses were not clouded. However, it was important for the researcher to take steps to protect the validity of research data.

## **Results**

The first of the two research questions were centered around the ideas of psychological safety, belongingness, and racial identity on the part of focus group participants, who were asked to answer discussion questions related to those concepts. For the sake of consistency and concept saliency between participants, the female participant will be referred to as member one (M1) and the male participant as member two (M2). Questions and responses from participants will be analyzed individually, and then discussed as they relate to each other in the discussion section. Using the approach of a thematic analysis and beginning with the concept of psychological safety, responses from focus group participants seemed to center around both participants feeling as though their classrooms, and their schools at large, were safe places for them for different reasons.

### **Research Question 1**

The first research question is: How does the use and/or non-use of racially representative texts (i.e., texts that center Black characters, experiences, and themes) by classroom teachers influence feelings of psychological safety, belongingness, and racial identity in Black students?

#### ***Psychological Safety: Representation***

The first coded theme that emerged from group discussions under the larger umbrella of psychological safety, and contributed to its presence, was the idea of **representation** on two fronts—one being representative texts featured in the classroom, and the other being representation among Black teachers working in the school. Falling under the code of representation, participants discussed the effects of reading culturally representative texts in their

English classes that reflected their own racial and ethnic identities as Black students, as well as those of other students in the classroom. Specific books that were mentioned by participants included *The Hate U Give* and *On the Come Up* by Angie Thomas, *Night* by Ellie Wiesel, *Born a Crime* by Trevor Noah, *I am Not Your Perfect Mexican Daughter* by Erika Sánchez, and *Fences* by August Wilson.

Participants noted that while their schools were racially and ethnically diverse to begin with, M2 attending a small alternative high school for talented students from low-income and minority families, and M1 having attended a large public school in a diverse and urban area, culturally reflective and representative texts being used in the classroom gave them another layer of comfortability in their classrooms. Words and phrases used by participants when discussing how they valued the use of these representative books in their English classes included “more comfortable”, “something for everybody”, “whole experiences”, and “accepted”. M1 discussed having assignments where she read Black-centered books and was asked to use her personal experiences to find similarities or shared themes in the stories. When asked how this exercise made her feel, M1 said that she was surprised by how many similarities she was able to find between her own life and the themes within the story. She went on to say, “it made me feel seen and like I’m not going through something alone. Like I’m not the only one.”

The second point under the code of representation, which was raised by M1, pinpointed an appreciation for diversity and representation among the Black teachers in her school. She shared how having teachers who looked like her, related to her, and supported her, enhanced the positivity and overall experience of her high school years. M1 discussed her close relationship with her English teacher, how she felt comfortable going to her with problems going on with her parent at home, and how the teacher often helped her take concrete steps towards

solving the problems she was experiencing at home and at school. The most salient pieces of this experience for M1 were related to the feeling that her connection to her English teacher, based in part in a shared racial identity, led towards feeling safe in her classroom and cared for in school. She mentioned not having to feel worried about being racially profiled or discriminated against for her Blackness by school staff because she inherently knew that she was seen for who she was, rather than what she looked like, and was accepted.

Both participants agreed that diversity within their classroom reading materials, as well as among their fellow classmates and classroom teachers, helped make their curriculum feel more tailored to them and their learning on a more personal level that took their individual identities into account. These points raised by participants supports the research hypotheses by offering supporting data that the use of racially/ethnically representative texts in the classroom, in addition to other factors of school climate, does, indeed, contribute to whether or not Black students feel psychologically safe in our classrooms. Participants asserted that reading books with characters that looked and lived like them, as well as having teachers that looked like and fully accepted them, enhanced feelings of psychological safety by reassuring the students that their teachers not only saw them, but they also genuinely cared about their personal and academic growth.

### ***Belongingness: Comfortability***

On the topic of belongingness in the classroom fostered by diversified classroom readings, specifically while reading *Fences*, M2 had the following to say: “I would say it definitely brought us closer as a class. We had a lot of fun times reading that book. Someone would make a joke and we would all start laughing, and I was like, ‘you know what? I really like this class, these people, and I feel like I belong here.’” He mentioned feeling as though he may

not have had the same feeling or experience, had he stayed in his previous school, which was not as diverse as his current high school. This response brings forth the importance of **comfortability** within a social group, which allows for the humor, laughter, and joy that one feels around people, who share an unspoken understanding or perspective that comes from shared life experiences.

### ***Belongingness: Connection***

M1, on the other hand, brought up feeling a new sense of **connection** or familiarity with the other students in her class while reading and discussing books such as *Born a Crime* and *The Hate U Give*. She spoke about her English class being very diverse and how seriously her teacher took “the acceptance of all of us” in her classroom. “We kind of became a family through these books and little plays that we would put on,” was how M1 described the closeness that she experienced with her classmates through her English class readings. M1 went on to say, “We would all kind of find out stuff about each other that we didn’t know from knowing each other for 3 or 4 years. It’s kind of like we all soul searched together.”

This feeling was also echoed by M2, who also reported feeling a sense of connectedness with his classmates through bonding over classroom readings. He mentioned feeling as though books did help him connect with his class, overall, as well as with one of his closest friends through classroom discussions and readings, which “definitely helped” deepen their friendship. M2 even commented that his friend will be “getting invited to [his] wedding now, for sure. Probably the best man.” Through his interactions and bonding with this friend in his English class, as well as other classes and school sectors, M2 discussed how grateful he was to have been able to get to know such an important person in his life, as well as other students. M2 said he likely would have still felt close to his classmates through other school and class activities



beyond his English readings, but that he would now “rather stick with them than go without them.”

Both focus group participants emphasized feelings of connection with others as one of the most salient impacts of their classroom readings. M1 later mentioned how those connections continue to this day. Her English teacher keeps in contact, even in college, and M1 still speaks to her classmates via group chat. Following a shooting that took place this year at a graduation for her school, M1 and her classmates reached out to those who still attended the school to check on their safety and offer support. She discussed the bonds she made with her fellow school mates earnestly and emphasized how they were strengthened in the classroom environment by discovering each other more deeply, connecting with themselves and others through readings, and being allowed to develop as their true selves.

This phenomenon also affirms the first research question, which asks how belongingness among Black students is impacted by culturally relevant texts. According to focus group participants, those feelings did not depend completely on the books they read in the classroom but were strengthened by them to the point of expressing gratitude and appreciation for their readings bringing them closer to themselves and others. As a whole, the codes or ideas of representation, comfort, and connection were the most salient pieces of what psychological safety and belongingness feels like and consists of for focus group participants. In other words, reading and discussing Black stories contributed to focus group participants feeling valued enough for their experiences to be reflected in their curriculum, comfortable enough in the classroom to laugh and be themselves without fear of judgement or the need to explain what is understood, and connected enough to better understand themselves and others.

***Racial Identity: Pride***

When asked to discuss the idea of their racial identities and how they may have been impacted by their classroom readings, part of participant responses can be coded as **pride**. M2 spoke about learning, both inside and outside of school, about various Black achievements and social progress spanning from slavery to today, which reminded him of the strength and power within Black communities. Specifically, he mentioned completing a presentation on the Black Power Movement, which he described as a “fascinating” experience. While M2 admitted that Blackness and related social issues are not topics that he discusses in conversation often, he feels a sense of pride when he contemplates its importance and expressed a desire to see more recognition of Blackness in books, film, and other forms of media. “It should be everywhere,” M2 commented, “because it is a demonstration of what people can do when they are united. It’s something that everybody needs.” Pride in his history as a Black person in the United States was a prominent idea for M2 in his discussion of his racial identity, which both participants believed to be positively impacted by classroom activities.

M1 spoke passionately about how important her racial identity was to her and the pride she took in both her familial and racial history. Due in part to seeing herself reflected in her classroom materials at school and also to Blackness being of significant value within her own family at home, M1 expressed a great deal of pride in being a Black woman in the United States due to similar reasons mentioned by M2 (i.e., social/political progress and accomplishments). M1 also described her pride as an unwillingness to dilute or change how she shows up as a Black woman in the world. When asked if she saw it as necessary to change the way she acts or talks when in white spaces (i.e., codeswitching), M1 responded with a vehement “no” because she is comfortable in her Blackness.

When M1 stated, ‘if I need to change myself, then you don’t see how great I am, then clearly, it’s your problem. Not mine. There’s the door, honey, you’re not hurting my feelings.’ She brought up the point that her pride in her racial identity is not dependent on or a product of how she is perceived by others. She is innately confident in her Blackness, which does not allow her to lessen herself for the comfort of others. M1 explained this beautifully by going on to say, “if I know I’m already great and the people around me are great, I’m not going to change myself for someone else to be comfortable. Not a parent, a friend, or a country. When you just see Black, you’d see the curly hair, the long nails, the lashes, the makeup. But that’s just the show. You don’t see the soul.” Here, M1 is describing how it feels to be seen only as her outward appearance and not for her inner spirit, which seems to be where she holds much of her self-worth and value.

A similar sentiment was also echoed by M2, who stated that he also did not believe in changing or diluting ones’ Blackness in order to fit in to non-Black spaces. M2 felt that “if they can’t accept you for who you are, they don’t need to be your friends. You ought to be able to just be yourself.” Clearly, both participants held a significant amount of pride in their racial identity and rejected the idea of changing how one moves through the world as a Black person as a necessity. These notions were not claimed by participants to be a direct product of their class’s Black-focused readings, but were noted to be indirectly related to them in that learning more about Black history and events triggered increased feelings of pride that were already instilled by family and/or lived experiences.

### ***Racial Identity: Inspiration***

In addition to pride being a central code that emerged from focus group discussions, participants also agreed on feelings of **inspiration** being a powerful aspect of their racial

identity, and it is coded as the second theme under the umbrella of racial identity. When M2 spoke about what came to his mind when he thought about being a Black person in the U.S., he described feeling inspired when he considers the successes that Black communities have been able to attain through struggling and persevering in the pursuit of self-determination. M2 discussed how seeing what others have been able to accomplish through hardships motivates him to “just keep pushing” through difficulties in his own life because his Blackness reminds him of what people who look like him have been able to achieve. Specifically, M2 brought up feeling inspired and proud when he sees the Black community supporting Black owned businesses. He mentioned how this acts as an example of us “trying to fight for each other and help each other out because we all come from the same path. We just try to make sure we all succeed,” which fostered a sense of unity within the Black community that M2 found inspirational.

M2 also spoke to how he sees Black accomplishments and excellence being a source of inspiration for the world at large, not only himself. “It’s definitely important because it’s going to encourage more motivation for the future, and people are going to end up doing more great things.” M1 talked about similar feelings of being inspired by “Black excellence” and motivated to achieve her goals by seeing what others in her community are doing. Specifically, M1 cited seeing a Black girl on social media create a prom dress out of duct tape and, as someone who aspires to be a fashion designer, feels as though seeing Black innovation such as that “is a great motivation for us and for me. It’s a good story to look up to.” These feelings of pride and inspiration being a primary aspect of their racial identity were consistent between focus group members and emerged from discussions as the largest coded themes in this category.

Although participants did not directly attribute these codes as results of reading representative texts in their English classrooms, they did attest that their classrooms were safe

places to express those feelings through independent projects (i.e., M2's Black Power presentation) and class discussions. This supports that facet of the first research question that investigates the relationship between reading materials and positive racial development. While their English curriculums may not have been the source of participants feeling inspired and proud of their Blackness, it can be stated that by highlighting Black-centered books, their teachers established safe classroom environments where M1 and M2 knew that displays of those feelings would be encouraged and welcomed.

## **Research Question 2**

The second research question was: Are the positive impacts of psychological safety in Black students also associated with higher degrees of school engagement and academic performance?

### ***Academic Achievement/Engagement: Meaning***

A main code that emerged from focus group discussions around academic engagement and achievement—particularly the factors that were present in learning materials when these concepts were heightened—was **meaning**. Both participants agreed that doing work that held personal meaning to them was a significant motivator in completing and putting effort into their schoolwork. In general, participants felt that work that felt “tedious” or “time consuming” without feeling meaningful, or having the potential for real-world application, was more difficult to apply themselves to. When asked if work for their English classes felt meaningful, M1 shared that she was able to find meaning in her work more easily than did M2. M1 began by mentioning that feeling “greatly welcomed” into her English class, after switching from a different section due to not feeling as though she fit in, made her feel as though applying herself to the classwork

“wasn’t that hard”. Getting assignments in and completing work, for M1, was reported to be an easier task when she felt comfortable in the classroom.

For M1, the most personally meaningful work was found in her college English course where she was asked to write a narrative essay about aspects of her childhood that she had never written about before. M1 had “never dug that deep” on an assignment before and, thus, found it to be challenging but able to keep her attention. Writing about her own childhood and life experiences was difficult for M1, but she noted that feeling engaged by assignments such as this one, which tapped into something of personal importance to her and her identity, was easier than other assignments that lacked this personal piece.

M2 reported similar sentiments regarding his English class but felt that he had to look harder to find meaning in his work. He mentioned how learning grammar in English class may not invoke much excitement or meaning from him, but because he enjoys writing stories, he is able to see his English class as a tool to sharpen or “improve” his personal writing skills. If M2 is able to connect seemingly meaningless work with something that does matter to him, he is able to find that motivation to apply to non-preferred work. However, overall, both participants reported feeling that work that mattered to them on a human level was easier to engage with and apply themselves to than work that felt rote. These participants’ opinions support the second hypothesis and suggest that when Black students’ feel comfortable and can see some part of themselves represented, they find it easier to put effort into schoolwork.

### *Academic Achievement/Engagement: Interest*

In the vein of **interest** being a motivating factor in academics, M2 spoke about his drama class and how his love for it made him want to show up to work on their production not only on

his scheduled days, but also on days that he did not have to be there for it. M2 stated that staying to help every day “actually helped me, you know, get closer with my theater teacher, friends that were there, with the actors, and connect better with them. When you find love for a project, it’s good because you actually want to do it and get it done and it helps you want to put effort into it.” M1 shared this perspective and spoke about often feeling bored or unengaged in class if she had no interest in the academic content but would want to succeed if there was something in the lesson that spoke to her. M1 shared that she often felt sleepy or tired in her high school classes but was instantly awake if she heard something that interested her. “If someone says something that I found interesting, I would immediately jump up and I’ll be like ‘oh I like this. So, we’re learning today. Let me take notes!’” Here, M1 is describing an increased work ethic or academic drive to succeed when working on a topic that captures her interest, much like M2.

Overall, both participants endorsed opinions that also support the second research question. When participants experienced feelings in their classroom such as comfortability, meaning, and interest, they found themselves working harder and performing better in class. If the aforementioned feelings can be considered aftereffects of psychological safety, it can also be said that it can act as a precursor to academic achievement and engagement for Black students in school. This impact will be discussed in greater detail in the following section.

## **Discussion**

All students need a safe environment for them to learn. Black students and other racially and ethnically minoritized populations are, perhaps, used to surviving in environments that are unsafe in a country that was not only not built for them, but whose institutions are often constructed with the intention of keeping these communities down. Unfortunately, our schools are no different and require systemic changes to the structural issues that contribute to the advent

of phenomena such as racial opportunity gaps, the school to prison pipeline, educational discrimination, teacher bias, unfair disciplinary practices, and more. This paper asserts that the use of diversified classroom texts is one avenue towards this type of change. Current literature suggests that psychological safety is a significant factor in whether or not REM students feel safe enough to learn in their classrooms and that culturally relevant texts allow them to feel seen and valued in the classroom (Wynther-Hoyte and Smith, 2020; Perkins, 2017; Gangi; 2008). This project attempts to answer the questions: (1) can culturally relevant texts be an avenue towards creating psychological safety for Black students? and (2) Does this impact lend itself towards improved academic achievement and engagement? According to focus group discussion data, the answers to both questions may be yes.

Coded themes from focus group discussions related to the questions of what psychological safety (i.e., representation, comfortability, and connection) feels like in classrooms where culturally reflective readings help make students feel seen by their teachers and others, tells the story of students who may often feel that their experiences and true identities are overlooked. Students who do not feel as though they are being seen for who they are, are forced to either retreat into themselves and make their presence smaller in order to survive or put on a mask and perform the role they believe they are expected to play. Both of these strategies take cognitive energy that could be used for learning and instead spends it on monitoring and surviving unsafe environments (Walton & Cohen, 2007). With this context, the three codes that emerged from discussion related to psychological safety captures the experience of students who do not have to spend mental and emotional energy on these strategies in order to get through their schooling. Focus group participants felt well-represented through the books they read in class, they felt a sense of shared racial identity with their teachers and classmates, they felt



comfort in their school environment, and they felt connected to those around them. They asserted that their racially and culturally representative classroom readings helped to facilitate these feelings, but the independent impact of diverse staff and student populations of psychological safety among REM students is also a well-researched and significant benefit that schools should pay attention to (Musa et. al, 2016; Reginal, 2021; Soares and Lopes, 2017). The more opportunities we give our REM students to see their identities reflected positively and lovingly in their environments, the more paths and futures we offer them to see themselves navigating with the knowledge that they are not the first and they are not alone.

When focus group participants discussed their racial identity, codes of pride and inspiration emerged. To them, their Blackness and the painful but beautiful history that comes with it was a source of power for them. Knowing the struggle that our people had gone through and continue to go through was a reminder of their own resilience and strength. It was something for them to lean on in their own times of stress and a part of their humanness that they loved unconditionally and unapologetically. Their unwillingness to change how they appear or move through the world, even through unsafe environments where they may not be accepted, denoted two young people who had not fallen for the trick of editing oneself to gain the love and acceptance of others. They choose to take up space in this world as themselves, however they choose to stand in their Blackness, loving the ones who love them and not feeling sorry for the rest. In school, they knew that their identity was accepted and could feel the security of knowing that their learning environment was not a stage that they had to perform on, but rather a second home of sorts where being who they were was easy and unpunished.

With the presence of this sense of comfort and psychological safety, both participants reported that engaging in their schoolwork was not particularly difficult; rather, having interest

and finding meaning in their work was a significant motivating factor in the classroom. This point can be seen as another example of the positive impacts of representation in the classroom and in relation to academic materials. By finding something that sparked their interest within schoolwork, focus group participants reported that seeing parts of themselves and what they cared about (i.e., their hobbies, enjoyments, lived experiences, career goals, etc.) reflected in curriculums made it easier for them to care about and engage with the work they were doing. Their shared opinions suggest that if teachers and schools could find as many ways as possible to appeal to the unique interests and identities of our students through classroom curriculums, academic engagement and achievement could be a potential gain.

In conclusion, this project discovered a possible link between psychological safety in the classroom and the use of culturally relevant texts in reading curriculums for Black students. When schools and teachers show how they see and value students who have been historically ignored or persecuted, they prove to REM students that they are safe, loved, and valued. Students learn best when they know and believe this. Adding their life experiences to what is being taught in classrooms is an easy and accessible way for schools to achieve this for our Black students who are starving for ways to feel as though they belong in places that they have not always been able to believe this. We, as educators, cannot hold Black and other REM students to the same social and academic standards that we do white students until we have done all that we can to ensure that our REM students are having the same schooling experience as the students who benefit from learning environments that have always prioritized and loved them. Opportunity gaps and unequal learning are to be expected when we consider what the landscape of education in the United States has looked like, historically, for different racial groups. In order to correct a broken system for our Black students, we must start by convincing them that we understand how

they feel and that they are safe with us. Only then can we ask them to believe us, learn from us, and trust us.

### ***Limitations and Future Research***

Because this study was done with the input of two focus group participants, results and outcomes cannot be directly generalized to the overall populations of Black students or students of other racial/ethnic identities. A similar study done with more Black participants would likely yield different and new thoughts that would widen the scope of this research topic. Even more insights could be gleaned by including the voices of other racial/ethnic identities and minoritized groups (i.e., religions, LGBTQ+, languages, disability status, etc.). Another possible limitation of the focus group format is the potential for lack of validity in participant responses. Because participants are sharing their thoughts and opinions with a person that they may not be familiar with, there the possibility that their responses could be influenced by the desire for social desirability or approval instead of their honest opinions. In the future, focus groups could be done anonymously, where participants are not aware of each other's' identities, could be a solution to this limitation and increase the likelihood of members sharing their true opinions. Future studies based on the experiences of all students of all identities can also give schools much-needed information on the current school experiences of their diverse students, what they believe is lacking in their classrooms, and how psychological safe could look and benefit the spectrum of learners.

### **Implications for Practice**

Implications from this study also have significant relevancy to the field and practice of school psychology. Research related to factors such as psychological safety, belongingness, and

racial identity gives school systems and practitioners insight into concepts that can make schools safer for students of all backgrounds. In our practice as school psychologists, we work with students in social-emotional and academic contexts in order to ensure that they have the support that they need in both, which this research gives helpful guidance towards. Diversifying classroom texts and prioritizing representation, according to obtained data, is a meaningful way to enhance student feelings of psychological safety. School psychologists can be mindful to utilize diverse and inclusive resources when working with students in individual and group counseling contexts so that students feel represented when in our spaces. School psychologists can also make change by sharing this knowledge and research with classroom teachers through consultation. Teachers who may be experiencing behavior and/or classroom management issues can benefit from implementing strategies to enhance psychological safety and representation in the classroom, which could have a positive impact on student behavior. Lastly, school psychologists who have shared identities (i.e., racial, linguistic, gender expression, sexual orientation, etc.) with their students can also enhance student psychological safety by simply being present in our schools. Students who see us and feel they can relate to us will also feel safe with us, which has the potential to improve their school experience by creating trusting adult relationships.

## Appendix A

### Consent to Participate in Research

#### Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Zaakirah Fulani, M.A. from the James Madison University School Psychology program. The purpose of this study is **to learn more about the experience of Black students in high school classrooms that utilize racially representative and reflective texts in the classroom.** This study will contribute to the body of research on how schools can promote inclusivity and belongingness for Black students, as well as other racial and ethnic minority groups. This study will contribute to Zaakirah Fulani's completion of her Ed.S. thesis

#### Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of semi-structured focus group discussions. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to your experiences as a Black high school student. The small focus group interviews will be audio taped and later transcribed by the facilitator.

#### Time Required

Participation in this study will require time to participate in the small focus group interview. The small focus group interviews will last no longer than sixty minutes.

#### Risks

The investigators recognize the possibility of some degree of psychological distress for participants who may be asked to discuss feelings of unsafety, discrimination, or racial trauma associated with the study's focus. It is intended that this focus group will be a safe, nonjudgmental space where all feelings will be validated and supported. You will be free to withdraw from the study at any time if any discussions feel overwhelming or for any other reason. Handouts with campus mental health resources will also be given to all participants for any needed debriefing or follow-up discussions.

#### Benefits

Potential benefits from participation in this study include satisfaction knowing your input helped inform diversity and inclusion initiatives for minority students. It is also possible that you could experience therapeutic benefits from sharing your thoughts and feelings in a safe space with students that may be able to relate to you. Additionally, participants may be exposed to helpful insights by listening to others share their school experiences and may also find that their feelings/thoughts related to racial identity and belongingness are affirmed by others in the group, which can be personally beneficial.

**Incentives**

You will receive credit towards a PSYCH 101 or 160 course for your participation in this study. If you are unable or unwilling to complete this study, you will still receive course credit.

**Confidentiality**

The results of this research will be presented to other faculty, staff, and administrators at JMU. In addition, results may be presented at professional conferences and/or submitted as articles to professional journals. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researchers retain the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researchers. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers including audiotapes will be destroyed.

**Participation & Withdrawal**

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

**Questions about the Study**

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

Researcher's Name: Zaakirah Fulani, M.A.  
Department: Graduate School Psychology  
James Madison University  
Email Addresses: [fulanizb@dukes.jmu.edu](mailto:fulanizb@dukes.jmu.edu)  
Telephone: 804-624-8100

**Questions about Your Rights as a Research Subject**

Dr. Lindsey Harvell-Bowman  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
James Madison University  
(540) 568-2611  
[harve2la@jmu.edu](mailto:harve2la@jmu.edu)

**Giving of Consent**

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

I give consent to be audio taped during my focus group.

---

Name of Participant (Printed)

---

Name of Participant (Signed)

---

Name of Researcher (Signed)

---

Date

## Appendix B

### **Introduction Script**

Welcome to our focus group and thank you for being here today. My name is Zaakirah Fulani and I'm an intern with Chesterfield County School from James Madison University. I'm here to get some information from Black students about your perceptions of the use of culturally relevant texts and how they impact your overall school experience while you were in high school. The purpose of this group is to use your feedback to see how schools can better serve racially and ethnically minoritized youth by making the classroom and curriculum more inclusive. Specifically, I want to understand what worked for you in an inclusive English/Literature classroom and how it made you feel about school overall.

The format we are using is a focus group. A focus group is a conversation that focuses on specific questions in a safe, respectful, and confidential environment. I will guide the conversation by presenting questions and prompts that each of you can respond to however you want. There are no right or wrong answers to these questions, so please feel free to share your point of view even if it differs from what others have said. Keep in mind that I'm just as interested in negative comments as positive comments, and at times, negative comments can be even more helpful. Just be honest! I also encourage you to respond to each other's comments, like you would in an ordinary conversation with a friend. It is my job to make sure that everyone here gets to share their opinions and that we stay on track.

I plan for us to meet one time for no more than one hour to talk about how the books that you read in your high school classes might have impacted your feelings about school and yourself. An author named Rudine Bishop wrote an essay that talks about how books can act as windows allowing us to see into the worlds and experiences of others, but usually not ourselves.



Or they can also be mirrors, which are books that reflect our own identities and experiences back to us in a self-affirming way when we read them. These mirror books are those that feature characters that look like us, talk like us, and go through similar experiences as us. So, during our focus group, I'll be asking you to think about the books that you read in your high school English/Literature classes and try to explain if and how reading mirror and window books impacted your school experience as a Black student.

I also want you to be aware that I will be audio taping our session so that I don't miss anything that anyone says. However, I won't use any names in my final report and your identities will remain completely confidential. The final report will be a summary of your comments and opinions, and will be shared with faculty at James Madison University, but you will not be identified as an individual in this final report. Nothing that anyone says in these sessions will be told to your professors, parents, or any school/university staff, so your daily life will not be impacted by anything that you say. I cannot control what you do when you leave, but I ask each of you to respect each other's privacy and not tell anyone what was said by others here today so that everyone can feel safe to share their thoughts. Let's begin with a warm-up.

## Appendix C

### **Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

1. Psychological Safety- Adapted from the Psychological Safety and Learning Behavior in Work Teams (Edmondson, 1999):
  - a. While in high school, when dealing with tough issues or problems in your school or personal life, did your English class make you feel more comfortable discussing them with other students or adults at school?
  - b. Did you ever worry that other students or adults in your school would reject you because of your racial identity? Did taking that class impact those feelings?
  - c. Did you think it was safe for you to make mistakes at school?
2. Belongingness- Adapted from the Sense of Belonging Instrument (SOBI-P & SOBI-A; Hagerty and Patusky, 1995):
  - a. Did the books you read in your English class make you think that the students and adults in your school accepted you for who you are?
  - b. If you hadn't had that class, do you think you would've felt like you fit into the culture of your school? Did you ever feel like an outsider?
  - c. In what ways did other students and/or teachers show that they valued you?
3. Racial Identity- Adapted from the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity-teen (MIBI-t; Sellers et. al, 1998):
  - a. How important or central to your personal identity is being Black?
  - b. What words would you use to describe how you feel about being Black and did anything you read in your English class shape how you see yourself?

- c. What do you think about Black parents surrounding their kids with mostly Black art, books, movies, etc?
  - d. Do you think it's necessary for Black people to change the way we act and talk around white people?
4. School Engagement and Academic Performance- Adapted from Panorama Student Surveys (Panorama Education, 2022):
- a. How happy were you with your grades in school last year?
  - b. How difficult or easy was it for you to try hard on your schoolwork? Was it any easier in your English class than in others?
  - c. How did you know when were feeling engaged and interested in class?

## References

- Arnold, J.M. & Sableski, M.-K. (2017). Utilizing a rubric to identify diversity in children's literature, In E. Ortlieb & E.H. Cheek (Eds.) *Addressing diversity in literacy instruction* (vol. 8, pp. 207-228), Emerald Publishing Limited, Bingley.
- Bishop, R.S. (1990). Mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors. *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom*, 6(3), 56-57.
- Braun V. & Clarke V. (2006) Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101 <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Dukes, R. L., & Stein, J. A. (2001). Effects of assets and deficits on the social control of at-risk behavior among youth: A structural equations approach. *Youth Society*, 32, 337-359. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0044118X01032003003>
- Edmondson, A. (1999). Psychological safety and learning behavior in work teams. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(2), 350–383. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2666999>
- Feger, M.V. (2006). 'I want to read' How culturally relevant texts increase student engagement in reading. *Multicultural Education*, 13(3), 18-19.
- Guba, E.G. (1981). Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries. *ECTJ*, 29, 75-91.
- Gangi, J.M. (2008). The unbearable whiteness of literacy instruction: Realizing the implications of the proficient reader research, 17(1), 30-35.
- Hagerty, B. & Patusky, K. (1995). Developing a measure of sense of belonging. *Nursing Research*, 44(1): 9-13)
- Kahn, W.A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *The Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692–724.

- Lambert, M. (2019). *Practical research methods in education*. New York: Routledge.
- Liamputtong, P. (2011). *Focus group methodology: Principle and practice*. Sage publications.
- Musa, A.K.J, Meshak B., & Sagir, J.I. (2016). Adolescents' perception of the psychological security of school environment, emotional development, and academic performance in secondary schools in Gombe metropolis. *Journal of Education and Training Studies*, 4(9), 144–53. <https://doi.org/10.11114/jets.v4i9.1705>.
- Panorama Education (2023). <https://www.panoramaed.com/surveys>
- Perkins, E. (2017) Hey, Black child. *Little, Brown Books for Young Readers*.
- Reginal, T. (2021). Providing better support to students of color: The importance of school climate, belonging, and well-being, *The Urban Institute* n.d., 4.
- Scottham, K.M., Sellers, R.M., & Nguyễn, H.X. (2008). A measure of racial identity in African American adolescents: The development of the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity--Teen. *Cultural Diversity & Ethnic Minority Psychology*, 14(4), 297–306. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1099-9809.14.4.297>
- Soares, A.E., and Lopes, M.P. (2020). Are your students safe to learn? The role of lecturer's authentic leadership in the creation of psychologically safe environments and their impact on academic performance. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 21(1), 65–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1469787417742023>.
- U.S. Department of Education. Civil Rights Data Collection: A First Look, 2016.
- Walton, G.M., & Cohen G.L. (2007). “A question of belonging: race, social fit, and achievement.” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 92(1), 82–96. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.92.1.82>.

Wynter-Hoyte, K. & Smith, M. 'Hey, black child. Do you know who you are?' Using African diaspora literacy to humanize blackness in early childhood education. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 52(4), 406–31. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1086296X20967393>.