

Leveraging Character Education to Reinvigorate Teaching about Race in the U.S.

A Secondary School Intervention Study

By Barbara Whitlock, with
Jessica Brooks

Montrose School

October 2025

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Context for the Intervention Study

In the U.S., the complex stories of Black Americans are often reduced to paradigms centered on polarized ideological aims. The contrast between the 1619 Project and President Trump's 1776 Report symbolizes this ideological divide. New York Times' journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones explained the purpose of the 1619 Project (2021): "to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States' national narrative." Hannah-Jones clarifies her focus on advocacy as the aim for the historical narrative she developed, first through a podcast series and later through diverse written, online and video media.

Where Hannah-Jones has sought to place the story of Black Americans at center stage, President Trump has sought to emphasize that Black Americans are simply part of the larger American story. In response to the 1619 Project (Watson, K., 2020), President Trump, during his first presidential term, developed a government commission with the stated aims: "to enable a rising generation to understand the history and principles of the founding of the United States in 1776 and to strive to form a more perfect Union," with the hopes for "rediscovery of our shared identity rooted in our founding principles." The 1776 Report's goal: to "[renew] American unity and a confident American future." (The President's Advisory 1776 Commission, 2021) In addition, opposition to Diversity Equity and Inclusion (DEI) policies and practices have formed a central goal of President Trump's second term in office, and education has been a principal target of such efforts. In K-12 schools, the presidential commission called for an end to "indoctrination" and encouraged "patriotic educational measures" (The White House, 2025). According to a recent study by the Rand Corporation, such government measures have been documented to inhibit teachers' efforts to teach about race in the U.S (Woo, *et al.*, 2024).

In hopes of reinvigorating how we teach about race in the U.S., I have found and tested the value of key Character Education principles that can facilitate a shift from teaching for advocacy or avoiding race topics to teaching the full complexity of truth about race in the U.S. -- without fear of backlash and while equipping students for informed civic engagement.

The intervention unit began with students viewing Chimimanda Ngozi Adichie's 2009 TED Talk: "The Danger of a Single Story." Adichie describes how she made reductionist assumptions about a servant boy named Phillipe and his family before she visited their village near Adichie's family home in Nigeria -- and she did the same about Mexicans before she spent time in Mexico City. Adichie also explains how "single story" assumptions were turned on her when she came to the U.S. for university study. For example, her college roommate asked if she knew how to operate a stove and what tribal music she listened to. Adichie's response: she played Mariah Carey. What Adichie prescribes as the antidote to the danger of the single story is to add many stories. This is a framework I follow in my teaching about race, and the case studies I use, which also includes my husband's stories, which add personal impact to the intervention unit.

My experiences as a classroom teacher affirm what Adichie documents: that the students' first reaction to hearing stories of those in a racial, ethnic or class group who have suffered is often pity. While compassion is a valuable asset to character formation, this emotional first reaction can undermine students' ability to take in greater complexity. To advance more complex perspective-taking requires the teacher to reframe in order to remind students to see fully the human dignity in the Black American case studies we explore, and to highlight the triumph arc and human agency in these stories. The narratives selected for students to read and view in this intervention unit included both realistic information about struggles Black Americans have experienced and traced the arc of triumph these individuals achieved.

Character Education Principles Relevant to the Intervention Study

The aim of character education is formative -- to help students cultivate the virtues or habits that help them aim toward a flourishing life in community with others -- as they prepare for active citizenship in a pluralistic democracy.

Character educators turn to Aristotelian principles to guide the development of such virtues, the most prominent of which is Practical Wisdom. Practice Wisdom is that advanced faculty of deliberation that helps us assess complex ethical dilemmas with the aid of the virtues and helps us practice perspective-taking in order to assess goods in conflict and become capable of discerning which choices advance flourishing aims.

In my research, I remain convinced that adolescents can develop this potential for practical wisdom through dialogue in trusted adult relationships -- with parents, teachers and mentors. When adolescents have a dialogue partner who is more advanced in practical wisdom -- to ask questions that help probe what is at stake in a given situation, in order to help them discern what choices advance flourishing aims -- adolescents have greater opportunities to cultivate practical wisdom. (Whitlock, 2024) Another factor involved in the formative character work of parents, teachers and mentors involves the schooling of desire, which stories and role models help facilitate, a concept developed by Karen Bohlin. When wise interlocutors accompany adolescents as mature dialogue partners, they plant seeds, lift aims, and contribute to positive motivation to help students sort through goods in conflict and make good choices. (Bohlin, 2000)

Karen Bohlin's Practical Wisdom Framework™ (Bohlin, 2022) provided a vital dimension to the study. In a political climate where talking about race provokes polarized responses, the net effect is to inhibit dialogue. The Practical Wisdom Framework™ emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and settling first emotional reactions before activating reflection, recalibration and a practically-wise response. Before beginning the intervention study, students were asked to document their comfort discussing race with diverse interlocutors. At the end of the study, they were asked the same questions to measure growth in comfort to improve self-reported feelings of comfort engagement in discussions about race. In addition, after the initial pre-survey, the teacher shared with the students that, in the pre-survey, they all communicated a common experience of discomfort about discussing race. This shared experience, plus a review of class-developed discussion norms civic discussions, as documented in The Courageous Dialogue Toolkit (Whitlock & Bohlin, 2021), helped support students to feel emotionally safe to engage in discussions about race. Settling first emotional reactions before engaging in dialogue about the history of race in the U.S. primed students to participate in the intervention unit with comfort.

Moral Dilemmas

Another principle of character education which framed the intervention unit centered on the principle of moral dilemmas, a subset of theories related to Practical Wisdom. Moral dilemmas name goods in conflict in order to promote complex reflection. For example, the race intervention unit focused on a central moral dilemma: *To what extent does justice require acknowledging the shared experiences of a racial identity group, and to what extent does justice require recognizing the radical uniqueness of each individual?*

Like all essential questions, the answer is complex:

- Justice can be advanced by acknowledging the shared experience of being Black in America, but justice can also be undermined by assuming a “single story narrative” (Adichie, 2009).
- Justice can be advanced by acknowledging the radical uniqueness of each individual, but justice can be undermined by practicing color blindness when considering the experiences of Black Americans.

Using the framework of moral dilemmas to teach about complex historical factors and agents primes the brain for complexity, promotes perspective-taking, and facilitates such intellectual virtues as curiosity, fairmindedness, courage, humility and honesty. Applying this moral dilemma principle to the teaching of diverse stories of Black Americans also contributed to the goal of breaking “single story narratives,” as explained further below.

Moral Exemplar Theory

Moral Exemplar theory focuses on the value of role models for character formation. The Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtue defines a role model as a person:

- Who provides a positive influence for others
- Whose actions set a positive example
- Who sets admirable goals and works hard to achieve them
- Who is admired for his/her positive qualities and contributions (Jubilee Centre for Character & Virtue, 2023)

Moral Exemplar theory clarifies the factors that combine to facilitate the formative influence of a role model. The research demonstrates that:

- “An exemplar is a person who is most admirable” (Zagzebski, 2017: 2).
- “A person who is admirable in some respect is imitable in that respect. The feeling of admiration is a kind of attraction that carries the impetus to imitate or emulate it.”
- “Admiration is motivating.” (Zagzebski, 2017: 20)
- “Admiration for acquired excellence is more compelling than natural excellence” (Zagzebski, 2017: 38, 43).
- “The admired person is like an ideal self” (Zagzebski, 2017: 55).

- The more direct the experience of an exemplar, the more impactful (Zagzebski, 2017: 68, 96) - in contrast to learning from exemplar narratives (Gilliford et. al, 2023).
- Moral exemplars model integrity: “[E]xemplars often resist cultural forces that would push them along in ways determined by other people...[T]here is an important way in which exemplars do not change..., or if they change, they change in a way that is self-directed” (Zagzebski, 2017: 179).

A branch of Role Model Exemplar theory which was also helpful to the intervention unit involves the role of identifiable Reference and Normative groups, which provide a community of role models that facilitate strong identity formation and resilience to foster character development. The research affirms:

- Normative groups are groups, collectivities, or persons that provide the actor with a guide to action by explicitly setting norms and espousing values (Kemper 32).
- “In general, a reference group is a group, collectivity, or person which the actor takes into account in some manner in the course of selecting a behavior from among a set of alternatives, or in making a judgment about a problematic issue. A reference group helps to orient the actor in a certain course, whether of action or attitude.”(Kemper, 1968: 32).
- Conformity in normative reference groups is motivational...In other words, the self-appraisals of individuals will correlate positively with the self-appraisals of individuals in their reference group due to normative influences. (Felson & Reed, 1986: 103).

Case Studies

The intervention unit focused on case studies of diverse experiences among Black Americans -- both historical and contemporary -- in order to promote complex thinking and to reduce the impact of ideological paradigms which tend to reduce teaching about race to reductionist “single story narratives” that often reinforce ideological divides.

Core text case study: Students read *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* early in the intervention unit. This text provides primary source evidence for the sufferings of those enslaved as well as the triumphs of those who survived enslavement and of those who self-emancipated. Students center their reading on Douglass’ framing for the narrative: “You have seen how a man was made a slave; you shall see how a slave was made a man” (Douglass, 1845, p. 68). The students focus on the process of

Douglass' self-emancipation -- physically, emotionally and intellectually. This text transforms a story of suffering into the triumph of all dimensions of the path toward freedom -- external as well as internal.

Family case study: My husband's personal narrative provided a pivotal role model exemplar story for the intervention unit. As a Black American, Ken Whitlock Jr. grew up in segregated Richmond Virginia, the grandson of a college professor, son of an elementary school principal father and high school English teacher mother -- all in segregated Black educational institutions. He grew up in a middle class black neighborhood, which provided a reference group steeped in models of academic and professional success. For example, a few blocks over lived Oliver Hill, a lawyer who was part of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund (led by Thurgood Marshall) which won the 1954 U.S. Supreme Court *Brown v. Board of Education* decision which declared racial segregation in schools illegal. Oliver Hill's son, Dukie, was my husband's friend. My husband can recount where every Black professional in his neighborhood lived -- his doctor, dentist, priest, the restaurant owner where the family went for burgers on Sundays, etc. His father was a civic leader, President of the Richmond Urban League, and he served in the first Black Marine Corps unit in World War II. His father documented his wartime experiences in his autobiography *Breaking Barriers: The Ken Whitlock Story* (Whitlock, K., 2000), and he is memorialized at Montford Point, the segregated Marine training ground at Camp LeJune. He also played professional football as the first Black player for the Toronto Argonauts (Hogan, M., 2021). My husband's family and his largely insular segregated world abounded with moral exemplars, and he had a broad normative reference group from which to draw upon models of success.

The insulation of that segregated world shifted when he was 11 years old, as the tide began to shift in Virginia -- from massive resistance to school integration to token integration through Virginia's "freedom of choice" initiative. Under this initiative, Black families brought their prominent students before the all-white Pupil Placement Board to assess their "readiness" for the challenges of the white schools. My husband was selected to attend Chandler Junior High, which opened its door a crack to the first Black students the year before (his neighbors Gloria Mead -- older sister to his friend Bobby Mead -- and Carol Swan were the first Black students to attend a white school in Virginia), and they suffered violent harassment.

My husband was a reluctant race pioneer, and he suffered terribly and at a highly vulnerable age. When he walked into school each day, a group of boys greeted him with the chant: "Do you spell a Gar -- a Ci-

gar -- no, I smell an N-." His grades plummeted; and he had to face the humiliation of summer school and the collapse of his academic confidence. Only years later did he hear stories about white teachers giving black students failing marks in order to discourage them.

When my students hear my husband's story, they feel compassion, and it takes some redirection for the students to see a story of triumph behind the pity that forms their first emotional reaction. The question they consider which helps facilitate this shift in focus is: How did my husband, who was so demeaned at such a vulnerable age in his school years, emerge as an outstanding student -- earning his BA in history *magna cum laude* from Boston University, his MA from the University of Virginia, and recently ending his 50-year teaching career, with the last 39 years teaching at a top-16-ranked prep school in Massachusetts?

He'd tell you that he "stood on the shoulder of giants":

- His ancestor Thomas Dorsey self-emancipated from Maryland in the early 1820s, bought his freedom with the help of friends, and became a millionaire caterer in Philadelphia. My students read about Dorsey's remarkable story (TarBush & Dreyfuss, 2021).
- Dorsey was active in the Underground Railroad (and he is referenced in William Still's pivotal work, *The Underground Railroad*, 1872).
- Dorsey was friends with Senator Charles Sumner, and he aided John Brown's wife when Brown was planning the Harper's Ferry insurrection to protest slavery. Brown's wife stayed at the Dorsey home in Philadelphia, and Dorsey helped her escape to England.
- The Dorseys were recognized as models of "respectability," and Mrs. Louisa Dorsey accompanied Frederick Douglass to Lincoln's Second Inaugural Ball because Douglass' significant other was white and their relationship was not sanctioned. Mrs. Dorsey was selected by Douglass because she was an emblem of Black respectability.
- When Douglass' daughter, Rosetta, became a "road-runner," Douglass sent her to live with the Dorseys "to learn how to become a respectable woman."
- Thomas Dorsey is highlighted in WEB Dubois' 1899 book, *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study*:
 - Dubois wrote: "Dorsey was the most unique character; with little education but great refinement of manner, he became a man of real weight in the community, and associated with many eminent men. He had the sway of an imperial dictator." For

example, he would not tolerate criticism of President Lincoln or his Republican Party in his restaurant, and he displayed Lincoln's picture prominently in his establishment.

- Dubois adds: "Such men wielded great personal influence, aided the Abolition cause to no little degree, and made Philadelphia noted for its cultivated and well-to-do Negro citizens." (Dubois, 1899: 34-35)
- Thomas and Louisa Dorsey's son, William, was a collector and artist, whose archives were the basis of Roger Lane's 1991 book: *William Dorsey's Philadelphia and Ours* (Lane, 1991).
- More immediately, my husband's great uncle -- Dr. Leland Johnson -- became the second Black American to earn both a PhD and MD from the University of Chicago in 1931. He went on to serve as the Dean of the Howard Medical School for nine years and taught at Howard University for 25 years.
- My husband's grandfather was a professor of Education at Virginia State University and his two sons -- my husband's two uncles -- were also doctors: Dr. Preston Johnson was a medical doctor who made his career with the Veteran's Administration; and his brother, Dr. Bill Johnson, was a professor of Chemistry at Lincoln University and a researcher at the University of Pennsylvania, where he had earned his PhD. Both my husband's parents and all of his uncles and aunts graduated from Virginia State -- an historically black college.

These role models were the giants surrounding my husband throughout his life in segregated Virginia. If you ask him how he survived the racial trauma of segregation and integration, he points to both his family and their successes as well as to the leaders in his neighborhood. Research on Role Model Exemplar and Reference Group theory confirms why my husband succeeded in academia despite such trauma in middle school: "[T]he role model provides institutional affirmation for the aspiring role occupant... He or she provides a counternarrative intended to destabilize the narrative of exclusion that accompanied the marginalization and devaluation of members of those groups" (Addis, 1996: 94).

My husband's narrative meets all the criteria for Moral Exemplar, Reference and Normative Group theories:

- A role model exemplar is admirable. → His family's accomplishments were highly admirable.
- A person who is admirable is imitable. → My husband was motivated to emulate and imitate his ancestors' academic successes.

- The family story-telling centered on the labors his ancestors undertook to acquire such excellence -- and the obstacles they overcame.
- My husband idealized these moral exemplars in his family -- and he knew them, their stories, and witnessed their acquired excellence directly. They gave him books, exposed him to art and classical music -- they encouraged him.
- My husband saw their integrity -- the way they persisted through obstacles without changing course -- unless self-directed.

These role models throughout his community provided a reference group that showed my husband images of his future self, helped him maneuver through the complex landscape of his segregated world and newly integrated school. It helped him make decisions about how to persist, how to move forward, and how to maintain a positive trajectory for his future.

New Lens on W.E.B. Dubois as a Character Educator focused on Race

In the process of my research, I've discovered another character educator, one who has not been recognized yet as such: W.E.B. Dubois -- the famous sociologist who, in 1895, was the first Black American to receive a PhD from Harvard. For all the respect Dubois' work has garnered, he has also collected a significant number of critics. He ultimately died an expatriate in Ghana. I think it's time to reexamine his work. I believe that Dubois has rich insights as a character educator focused on the issue of race in America. We must assess him in his historical context, rather than anachronistically, in order to discover the value of his contributions.

An examination of Dubois vision revealed in his essay, *The Talented Tenth* (1903), correlates to many principles of Character Education that align with issues of race:

- From Dubois opening line: "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men." (Role Model Exemplar theory)
- "Now the training of men is a difficult and intricate task. Its technique is a matter for educational experts, but its object is for the vision of seers." (Character Education)
- "You misjudge us because you do not know us." ("Danger of the Single Story")
- "A saving remnant continually survives and persists, continually aspires, continually shows itself in thrift and ability and character." (Reference Group theory)

- “He is, as he ought to be, the group leader, the man who sets the ideals of the community where he lives, directs its thoughts and heads its social movements.” (Reference Group theory)
- Black colleges -- “[I]t placed before the eyes of almost every Negro child an attainable ideal.” (Role Model Exemplar theory)
- “Education must not simply teach work -- it must teach Life. The Talented 10th of the Negro race must be made leaders of thought and missionaries of culture among their people.” (Normative Reference Group theory)

(Dubois, *The Talented Tenth*, 1903: 25-37)

The bibliography which follows includes key works by Dubois that pinpoint the connection between Character Education principles and issues of race in the U.S. Clearly, Dubois is an important character educator to study in order to address the issue of race in the U.S.

Additional Historical & Contemporary Case Studies

Throughout the unit, I interspersed historical and contemporary case studies of Black Americans, such as those who started all-Black towns, exposed legal corruption, built businesses, led legal battles, etc. (See Appendix for links to videos and articles).

By organizing the intervention unit around case studies that reinforce Adichie’s “many stories” principle, I hoped to shift students’ first responses toward a more complex understanding of the history of race in the U.S.

Intervention Study Scope & Implementation

A total of 42 students participated in the intervention study of 11th graders (ages 16-17) in their English courses -- Advanced Placement (AP) Language & Composition and Honors American Literature. The students were surveyed anonymously in the classroom through Qualtrix^{XM} -- both before and after the intervention unit. Three cohorts were included in the study:

- the AP Language & Composition class (17 students) 2023-24
- the Honors American Literature class (12 students) 2023-24
- the AP Language & Composition class (13 students) 2024-25

My research assistant administered two anonymous surveys over the course of three weeks: (1) a pre-survey on the first day of the intervention before beginning the unit and (2) a post-survey on the school day after the last day of the intervention. Both surveys were nearly identical, with the exception of two

questions that were only asked in the post-survey. Students were assured that the de-identifying of their survey responses would be done by a research assistant and not their teacher.

Both surveys began with an open-ended question in which students were asked: *Define racism in your own words*. At no point during the intervention was racism defined in readings, videos or by the teacher. The aim was to cull authentic definitions from students and see if students' definitions of racism changed as the result of the intervention. The assumption was that students' frequenting of social media made it more likely that they may have imbibed a simplistic definition of racism (Brown, *et al.*, 2021). The hypothesis was that, after the race intervention unit that featured diverse stories of Black Americans, students' definitions of racism would grow in complexity. After the pre-survey, I began instruction in the intervention unit with Adichie's TED Talk (2009, July). Adichie reminds that, without knowing diverse human experiences and stories, people tend to reduce groups of people into single story narratives. The intervention unit was steeped in diverse stories, and the researcher attempted to assess for growth in complexity of students' definitions of racism to determine the impact of both their exposure to diverse stories and to the "many stories" framework that Adichie advocates.

Both surveys also contained 11 questions which asked students to rate their comfort level on a Likert scale (ratings 1-5) to engage in dialogue about race across various scenarios. The first set of scenarios focused on engaging in any conversation about race with diverse interlocutors:

How comfortable would you be engaging in a discussion about race in each of the following scenarios?					
	Extremely uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Extremely comfortable
With my current English teacher	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
With a group of my friends at school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
With a group of classmates at school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
With a group of friends outside of school	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
With my family	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
With a group of strangers of a similar age range as myself	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

The second set of scenarios focused on engaging in a conversation about race with diverse interlocutors who students knew disagreed:

How comfortable would you be expressing an opinion about race in each of the following scenarios?					
	Extremely uncomfortable	Somewhat uncomfortable	Neither comfortable nor uncomfortable	Somewhat comfortable	Extremely comfortable
To a friend at school who disagrees with me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To a classmate at school who disagrees with me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To a friend outside of school who disagrees with me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To a family member who disagrees with me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐
To a stranger of a similar age range as myself who disagrees with me	☐	☐	☐	☐	☐

Finally, both surveys asked students to identify their racial identity from a list of options, with an option to elaborate further.

The post-survey also asked whether, over the course of the intervention unit, the students encountered any media that discussed the topic or race, and if so, what media content they encountered. The post-survey also asked the students, through an open-ended question, what most impacted them during the intervention unit.

Intervention Study Methods & Findings

The intervention focused on the evaluation questions:

- After encountering individual stories and experiences from people of color in the course's unit on race,
 - Are students more comfortable having discussions about race in various social and professional settings?
 - Are students more likely to engage in discussions about race with people who disagree with them?
- Two additional questions were added to the post-survey:

- *Over the past three weeks (during the intervention study), did you encounter any information on social media, the news, or other media sources about race? (An open-ended follow-up question about media exposure details was included.)*
- *How did this unit on race affect your views, and was there anything that stands out that impacted you the most? Please explain what impacted you and how this impacted you.*

Pre- and Post-Intervention Survey Comparisons

Question: *How comfortable would you be engaging in a discussion about race in each of the following scenarios?*

	Average Likert Rating	
Scenarios	Before Intervention	After Intervention
With my current English Teacher	3.9	3.9
With a group of my friends at [school]	4.1	4.1
With a group of classmates at [school]	3.6	3.5
With a group of friends outside of [school]	3.6	3.6
With my family	4.3	4.1
With a group of strangers of a similar age range as myself	2.6	3.2

Question: *How comfortable would you be expressing an opinion about race in each of the following scenarios?*

	Average Likert Rating	
Scenario	Before Intervention	After Intervention
To a friend at [school] who disagrees with me	3.3	3.3
To a classmate at [school] who disagrees with me	2.9	3.0

To a friend outside of [school] who disagrees with me	2.9	3.2
To a family member who disagrees with me	3.2	3.6
To a stranger of a similar age range as myself who disagrees with me	2.6	3.0

The shaded categories have the largest change in ratings during the course of the intervention. They are statistically significant at the 0.05 level using the following statistical investigation.

In order to test whether the students were more comfortable engaging in conversations and disagreeing with others about race, we used a Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test to compare the paired Likert ratings (before and after the intervention) for each individual to assess whether the students demonstrated a significant change in their comfort levels after the intervention.

The research confirmed that students grew in self-reported comfort to engage in conversations with strangers of the same age in general, strangers of the same age range who disagree, and family members who disagree. These findings proved statistically significant.

The second aim of the study -- to see if adding "many stories" led to more complex definitions of racism -- the qualitative analysis did not yield conclusive evidence. However, students' open-ended comments in the post-survey suggested positive growth in cognitive complexity as a result of the unit.

- "Now that we have had these discussions in class I find myself noticing when I am not aware of many stories. With this increased awareness of where I fall short, I can seek out more knowledge."
- "This unit on race really just expanded my knowledge of racial history. I think we spent a lot of time focusing on individual stories (such as the fifth-generation restaurant owners, or the black family that purchased a bed and breakfast they could all return to) that had an impact on me. A lot of my experience in a race unit in school before were very surface level and felt like they were teaching the same content -- this didn't."
- "I am now more aware that there is more than one story when it comes to a person and their background."

- “I was struck by the importance of gaining knowledge from several resources to lessen the bias present and lead me closer to gaining true knowledge.”
- “The importance of multiple stories -- to clear your mind of stereotypes and stigma.”

Students clearly reference the role of “many stories” as adding to their ability to consider multiple perspectives and honing their awareness when they need to learn “more stories” to gain greater understanding. While qualitative analysis of the survey questions did not prove that the students grew in their ability to integrate greater complexity into their definitions of racism, their open-ended responses offered some promising insights as to the impact of the “many stories” framework for the intervention unit.

Study Methodology & Limitations

The study employed an experimental design with treatment and control observations. The sample size of 42 students, involving two sets of two observations -- before the intervention and after the intervention -- which led to a total of 84 observations. The pre-survey responses reflect the baseline attitudes about race for each student, and the post-survey responses capture the effects of the intervention. The sample of 42 students is large enough to make generalizations about how the study results might apply to students at similar schools that have a character education curricula, a similar age range, and similar racial demographics.

The intervention did not employ a randomized control trial. However, the treatment and control groups are nearly identical (each student had an observation in each group). Consequently, so long as the following three limitations are addressed, this study design approximates a randomized control trial.

- First, all selected students responded to the survey. All students present in class for the first survey took both surveys, aside from one student who did not receive parent permission to participate in the study and another international exchange student. Of the three students absent on the first day, two of the students made up the survey before the following class day.
- Second, during the three-week period in which the intervention occurred, students may have been exposed to outside influences (social media, family discussions, etc.) in addition to the intervention itself. These outside influences might add to or counteract the intervention. To account for this possibility, a question in the post-survey asked students whether they had exposure to such influences. Influences from within the school were controlled for as well: no

other courses included curricula about race during the time frame of the study. Organic student discussion of the unit outside of the classroom prompted by the intervention is considered attendant to the intervention.

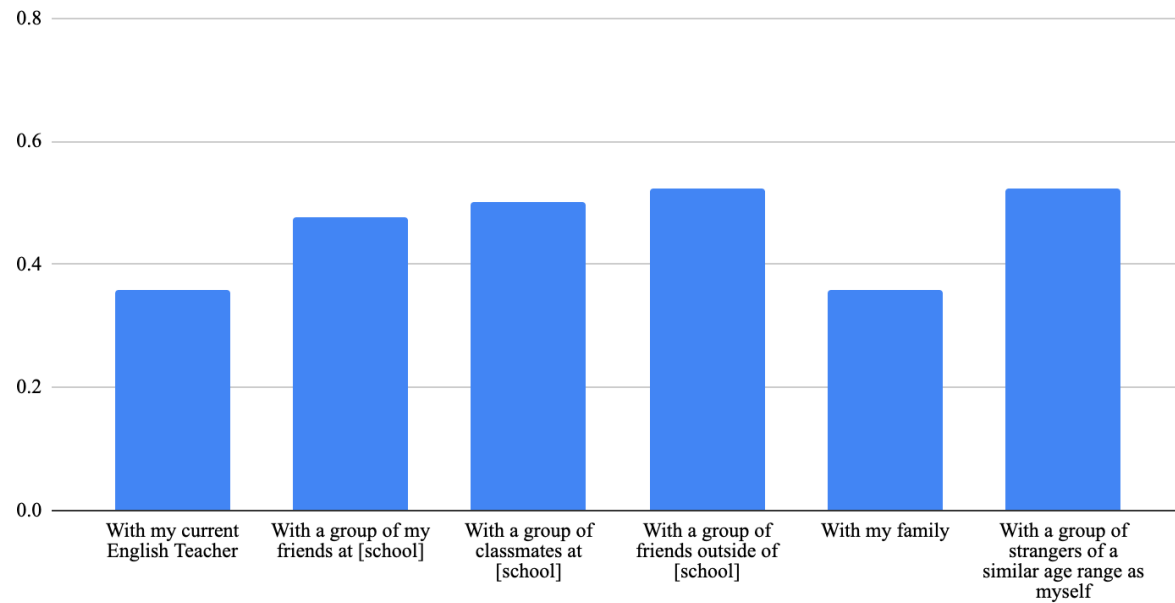
- Third, students did not demonstrate that they had artificially inflated their post-survey Likert ratings to meet “experimenter demand.” The anonymous nature of the survey, the affirmation of a researcher who was not the teacher, as well as a strong sense of trust between student and faculty in the school can counteract this possibility.

The first research cohort, 2023-24, engaged in the intervention during February, which is recognized in the U.S. as Black History Month. The second research cohort, 2024-25, participated in the intervention over the course of the 2024 presidential election. In both of these cases, student exposure to content about race may be higher than usual. The post-survey question about exposure to outside influences helps limit the degree to which these circumstances impacted our findings.

The intervention took place over the course of three weeks. While this short time frame is beneficial in limiting the level of exposure to content about race from outside sources, it also limits how much can be taught in the intervention unit. Further, students responding to the post-survey only three weeks after recording their pre-survey responses may have remembered their original responses and have remained somewhat anchored to those responses. However, even for questions that saw no change or a modest change in average student response, there was a high proportion of students changing their responses, which limits the concern about anchoring. Below are the proportion of students who changed their ratings for each question.

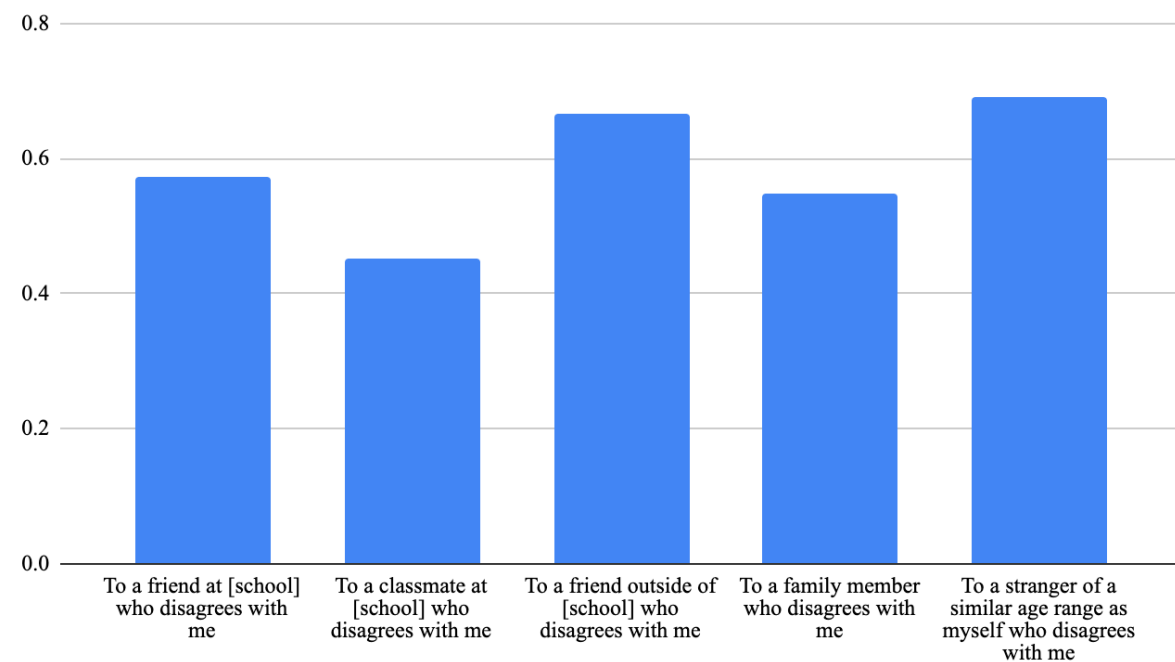
Proportion of students who changed their ratings for the question:

How comfortable would you be engaging in a discussion about race in each of the following scenarios?



Proportion of students who changed their ratings for the question:

How comfortable would you be expressing an opinion about race in each of the following scenarios?



Due to the demographic makeup of the sample, the majority of respondents were white. To ensure that the non-white student responses did not diverge significantly from the white student responses, the average change across categories was compared between these two subgroups.

An important context variable is the school's specific work to build a culture to support civic virtue through Courageous Dialogue, as documented in the Courageous Dialogue Toolkit (Whitlock & Bohlin, 2019). And, more broadly, as a school established and developed with the principles of Character Education, students are well versed in the habits for individual and community flourishing as articulated by the school's Habits of Mind, Heart & Character taxonomy. The virtues relevant to this study are taught in middle school and articulated throughout the upper school as well, including posters in each classroom. For example, related virtues that are well-known and publicized at the school include:

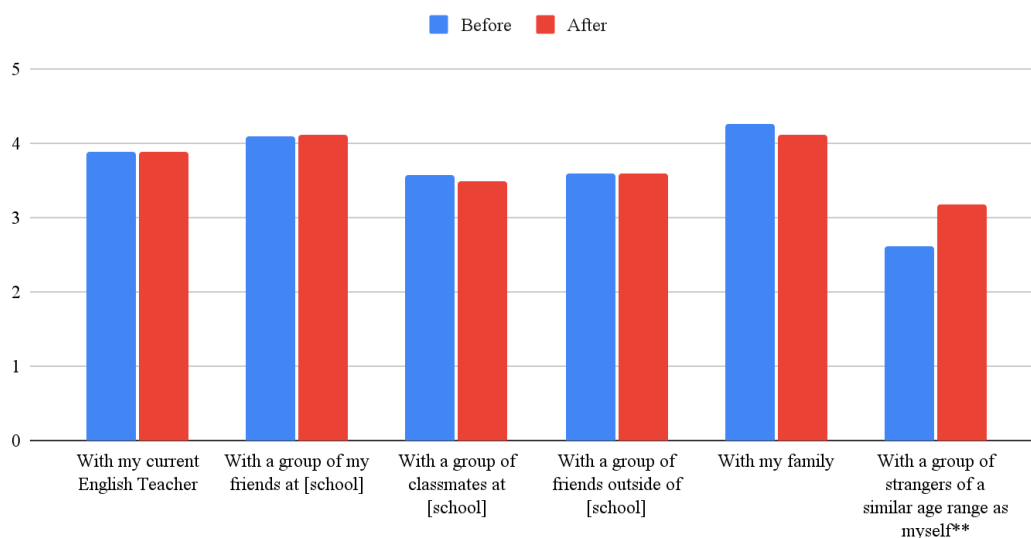
- Habits of Mind
 - **Fairmindedness:** *I listen to feedback and give a fair hearing to alternate perspectives.*
 - **Humility:** *I admit what I don't know.*
- Habits of Heart
 - **Empathy:** *I seek to understand the feelings and perspectives of others.*
 - **Respect:** *I know everyone I meet has dignity, and I treat them accordingly.*
- Habits of Character
 - **Courage:** *I do not let fear hold me back from developing my strengths, and making good choices.*
 - **Honesty:** *I seek to know, understand, and communicate truth.*

The culture of the school could contribute to high rates of comfort to engage in dialogue at school with the teacher and classmates.

While the intervention did not change perceptions of comfort to engage in conversations about race at school, the intervention revealed significant increases in comfort to engage with those outside of school -- particularly those whom students knew disagreed about race. After undergoing the unit on race, students were more comfortable engaging in a discussion about race with a group of strangers of a similar age (statistically significant at 0.05 level). Students were also more comfortable expressing opinions about race with family members who disagreed with them and with strangers of a similar age who disagreed with them (statistically significant at 0.05 level). In all three of these categories, average student responses increased by approximately 0.5 Likert points.

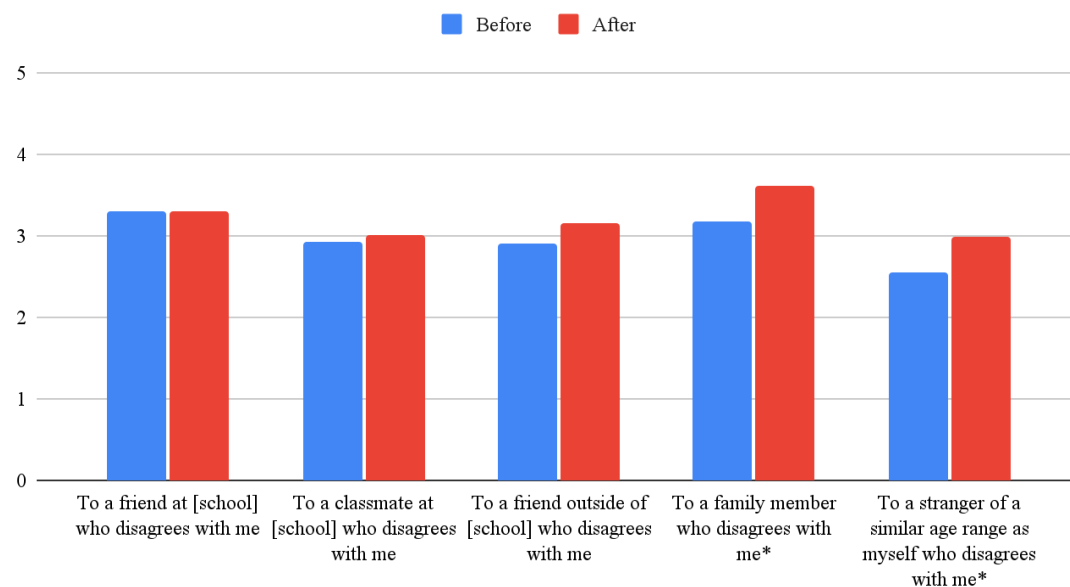
Average Likert rating for the question:

How comfortable would you be engaging in a discussion about race in each of the following scenarios?



Average Likert rating for the question:

How comfortable would you be expressing an opinion about race in each of the following scenarios?



* statistically significant at 0.05 level ** statistically significant at 0.01 level

One initial concern about the study was whether students may have outside influences driving any increases in their comfort level. To account for this, the sample of students who reported outside

influences (the news, social media, family discussions, etc.) was compared to the sample who reported no outside influences (n=23 and n=19, respectively). No significant difference was found in any categories. This indicates that the whole-sample findings were robust to outside influences and that the race intervention unit was the sole factor which drove changes in comfort level before and after the intervention.

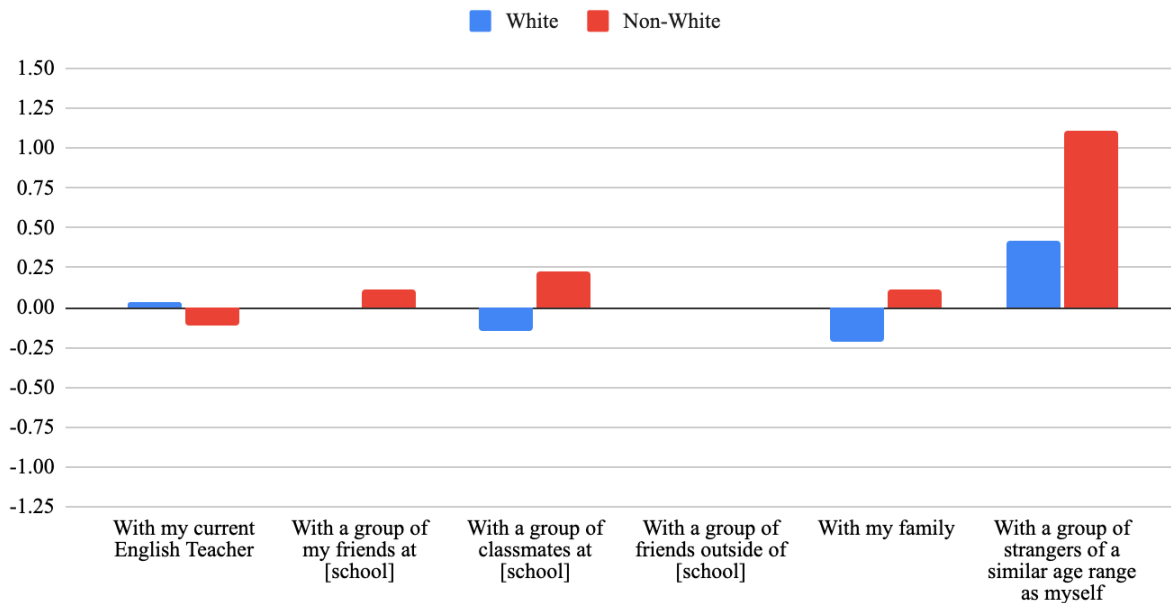
Another concern about the study was the homogeneity of the sample, which was composed of primarily white female students. In order to determine whether the intervention unit as taught was helpful for both white and non-white students, the two samples were compared as well. Of the 42 students, only nine students identified as non-white. Further division of the sample by racial identity was not studied in order to protect student anonymity. As a result of the small sample, statistical significance could not be assessed when comparing the responses between white and non-white identity. However, none of the average differences are within a standard deviation of the pooled sample.

There were some more notable differences when splitting the sample by white vs. non-white identity. First, on average, non-white students showed a much greater change in comfort level after the unit for the question about engaging with a discussion about race with a group of strangers of a similar age range. This was the most pronounced difference between the samples, with the difference at nearly 0.75 Likert points.. Second, non-white students showed a negative average change (their Likert rating decreased after the intervention) for disagreeing with a friend at school who disagrees with them. Third, non-white students had a negative average change for disagreeing with a family member and disagreeing with a stranger, at least 0.5 Likert points lower than white students. Since these two categories are two of the statistically significant categories, this differential warrants further study.

However, these differences in responses along white vs. non-white identity should be interpreted cautiously, given the small sample size of non-white respondents and the lack of conclusions that can be reached with statistical significance. The average change for each question is illustrated below by racial identity.

Average change in Likert rating by racial identity for the question:

How comfortable would you be engaging in a discussion about race in each of the following scenarios?



While students only reported statistically significant improvements in comfort engaging with a stranger, disagreeing with a family member, and disagreeing with a stranger, these three categories are arguably among the most challenging types of conversations young students could have. High initial comfort levels engaging with their friends and peers may have made improvements in other categories appear more modest. Further study could clarify whether this is the case or not.

Additionally, after implementing the survey, the authors noted that discussing race with a stranger could be perceived as verbal or online communication. These possible dimensions of communication could also be further studied.

Finally, further study is needed to determine how well students of different racial identities respond to the unit, as well as how male students may respond (due to this sample being entirely female).

Conclusions

In a culture fractured by political ideology and among teachers who have demonstrated reluctance to teach about the history of race in the U.S., Character Education offers a sturdy lifeline.

- Bohlin’s Practical Wisdom Framework™ offers a process to help students acknowledge and settle first emotional reactions in order to facilitate greater courage to engage in controversial topics such as race and to foster less emotionally-charged reflection while facilitating recalibration and practically-wise responses.
- Teaching “many stories” about the history of race in the U.S. is essential to undermine the prejudice which “single story narratives” engender.
- Highlighting the arc of triumph, rather than allowing students to remain stuck in pity, is essential to ennobling the stories of Black Americans in order to break the “single story narrative.”
- Role model exemplars and positive reference groups mitigate the effects of race trauma and expand “many stories” in teaching race in the US.
- The work of W.E.B. Dubois should be reexamined, and Dubois should be recognized as not only a character educator, but also one who offers expertise in teaching about race.

Teaching about race in the U.S. can shift from ideologically-charged advocacy lessons to greater fairmindedness with the aid of Character Education principles.

Links to articles and videos which are helpful in adding “many stories” to teaching about the history of race in the U.S.

- Video: [The Danger of a Single Story](#)
- Videos about Frederick Douglass: [Frederick Douglass](#), [Frederick Douglass in New England](#)
- Video: [Free Blacks in the North before the Civil War](#)
- Video: [History of Blacks in Oak Bluffs, Martha’s Island](#)
- Article: [Thomas Dorsey of Philadelphia](#)
- Video: [1920s Oklahoma African-American communities](#)
- Video: [Chase Family of Louisiana](#)
- Video: [Black Entrepreneurship](#)
- Video: [Elite Black High Schools](#)
- Video: [African American Higher Education](#)
- Video: [Middle Class Black Community](#)
- Article: [Campbell Family of DC](#)
- Video: [Black woman lawyer who brought down the mob](#)
- Video: [First black doctor in Arizona](#)
- Video: [History of Doctors in Indiana](#)

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