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# “They just wanted to move on”: A qualitative study on the experiences of Black students in classroom discussions on race

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The current study used qualitative methods to explore what classroom conversations around race and social justice look like for Black high school students and the role of technology in these conversations at a time when most students were engaged in hybrid or distance learning. Through semi-structured interviews, 16 students recounted their experiences discussing contemporary racial justice issues in school. Participants recalled experiences throughout their schooling in traditional classrooms and more recent incidents in the context of distance learning. Findings revealed that Black students take on much of the labor of educating their classmates and teachers about racial justice issues in class. They also highlighted the importance of safety when having these conversations. Concerning those discussions occurring in virtual settings, students described how technology promoted an environment in which Black students felt safer having these dialogues. Findings from this study emphasize the complex roles that Black students play in cultivating learning environments that raise the critical racial consciousness of everyone in the classroom, including teachers. Digital classrooms and spaces can also potentially serve as an environment in which Black students feel safe to explore and express their perspectives fully. These findings also further highlight the need to build the capacity of educators to facilitate conversations and hold space for all students to make sense of and cope when issues of racial injustice are at play and affecting students’ lives and mental health.

## KEYWORDS

classroom discussions, black student experiences, digital learning, racial justice, school ethnic-racial socialization

## Introduction

In her book entitled *We Want to Do More than Survive. We want to Thrive: Abolitionist Teaching and the Pursuit of Educational Freedom* (Love, 2019), Bettina Love writes, “Children of color attending schools that do not help them interpret the racist, sexist, Islamophobic, patriarchal, homophobic transphobic, and xenophobic world in which they live is not only maintaining the status quo but also ensuring that whiteness, patriarchy, and hate are never

disrupted and challenged. Thus, white supremacy stays on track” (p.86). Love articulates the obligation of education to teach students of color how to interpret and resist oppressive systems to disrupt them. Beginning in 2020, Black students were navigating their social environments at the height of social unrest as racial injustice and antiblack violence were displayed internationally. Additionally, they were navigating learning in a global pandemic that was disproportionately affecting and continues to affect Black families and communities physically, financially, and emotionally. This unprecedented context presented an urgent research opportunity to examine Black students’ academic experiences and how they navigated conversations about race-related topics in their educational environments. The current study used a qualitative approach to understand how Black high school students perceive discussions about racial justice issues in their classrooms.

A qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Black students in academic spaces discussing historical and contemporary racial justice issues. Moreover, adolescence is a developmental period in which young people begin to think more critically and expand their social and political identities (Finlay et al., 2010). For Black adolescents, their experiences are racialized in ways that make race a salient social identity to explore. As such, school becomes a socializing agent in which Black students can make sense of their own experiences and apply them to those of Black people in their communities and the broader national context.

## School racial-ethnic socialization

School racial-ethnic socialization (RES), a growing area of research, refers to the explicit and implicit ways schools communicate messages about race and culture (Byrd and Hope, 2020). These messages are conveyed by a pre-established curriculum and through norms, structure, and policies (Wills et al., 2004; Byrd and Hope, 2020). Early school RES scholars used research on parent RES combined with research on multicultural education to analyze school racial climate in five dimensions. These five dimensions include the promotion of cultural competence, cultural socialization, mainstream socialization, colorblind socialization, and critical consciousness socialization. One of the ways that school RES messages can be transmitted is through explicit conversations about racial justice issues in class.

## Talking race in class

In a review of research on classroom conversations of race, Brown et al. (2017) situate race-related conversations in classrooms as being (1) curricular, (2) discursive, or (3) disruptive with implications for how students and educators understand a racialized society. Curricular conversations refer to the pedagogical strategies used to plan for these conversations, including texts, tasks, and concepts to highlight. Relatedly,

discursive conversations refer to the role of language and the linguistic tools used in these conversations. Disruptive conversations use critical approaches to interrogate and use counternarratives to move away from narratives and ideologies that uphold white supremacy. This category aims to leverage the complexity of racial justice discourse and allows for open discussion and unresolved dialogue. Additionally, disruptive conversations recognize silence and students’ and teachers’ strategies for using discourse to protect themselves and build community. This review explicitly highlights how teachers can or should facilitate discussions using these logics to disrupt inequalities. However, less is known about how students, particularly Black students, are contributing to and experiencing these conversations as they become more common in United States classrooms. While discussions of race have been more visible in the mainstream and social media over the last decade (Walters, 2007), events such as the killings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor by police led to global protests and a national conversation about racial injustice in the United States. As a result, schools and educators have had to decide whether they will have conversations that address these events (Jones, 2021). Teachers have historically avoided these conversations as they are not always equipped with the tools to tackle these complex and sometimes controversial topics with students (Pollock, 2009).

## Difficulty in talking race in class

Teacher educators have proposed and advocated for teachers to be adequately trained to teach and help students understand racial differences in ways that reduce prejudice (Banks, 1996). Given that the public school system in the United States serves a majority of students from racially minoritized backgrounds, these skills are more critical than ever before. However, discussing race and racism remains a challenge. The challenge of facilitating these discussions effectively is often seen as an added burden on teachers to include in an already packed curriculum, as opposed to being viewed as a central goal for student experiences (Bolgatz, 2005). Additionally, there is often a sentiment that discussing race and racism could potentially perpetuate racism (Hooks, 1994; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Bolgatz, 2005). Research has shown that white teachers often are uncomfortable talking about whiteness (McIntyre, 2003), avoid explicitly discussing race in the teaching of United States History (Almarza and Fehn, 1998), and will even avoid the topic of race when they are using texts with explicitly racial content (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

As a result of this discomfort, students of color have been shown to recognize this “silence” as it relates to issues of race and racism. In a recent study examining Black students’ perceptions of school racial climate, Byrd and Hope (2020) conceptualize silence as “a noticeable lack of content about race from their teachers and school and ambiguity.” Students can acknowledge they have heard messages about race while at school but cannot describe what they are or recount a more specific example. Students in the study expressed disappointment in the absence of meaningful discussions and curriculum addressing race and Blackness.

## Talking race in digital contexts

In addition to considering the nature of race-related dialogue in traditional classrooms, it is imperative to consider other social contexts in which youth engage in discourse around race and racial justice. Notably, Black youth have become thought leaders and activists in digital spaces (Tanksley, 2016). Social media has become an essential space for discussing racial justice issues, and Black young people have been at the forefront of some of these conversations (Tanksley, 2022). Researchers have examined how race manifests in online discourse and experiences and how they intersect with those offline. Notably, scholars have found that racialized online experiences have implications for Black students' academic experiences (Tynes et al., 2013; Hurd et al., 2022). Less is known about the nature of conversations around race in virtual academic classrooms, particularly k-12 classrooms. The academic context in which the current study data was collected is non-traditional in that students were navigating virtual classrooms and learning management systems. The distance learning contexts provided a unique research opportunity to explore the nature of conversations around race and racial justice through the lens of Black students who have also navigated these conversations in traditional classrooms. This context also exposed a need to understand digital technologies' role in these conversations.

## Current study

As stated above, the present study aims to explore the nature of conversations about race and contemporary racial justice issues in high school classrooms as perceived by Black students. Through semi-structured interviews with Black high school students, I aim to think critically about the role of technology in these classroom conversations. While I acknowledge that these discussions can be sources of socialization for Black adolescents, I also acknowledge that these discussions do not fit neatly within current conceptualizations of school ethnic-racial socialization in the literature. These discussions likely encompass multiple dimensions of ERS depending on how productive or helpful students perceive them. Research on multicultural education and related constructs suggests that teachers are often most comfortable with conversations that promote cultural competence and cultural socialization in schools (Byrd and Hope, 2020). Teachers are less likely to feel comfortable having conversations about racism and oppression. Thus, it is likely that such discomfort has implications for how these discussions are facilitated and their potential to be helpful or harmful for Black students, specifically.

The current study is guided by the following questions:

1. What is the nature of conversations around race in high school classrooms?
2. In what ways, if at all, are these conversations useful for Black students?

3. What is the role of technology in these conversations in the context of distance learning?

## Materials and methods

### Participants and recruitment

The Institutional Review Board approved the current study at the University of Southern California, where the study was initiated. The sample included 16 self-identified Black students in grades 9–12, mixed in gender. Table 1 summarizes the gender, grade, age, and type of school participants attend. Of note, little is known about the specific racial demographics of the schools that participants attended. Students informally named whether they attended a school with majority white or Black students and whether they had majority white or Black teachers. Only three participants explicitly named attending a school where the majority of students were also Black. These students attended traditional public schools. The remainder of the students expressed that they were a numerical minority in their schools and classes.

Recruitment was done using snowball sampling. I initially advertised the study using my social networks online and offline networks that circulated the recruitment flyer to their networks. Interested parties reached out *via* email. Once an interested party emailed, they received and completed a google form that determined if they met the criteria for the survey, indicated whether they were 18 or 17 and under, and provided their contact information and contact information for parents if they were minors. For those who met the criteria, parents were emailed a consent form to be signed electronically by them and the student. Only once consent and assent were received were participants scheduled for zoom interviews. Participants who were already 18 were sent consent forms to be signed electronically and returned before scheduling an interview.

### Materials and procedures

Once consent/assent forms were returned, participants received a zoom invitation *via* email that included the date and time of the interview. Once in the Zoom room, I reviewed the purpose of the study once more. I also asked the participant for permission to record the interview. If the participant granted permission to record, I asked them to choose a pseudonym and provided them with instructions to change their display name on zoom to that pseudonym. I then started the recording.

In these 45-min long semi-structured interviews, participants were asked to describe a time when they discussed race-related issues that were publicized in the news at school. Probes encouraged students to give details about the conversation, their perceptions, and their responses. The interview moved on to ask about what they would like to see from teachers and in classrooms as it related to learning how to discuss and address these issues.

TABLE 1 Sample demographics.

Pseudonym	Gender	Grade	Age	School type
Alexis	Girl	11th	16	Traditional Public
Anne	Girl	10th	15	Traditional Public
Brooke	Girl	12th	17	Traditional Public
Chanee	Girl	11th	16	Public Charter
Chloe	Girl	12th	17	Catholic Private
Donte	Boy	10th	15	Traditional Public
India	Girl	10th	15	Independent Private
Jamal	Boy	11th	16	Traditional Public
Justin	Boy	10th	15	Traditional Public
Kayla	Girl	12th	17	Traditional Public
Kelly	Girl	9th	15	Traditional Public
Lima	Girl	9th	14	Private Online
Megan	Girl	10th	15	Traditional Public
Mykia	Girl	12th	17	Traditional Public
Reilly	Girl	10th	15	Traditional Public
Shante	Girl	12th	17	Traditional Public

Each interview was transcribed and uploaded with no personal identifying information. Given the sensitive nature of race-related topics, participants were also given a list of mental health resources at the conclusion of the interview.

## Analysis

I took a deductive and inductive analytic approach. Thematic analysis was used to systematically analyze the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006). First, transcripts were uploaded and stored in Nvivo. I, along with a research assistant who identifies as a Black woman, read interview transcripts and developed a coding scheme that included any topics related to classroom conversations around race, social justice issues, and the role of

technology. In the first round of coding, nine codes were identified: (1) race in the curriculum, (2) race in the news, (3) Black Lives Matter, (4) race on social media, (5) Donald Trump, (6) teacher silence on race (7) Conflict (8) Student Discomfort and (9) Teacher discomfort. Within each of these codes, subcodes were created to specify further how the data was categorized under each code. The creation of subcodes was informed by previous literature on classroom conversations of race and constructs emerging in the data as identified by the research assistant and me. I then re-read all 16 transcripts, engaged in another coding round in NVivo, and wrote memos noting trends while coding. I then read through the research assistant's memos and excerpts in NVivo to indicate observable patterns in the data. I reviewed these with the research assistant to share, discuss, and interpret the memos and excerpts coded. The final agreed-upon themes were chosen based on their relevance to the research questions.

## Ensuring trustworthiness

Given the salient similarities and nuanced differences across my identity and the identities of my participants, I employed many approaches to strengthen the trustworthiness of this work using Nowell et al. (2017) approach to meeting trustworthiness criteria. For example, in preparing the protocol for this study, I commissioned a youth advisory board (YAB) of three Black high school students, two girls and one boy, who reviewed interview questions and consulted on the phrasing and wording of protocol questions to ensure questions were understood in the ways they were intended to be. The YAB also provided feedback on emerging themes and overall findings as their social identities reflected those of the study participants.

## Positionality

The author, a Black woman, conducted all interviews. As a Black woman, who was at the time of data collection a graduate student researcher, I was empowered by my positionality in conducting this study. As is the case for all researchers, my identities and life experiences inspired this inquiry of research and how I collected, coded, analyzed, and understood the data. Additionally, as a researcher who examines the role of digital experiences on academic and digital development in Black youth, my expertise also informed my use of technology for participant recruitment and data collection. Lastly, my social position and identities also informed my engagement with participants during the interview process. As previously mentioned, data for this study was collected in 2021. More specifically, interviews were conducted just 2 months after the capitol insurrection while COVID-19 was devastating Black communities. The sociopolitical context and my identity as a Black woman, who is also a student shape the lens through which the data was collected, analyzed, and interpreted.

## Results

The current study explored the nature and utility of classroom conversations about race. Generally, participants highlighted where and in what courses topics of race were most often discussed, as well as their roles as leaders in these conversations. Additionally, students identified moments in which teachers misstepped or did not correct students' missteps. In describing their most recent conversations often taking place in virtual classrooms, technology consistently came up as playing a role in how conversations were perceived, as well as the overall outcomes of the discussions. In what follows, I specify and describe these general themes in more detail.

### The nature of race-related conversations in classrooms

The first research question was descriptive and the results described below highlight the academic context in which conversations about race were taking place. Students often highlighted (a) the curricular context or subject matter of the course in which the conversation took place, (b) missed opportunities for intervention, and (c) teachable moments in which students often acted as experts or authorities on matters related to racial justice.

#### Curricular context/course subject matter

When it came to discussing where and when conversations about broad racial topics occurred, students mentioned History and English courses. Donte, 10th grade, said "Last time I can remember we talked about Black history would be like eighth grade, and that's because we were reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* or no. Ninth grade and it was in my English class. It wasn't positive history. It was slavery, so ...". Here Donte reflects on the last time he remembers there being a conversation related to race, and specifically, Black history in his courses. He references his English course from the previous year and notes that it was not being discussed positively. Chloe, 12th grade, on the other hand, has had a different experience attending a Catholic school and shares her experiences talking about race-related topics in her classes. She shares:

I would say because since most of what happened with the Black Lives Matter movement was in the summer, they did hold prayer services where again, they did pray about the situation, but it wasn't really like an open discussion kind of thing. But I would say that we do dwell on it in history class. So definitely in my history class, we do talk about race and how that plays a part in America and how some people have to work harder than others. We did talk about that in history, not so much in my other classes, not because I don't care about it, but it does not really go with their own curriculum. So I think that's why. Usually they do in English because it's

kind of like you are writing, you can be creative and write about your struggles, but I would say definitely in English and even religion, since I do take that, we do talk about it in, I would say History, Religion, and English more so just because you can kind of write about it and reflect on it and it kind of ties in with their curriculum.

Similar to Donte, Chloe identifies English as a course where conversations about race-related topics occur. Additionally, she names history and religion as courses where her teachers talk about issues related to inequality and oppression in the curriculum. Brooke, 12th grade, shares that her history teacher has not only discussed historical issues of race and racism, but they have also discussed more contemporary racial issues. She says, "I would say they did talk about racism prior to the Capitol and what has happened there. We did talk about the race issue in the sixties and even before that, but then also in history class, we'll talk about the race issue today. So you kind of talk about it in this class." In these examples of teachers making the effort to incorporate discussions of race or culturally relevant pedagogy into the curriculum, history, and English courses are most commonly named. When asked to describe the nature of her experiences in these classes related to race, Megan, 10th grade, goes on to describe an instance that occurred and left an impression before the beginning of the school year. Megan shares:

But, when my English teacher put out the syllabus for this year, I kid you not, the first picture that was on there was of the Freedom Riders getting beat up. So, I was confused. I was like, "Wait a minute. This is the first time, this is your syllabus and your welcome letter. This is how I get to know who you are as a person and the first picture you want to show me is this? Okay."

In her description, Megan expresses confusion about the teacher's choice to use a violent image that is a representation of historical racialized violence toward Black people on the syllabus. In her statement, she expressed concern about the lack of contextual introduction to the image as it is the student's first introduction to the teacher and the course content.

#### Teacher missed opportunities for intervention

In discussing their experiences engaging in conversations or discussions related to race, Black students often indirectly described missed opportunities for teacher intervention. For example, Megan describes an instance where a white student in her virtual classroom, who she identified as a "proud Trump supporter" was making derogatory and inflammatory comments about the Black Lives Matter organization. It is important to note that Megan's choice to name her peer as a "proud Trump supporter" in the context of this interaction implies a connection that she is making between being a Trump supporter and having negative attitudes toward the Black Lives Matter organization. Megan shared that she responded to the student and was visibly



upset in the moment. When asked if or how her teacher responded, she shared:

I mean, they did agree with me and say, “Yes, Black Lives Matter. It’s true what they are saying,” and they kind of just wanted to move on. My teacher called me and another student after class who had been the one speaking up to these people, and he told us that he does fully agree with us and he just doesn’t want us to get attacked, because he said that based on a lot of the assignments that some of those students had turned in, he knows their points of view and he knows that it would not go well if we were to argue over distance learning, so he wants to protect us by just, everyone gets their say and then we move on.

In this excerpt, Megan shares that the teacher does verbally agree with her at the moment. However, there is no discussion about why the student made those comments or why they may be harmful to students in the classroom because “they kind of just wanted to move on.” Megan also names the fact that the teacher called her and another student after the class to check in and provide affirmation to their comments and feelings. The teacher also justifies their actions or lack thereof in class by suggesting that engaging in further dialogue around the topic would potentially lead to an argument. Thus, suggesting that allowing everyone to “get their say” and move on was the best solution for everyone.

In another example, Alexis, 11th grade, describes an instance where a white student in her class would make comments about her hair and often self-identify as Black because her white grandmother lived in Egypt, but was not from there. Alexis often found those comments offensive given the historical racialization and subjugation of Black people in America. One cannot simply “take up” being Black. Additionally, when Alexis wore braids in her hair, the student would pat her own head mocking the gesture Alexis would do if her braids were itching. When asked if or how her teachers responded when the student would make those derogatory comments, Alexis replied “Most teachers did not do anything.” Alexis goes on to say of her history teacher:

I don’t think he really understood what was happening, to be very honest. And, that’s something I rarely ever say about somebody. But, I think he genuinely did not know that she was mocking me, at times. But then, I think sometimes he did know because then he would mock her right back and do like jabs at her. So I’m like, ‘Okay, maybe he does know,’ but, yeah.

Here, Alexis expresses that she cannot determine whether or not the teacher understands that the student is inflicting harm. However, she also notes that the teacher may understand to an extent based on his mocking behavior toward the student. Here is another missed opportunity for the teacher to intervene in a thoughtful and meaningful way to address the racialized nature of the comments and mockery toward Alexis.

Lastly, Chloe, a senior in high school, describes a recent incident following the Capitol insurrection which took place on January 6, 2021. Chloe shares that her school community talked about the insurrection in most of her classes the following day and describes a moment during the discussion in which she says:

When we were talking about the Capitol, someone in my class brought up how some of the protesters are Antifa and no one said anything. And then one of my friends behind me texted me and was like. This was when we were virtual. So we were online, and she brought up how she heard that some of the protesters were Antifa, then my friend texted me and was like, “what? do you hear what’s going on?” And I texted her back and I was like, “yeah I know because Antifa had nothing to do with that and they said that.” I guess there are sometimes when it’s not racist, but it’s kind of dumb because some people like do not do their research. I would say it’s a dumb comment where they just kind of do not pay attention to what’s going on. Then they say a comment that’s not true.

In this example, Chloe articulates that her classmate made a comment alluding to the fact that another organization, commonly associated with Black Americans, was involved in storming the Capitol in Washington DC on January 6, 2021. Chloe says “no one said anything.” Here is just one more example of a missed opportunity for impactful dialogue in which students could have potentially learned more about how and from where these false narratives originate and the ways they are often racialized with deep roots in antiblackness. While this section has highlighted missed opportunities for teacher intervention, the following section highlights instances in which Black students took it upon themselves to speak up or “teach” their peers, and in some cases their teachers during race-related conversations.

### Black students’ teachable moments

Across interviews, Black students often highlighted instances during classroom discussions where they felt they needed to “educate” their classmates, and in some cases, the teachers on race-related issues. They also discuss moments where they were the only ones who spoke up in defense of themselves as Black students, as well as, the Black Lives Matter Movement when students were misinformed or made racist comments. For instance, Justin, 10th grade, describes conversations about George Floyd and police brutality that took place in his history class. He says:

I don’t really bring it up. I don’t bring it up out of the blue, but there are a lot of people who have misconceptions in my grade and in my classes, and so when they say something false, I’m the first one to shut it down because I know for a fact it’s wrong and I’m not going to let them tell other people something they don’t even know anything about. So I’ll unmute immediately and shut it down, and typically my teachers are on my side, so it’s not too difficult.

In another case, Anne, 10th grade, explains that she is often the only person to acknowledge and speak out against issues of racism in her classes. However, she acknowledges that some non-Black students posted on social media in solidarity, particularly around the time of the racial unrest amid the killing of George Floyd last summer. Anne shares:

I know that some post on their [Instagram] stories, especially, as I mentioned, closer to June of last year, but I don't know if there's actively someone who's not black who does that. I don't have any other black person in my class. All the other black people in my school are either a grade above or a grade below me. Actually, that's not true. Maybe there's one black person in my grade who still goes to this school, but if it's not me, then I don't know who else it is. Typically it's a person of color.

Anne names the fact that she is one of few Black students in her school yet takes on most of the labor required to address and educate students on race-related topics in her classes. Her experiences mirror those of other participants. Megan describes a time when she was assigned a group project in which students were to propose a solution to a social issue. While Megan wanted to propose a solution to police brutality, she explained that students in her group did not think that police brutality was an issue and instead wanted to do a project related to gun control. Megan shared that New Jersey already had some of the strictest gun laws in the country, but had a pervasive issue with police brutality. Megan pushed the group to reconsider and ultimately was able to convince her team to research and present on police brutality. Below is an excerpt of Megan's interview in which she describes her presentation to the class.

So then, what I did was, which was petty, but it also did scar some children, which I feel really bad about, was I played the censored version of the Rodney King video, in class, part of my presentation. I played it. I made them watch it, for 42 minutes. We talked about it. And, my teacher let me...I was like, "Wait, you are going to let me do this?" So, she did it. And, that's when the offensive comments for that project stopped because I made them watch it. I was like, "Look, we have this project, and if we have a chance to talk to the people that run this state and possibly that run the country, then we are going to take it."

Throughout her interview, Megan describes moments like this one in which she is acting as an advocate and educator of social justice-related issues in her classes and school, writ large. She even talks about starting a Black Student Union at her school and encountering pushback from parents of non-Black students for their programming designed to celebrate African American culture and raise awareness of social justice issues in their community and the broader United States.

As described in each of these excerpts, Black students often feel like they are, in some cases, the only ones in their classes that

educate students on these topics and work hard to make people understand the harm that is done to Black people in this country, even in the face of pushback from students, and sometimes authority figures. Shante, 12th grade, describes how she has to analogize Black people's experience with those from other groups to help students empathize and understand. Shante explains:

One of the kids in my history class. So then, what I did was, he was Jewish, so I related it to the Holocaust. I said, "So, back then, the Holocaust was okay? It was okay to judge people because they were Jewish?" He said, "Well, no." I said, "It's the same thing."

And people said, "Well, why didn't the slaves just leave?" I said, "Well, why didn't the Jews just leave? ..." They said, "Well, their soldiers had their homes." I said, "Well, my ancestors' homes were in Africa, so ..." And they are like, "Well, why didn't they just rebel?" My argument was always, because in this town they are mainly Jewish. My argument is always, "Well, why didn't the Jews just rebel?"

In each of these examples, Black high school students can identify and describe moments in which they have to choose whether to educate their peers or allow misinformation or harmful rhetoric to persist in the classroom. While they may not always be the person to initiate these conversations, Black students are playing important roles in shaping these classroom dialogues with little to no external incentives. In the following section, I describe students' perceptions of these conversations' usefulness in (virtual) classrooms.

## Utility of Race-related conversations for Black students

The results in this section describe how students spoke about the utility of classroom conversations related to race and racial justice. When asked how useful these dialogues are, students often communicated mixed perspectives. They expressed that these conversations were necessary, but also identified potentially negative implications when they are not adequately guided and provided with accurate information.

### Usefulness of conversations

Jamal, 11th grade, speaks directly to the ways that these conversations can potentially lead to uncomfortable interactions for him, personally. He says:

I would say that sometimes it is a hurt because if I were to be asked to work with that student maybe in a breakout room, it would be much harder for me to be nice and participate with them, especially knowing that I can do it on my own. So I would probably leave them in the dark, but it could help also, just knowing who supports me or is just

not against me. They don't even have to like me. Just knowing that you are fine with my race is good enough for me.

Conversely, Mykia, 12th grade, speaks in more pronounced ways about how these dialogues can be beneficial for students, particularly, white students. She also speaks about how, in some cases, these conversations can potentially lead to her feeling more supported by her white classmates and friends, Mykia shares:

I would say it's helped me kind of just open my eyes to certain things that have been happening in there, especially it's opened my friend's eyes to other things that happen in America. I know some of my friends are white, so I know some things they cannot relate to, but now it's kind of like, they all have been learning about it and reading about it and doing their research to see what goes on and what has been happening and how it affects them. I do know over the summer I was flooded with text messages from my friends who were white, just asking me if I was okay, if I needed anything if I ever needed to talk to, they were there just because they saw what was happening. I think it does, whenever we do have those discussions, it does help me see people in a different light and it does help me kind of grow as a person and kind of understand situations more on a deeper level.

Mykia and Jamal speak about how these classroom conversations around race have been useful and the implications for students, socially. Another student, India, discussed how these conversations can be beneficial for learning academic content, as well. India, 10th grade, shares:

I think it does. It kind of makes the class more interesting when we have discussions rather than kind of just listening to a teacher talk to you about. I mean I'm in a politics class, so it's kind of more interesting talking about things that have happened over the summer and that have been happening now instead of kind of just talking about politics. It does make it more interesting.

Here, India is speaking to the ways that bringing in relevant real-world examples can make the curricular content more interesting for students and foster deeper connections to academic material. Megan, like Jamal, has mixed feelings about having the conversations. She articulates the complexities of these conversations and the necessity of adequate support and education for them to be productive.

I think they are very useful and helpful because you are going to come in contact with people who are different than you. You're not always going to know what they are going through. Even with their race, you are not going to know. Because a

white person's not going to understand the pain that I feel. So, I think it's helpful, but only if the right education is given...

But, I think there's the wrong information. Then that's when it becomes more harmful than helpful. Because, then, they are not getting the issue.

Megan explicitly states that these conversations can be "harmful" when inaccurate information is being communicated or allowed in the space. However, she also expressed a belief in the promise of these conversations to help promote understanding and compassion across racial-ethnic groups. In a time where racial and social unrest is at its peak and a pandemic that is ravaging racially minoritized communities and families, creating spaces that promote empathy and understanding is critical.

## The role of digital technology

Throughout these interviews, the role of technology came up both directly and indirectly. Across the described themes, students refer to the virtual classrooms and the roles they play in engaging in some of these difficult conversations regarding race and social justice issues as compared to in-person conversations. Themes including engagement, safety emerged, and technology as an extended classroom space are discussed.

## Engagement

Students highlighted the ways that technology both promoted and inhibited engagement in race-related conversations. Chaneé, 11th grade shared:

Distance learning and people not turning on their cameras, not turning on their mics, not typing in the chat, I really don't know how a lot of my other classmates feel. I know how my Black classmates feel; there are like five of us at school. I follow them on Instagram and I know how they feel, but otherwise, I have no idea if it's really a helpful conversation or if they're even listening.

Chaneé describes what she perceives as a lack of engagement during some of these conversations as a result of the virtual platform they are using to interact. She expressed how some of the platform's features make it more difficult to determine how students are feeling about the conversations or whether or not they care to have them. Chaneé also communicates that she knows where her Black schoolmates stand on these issues based on their social media presence, which underscores how technology and virtual communities can promote engagement in such conversations outside of the classroom and still have implications for how Black students experience these conversations inside of their classrooms. Megan shared a similar perspective related to not being able to have these conversations in person.



So, whereas, when we were in school, it was a lot easier to argue. I was able to get my point across, and you can't mute yourself. You can't turn off your video. When it comes to those conversations, I hate that we have to have them on Zoom. But, safety's first, of course. But, I'd rather have those in person, so I can make the person look at me.

Chanee and Megan, who are both outgoing and highly engaged students in their classes, find the virtual facilitation to be limiting in some ways as it relates to having meaningful dialogue.

## Safety

Themes surrounding "safety" also emerged. Anne, speaks about how technology has made her feel safe in expressing her thoughts during race-related conversations in school. She says:

I feel like having these conversations through distance learning is easier for me. If we had to do it in school, I would in a heartbeat, but it's just easier knowing that if anyone attacks me, I can mute them, but also if we were in school, I don't know what would happen to me because there are a lot of Trump supporters who are proud, and they make their intentions clear. So I don't know if they would just do something crazy like those people at the Capital. I really don't.

In this quote, Anne is speaking about the ways that technology can promote safety for Black students engaging in conversations with students from other racial-ethnic groups. She references the insurrection at the capitol building in Washington DC on January 6, 2021, which was 2 months before data collection, and compares the insurrectionists to Trump-supporting students in her classes. However, she says that having these conversations virtually allows for a level of distance and protection from being "attacked." She also mentions that when someone says something harmful, the mute feature on Zoom helps minimize the potential severity of the harm. Kelly, 9th grade, speaks, similarly, to the ways that virtual classrooms have allowed students to feel safe to express themselves in these conversations. She references the benefits of the private direct messaging function for communicating points anonymously to the class through the teacher and having the autonomy to be able to choose whether they want their identities attached to their comments. Kelly says:

Normally when we have conversations like these if we don't want to have our name attached to it, we could send a private chat to a teacher and they can just read. They could just read what we typed and not say our names to it. If people don't want to know what other people said, they don't really have to know, but if we do feel confident enough to share with everyone, we are allowed to do that too.

In this instance, Kelly recognizes the vulnerability that these conversations require, and the importance of feeling safe to express your opinions and concerns related to race and social

justice issues. In her interview, Lima, 9th grade, describes a moment when her teacher, a white woman, read "the N-word" aloud while reading an assigned text. She expresses that students were visibly upset and addressed her. Lima says, "Because, in other classes when she said the N-word from the book, they had gone off on her in the Zoom, and then they left." (Lima says that students "left," meaning they left the zoom room). This is important because the virtual context shaped the way students were able to react to this teacher. Students may not have felt as empowered to stand up for themselves or leave a physical classroom and would have been made to sit with their discomfort and triggers.

Another student, Chloe, talks about another approach to responding to harm during these conversations. In this case, technology continues to provide opportunities for students to deal with their emotions in these moments. Unlike Lima who described how students reacted in a zoom classroom in the moment, Chloe references how she and her classmates have used group chats to validate one another and share their concerns or disagreement with how a teacher addressed a Black student who did not have their zoom camera on during class. Chloe shared that the teacher commented on the student not having money to afford broader bandwidth for her family's wifi. Students took offense to this comment and took the conversation to their group chat.

Chloe: We didn't really respond to her, but we do have a group chat. In the group chat, a lot of people were saying, "Why did she have to say it like that?" We did actually tell my friend about what had happened and what she had said.

In this scenario, technology is again being used to create safe spaces for students outside of the "classroom" to discuss what is taking place in the "classroom," particularly when the harm is being done by a teacher or another authority figure. Students take it upon themselves to create these spaces.

## Discussion

The current study used qualitative methods to explore what classroom conversations around race and social justice look like for Black high school students and the role of technology in these conversations at a time when most students are engaging in hybrid or distance learning. Overall, students expressed that these conversations typically took place in English and history courses, which is consistent with literature exploring classroom conversations of race (Bloome et al., 2005; Bolgatz, 2006). However, some participants also mentioned that teachers in other courses outside of English and history made attempts at facilitating dialogues when there were highly publicized race-related incidents, such as the capital insurrection or a police shooting. While generally, it seemed that Black students perceived their teachers as well-intentioned, they also described moments where teachers missed opportunities for intervention. In these

cases, students had to act as experts on these issues in the classroom. These findings reflect literature that suggests that teachers in the United States often shy away from conversations about race due to feelings of discomfort or fear of being perceived as racist, as well as, the fact that schools rarely take a critical approach to racial justice issues (Ladson-Billings, 2004; Byrd and Hope, 2020).

The teachers described in this study seemed to have the desire to introduce some of these topics of race and diversity but did not necessarily have the skill or training to manage these conversations in ways that make Black students feel safe and seen. Black students described moments where tensions would arise between students in class, and the response from teachers would be to end the conversation. In these moments, students were asked to move on to another topic. However, for many of them, it is very difficult to continue with the course content as usual after experiencing harm from the comments of a classmate with no direct response from the teacher at that moment. Students' acknowledgment and naming of these moments in this study support research that shows that high school students understand when teachers are not equipped or supported in discussing racial injustice and oppression in school (Hope et al., 2015). Findings indicated that teachers and other non-Black students would reach out to Black students after class to check in or express their agreement with their perspectives, but in those moments of the incident, Black students felt they were alone in their perspectives and their support of racial justice and Black Lives.

The analysis also revealed safety was a concern for Black students engaging in these dialogues. Notably, students were vocal about the recent insurrection that took place in Washington and made comments about not knowing what [white] people might do after witnessing that incident. However, students rarely mentioned shying away from these conversations. They advocated for having them and spoke in depth about the importance and utility of having these conversations in class as a means of demonstrating a commitment and valuation of Black people and the urgency of finding a solution to racial violence and injustice. Students often took up this work themselves by speaking out in class and creating groups and clubs, in person and virtually, that provided learning experiences for their classmates and entire school communities around issues of racial justice and antiblackness. Additionally, these groups allowed Black students to celebrate their Blackness and culture by, in one case, providing Black History Month programming for the entire school, to which they experienced pushback and negative responses from adults in the community. These findings are consistent with early education research on classroom dialogues around race in higher education classrooms that show students of color, and Black students in particular, often take leadership and guide conversations around race and racial justice issues (Tatum, 1992). This research also explicitly names the creation of a safe classroom atmosphere for all students in preparation for these discussions (Tatum, 1992). Findings in this study are also consistent with the work of developmental scholars whose work

indicates that Black youth and children have more advanced conceptions of race and discrimination (Brown and Bigler, 2005; Dulin-Keita et al., 2011).

In addition to the themes described above, it is important to note the context in which these conversations are occurring. Students in this study were navigating high school amid a global pandemic that was and continues to disproportionately impact Black communities (Dyer, 2020). Students were attending school virtually using digital technologies that they, as well as their teachers, were learning while also learning course content. In describing conversations that had taken place in virtual classrooms, students often, directly and indirectly, mentioned the role of technology. Specifically, students mentioned that they felt safer from attacks when engaging in these conversations in virtual classrooms and said that teachers and students can be muted, use anonymous chats, or leave the virtual classroom altogether. Conversely, students also indicated that lack of video and audio can, at times, be perceived as a lack of engagement or care for these issues directly affecting Black people, which has left students feeling unsupported or feeling as if their classmates or teachers may hold racist beliefs about them and Black people, more broadly.

## Black youth perspective: Experiences and implications of classroom conversations of race in virtual settings and beyond

There are several key findings of this work that emphasize the complex roles that Black students play in cultivating learning environments that raise the critical racial consciousness of everyone in the classroom, including teachers. While Black students took the initiative of often speaking out against racist or harmful comments or treatment, they did so in the face of teachers and administration either not responding or inadvertently inflicting more harm. Black students in this study were acutely aware of the possibility that students in their classes or their teachers could potentially hold similar racial attitudes to those who "stormed the capitol," and what that might mean for them as Black students in the space. Students referred to the virtual classroom as being a "safer" way of having these conversations. However, as students begin to enter in-person schooling and issues of racial violence and injustice persist, educational leaders and scholars must find ways to make these classrooms safe spaces for Black children to advocate for themselves and others. Additionally, although teachers are making attempts at facilitating these conversations, their discomfort with the tensions that arise during these dialogues limits their possibilities for helping students to think critically about the topics they are discussing. Furthermore, continuing to not intervene in the moment that a student is making harmful, racist, or inaccurate comments might create an environment in which Black students feel uncomfortable or unsafe, and non-Black students think those types of comments are appropriate.

Another area of concern is the curricular content around race and racism. Some of the students in this study voiced concern regarding the pedagogical strategies being used when it came to curricular content that engaged issues of historical racism. This finding is consistent with previous studies that highlight the voices of Black high school students and found they were discontent with the ways that race, culture, and class were engaged in core courses (Hope et al., 2015). Students described moments when teachers would blatantly use the “N-word” when reading assigned texts and students were visibly uncomfortable and upset. These moments do little to build students’ confidence and trust in their teachers and the learning environment.

Finally, throughout the interviews, students made references to their peers as Trump supporters. Embedded in these references are assumptions about the racial attitudes of those who they have identified as “Trump supporters.” While they are describing their lived experiences and interactions with these individuals, their evaluation of what it means to be a “proud Trump supporter” is consistent with research highlighting the “Trump Effect” (Costello, 2016). This phenomenon refers to the belief that the 2016 presidential election had negative effects on the social climate in schools with educators citing a rise in incidents involving racist and xenophobic rhetoric (Costello, 2016). For the students in the current study, recent viral videos and media of individuals storming the capitol building in Washington in support of Donald Trump were also salient. To that end, these findings should also be considered carefully within the sociopolitical context.

## Limitations and future directions

Through this exploration, Black high school students describe the nature of classroom conversations as it relates to race and contemporary racial justice issues in traditional classrooms, as well as in the context of distance learning. While this study offers critical insights into the perceptions and experiences of Black high school students engaging in these discussions, it is not without limitations. One such consideration is that most of the students in this study attended schools in which they were one of few Black students in the school. Only three of the students in this study attended schools that primarily served Black students. Scholars should continue to examine what these conversations look like in classrooms where the majority of students are Black or their teachers are Black to determine whether Black students are having similar experiences as those in this study. We also had limited representation of boys and no representation of students who identified as nonbinary or gender non-conforming. Future work should also consider, more explicitly, the experiences of Black boys also engaging in these conversations in academic settings as it has been established that they have unique academic experiences (Chavous and Cogburn, 2007).

Taken together, findings from the current study suggest that Black adolescents have an advanced critical analysis of the racial history of this country and its application to

contemporary racial injustice. They are also able to make connections to their own experiences in their schools and communities. Black adolescents in this study also take lead roles in facilitating these conversations and teaching their peers in class and, in some cases, teachers by addressing misinformation and harmful or racist rhetoric in the moment. This study also highlights the role of technology as a tool that allows students to feel safer while having these conversations. Future research should explore what safety might look like for in-person classrooms where these conversations are taking place. Lastly, district leaders and administrators should prioritize supporting and training teachers to be able to effectively have these conversations in ways that cultivate safety for Black students and foster students’ critical thinking skills as it relates to issues of racial justice.

## Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by IRB Office at University of Southern California. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants’ legal guardian/next of kin.

## Author contributions

AS conceptualized the study, collected and analyzed data with the help of research assistant, and wrote the entirety of this manuscript.

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## Conflict of interest

The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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## Appendix A: Interview protocol base questions

1. Can you tell me a little bit about your schooling experience?
2. Can you talk a little bit about what kind of school you were attending?
  - a. What has the virtual experience been like compared to the in-person experience.
3. How, if at all, does race come up in your classes?

Probe: How have those conversations come up in school?

4. How, if at all, have you discussed what occurred at the capitol building in Washington on January 6 in school?

Probe: How have those conversations been initiated?

5. In what ways, if at all, have your conversations at school around race been useful?
6. How are you feeling when having these conversations?
7. In what ways have these conversations prevented you from being more engaged in class.
8. What would you like to see from your teachers during these conversations?